

The Kerchief

I love reading and thinking about preparedness! Ever since I was a little kid, running around the woods pretending that I was a pioneer, I've been obsessed with being prepared for anything, anywhere, and at any time. And what I carry in my pockets, stash in my vehicle, and store in my basement reflect that attitude.

Since Richie's "The Backwoodsman" magazine is the very best source of information available today on emergency / survival preparedness, I thought I'd share my thoughts on a traditional piece of emergency survival gear that has always been overlooked in modern day preparedness and survival discussions, but which is starting to be recognized once more as a must-have item: the Kerchief.

A few notes on the kerchief. The traditional kerchief which I will discuss in this article should not be confused with our modern day handkerchief or even the bandana. Our modern handkerchief is only about 10 or 12 inches square, and the bandana is standardized at 22X22 inches. The traditional kerchief, on the other hand, was big, usually at least 42X42 inches on a side. See Figure 1. That's four times the size of a bandana! It was big because it did a lot, as you will see. And it was traditionally made out of a lightly woven natural material like linen or cotton so it could be easily carried in a pocket, worn around the neck, or even over the head like a scarf. Yet it was strong enough to carry heavy items and support a lot of weight.



Figure 1 A typical Kerchief: about 42X42 inches square and made of loose weave natural cotton. Large enough for even the biggest tasks, yet small enough to fit in your pocket!

Going back to the early days of this country, and even to the late middle ages in Europe, the kerchief was one of those universal, multipurpose items that everyone carried and used on a daily basis, like an axe, or a knife, or a hat. But it gradually fell out of use and was replaced by a several more specialized items such as the handkerchief, scarf, hand towel, etc. To understand why it fell out of use, take a look at the history of the axe. This same process of replacement also happened to the axe.

At one time the axe was used for pretty much everything that required cutting. In fact, many a pioneer family lived in a house made entirely with no other tool than the axe! And it was commonly used for many other everyday jobs as well, such as butchering, making furniture, repairing equipment, heating

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the home, providing cooking fuel, defense, etc. It was the go-to tool that no farmer or pioneer could live without.

Now consider the truck load of modern tools that are needed to build anything today, and notice that the axe is not even included amongst them, since it is not even considered a builders tool. In fact the axe isn't even used for felling trees nowadays. Like the kerchief, the axe is a throwback to a different era. Today it is mostly only used by folks, like the readers of *The Backwoodsman*, who either want or need to be self-sufficient. Like the kerchief, the once universal axe has been replaced.

That's not to say that the traditional kerchief fell out of disuse everywhere, however. There are two particular groups who kept its use alive well into the 20th century: the Cowboy and the Hobo. Both Cowboys and Hobos needed to travel light and, therefore, only carried essential items that could be useful in a wide variety of ways and in many situations. That describes the kerchief perfectly!

Cowboys carried and used their kerchiefs for many reasons, but chief among them was for protection against exposure. They wrapped it around their necks to protect against the sun. Or they dipped it in water first to keep them cool. They wore it over their face like a mask to keep out dust and tiny insects. They tied their hats to their heads when it was windy, and tied it over their ears to prevent frostbite when it was cold. They stuffed it with vegetation or whatever soft material was at hand to cushion their head and keep it off the cold ground at night. And they used it to gather forage for their horse, as a towel to mop their brow, to wash themselves, to patch their clothes, to bind wounds, etc. The cowboy was so attached to his kerchief that to this day the classic image of the cowboy that we have shows him with his trusty kerchief tied around his neck.

The kerchief was just as important, and just as iconic, for the Hobo. The classic image of the hobo shows him carrying all his possessions tied up in his kerchief and slung over his shoulder at the end of a stick, the classic hobo's bindle. And just like the cowboy, the hobo's kerchief was his best friend. He used it to gather food, carry his possessions, mop his brow, keep himself clean, filter water, cushion his head, signal his friends, stay warm. It was his comfort and best friend on the road. Again, the hobo traveled light with only what he could carry in his hands or his pockets. He didn't waste time carrying stuff he didn't need or couldn't use. The kerchief fit the bill perfectly as a universally useful item that could be used in hundreds of ways.



So let's take a look at just some of the other ways that the kerchief was used.

For starters the kerchief was used on a daily basis to provide protection against the elements back in the days when people spent more time outdoors than indoors. It was worn on the head or wrapped around the neck for warmth or sun protection, by both men and women. Figure 2

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Figure 2 Protection and Concealment

But it could also be used in some non-traditional ways. For instance, if you laid it flat on the ground and then tied or pinned the two left side corners together and then did the same for the two right side corners you would have two loops. See Figure 3. Grab the kerchief by the two loops and you have a bag that could be used to carry stuff like:

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- Firewood
- Wild foods: apples, mushrooms, eggs, nuts, etc
- Horse fodder or forage
- Tools and gear
- Fish or small game
- The harvest
- Groceries
- Chickens or other small animals
- Building supplies like rocks or straw
- Or anything that needed carrying!



Figure 3 The kerchief configured as a bag

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Figure 4 An impromptu carry bag for gathering firewood, or harvesting wild foods, or just totin' what needs totin'!

Or if you put your arms through the two loops you had a backpack, useful for carrying heavier items or just handy if you need your hands free. Figure 5.

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Figure 5 The Kerchief as a backpack

Tying or pinning two opposite corners together resulted in a bag that could be slung over the shoulder or across the chest to keep your hands free when gathering or harvesting. Or to immobilize an injured or broken arm. And these are just 3 of the many ways that the kerchief could be configured to do various jobs. With a handful large safety or blanket pins the kerchief becomes a very flexible system.

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Figure 6 A handful of #3 safety pins or a stout blanket pin increase the utility of the kerchief and allow it to be configured for many different jobs.

Other ways it could be used:

- Towel for staying clean and dry
- Head band to keep sweat or hair out of your eyes
- Rag for cleaning
- Neck scarf
- Head scarf
- Mask for bug, dust, or sun protection, Figure 2
- Hiding place. See Figure 6
- SOS or danger flag
- Semaphore flag
- Sail
- Hunting blind. See figure 6
- Trail marker
- Blanket, warmth or comfort
- Baby or pet carrier
- Tablecloth
- Work surface, prevent small parts from getting lost

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- Apron
- Pot holder
- Hand protection, gloves
- Char cloth
- Bullet patch
- Sewing patch
- Pillow
- Belt
- Tumpline
- Leash
- Wound bandage
- Arm sling
- Tourniquet
- Fibers for
 - o fishing line
 - o sewing thread
 - o first aid sutures
- Cordage, ripped in to strips or used as-is
- Water filter
- Poultice bag
- Tea or boiled infusion bag
- Item of clothing
- Rock throwing sling
- And of course, a handkerchief!

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- **Figure 6 Kerchief stretched between brush creates a quick hunting blind or hiding spot**

I could go on for pages, and even then I'm sure I wouldn't even come close to considering all of the possible ways that the kerchief could be used.

In summary, it was a friend on the road, and a comfort when you needed it. It could gather your food, help cook it, then clean up afterwards. It signaled your friends yet hid you from your enemies. It cooled you when it was hot, warmed you when it was cold. It helped keep you safe from danger, and tended your wounds when danger was unavoidable. It cushioned your load, was the helping hand when needed, carried your burden, and kept your stuff from getting lost.

In short, it was an essential and indispensable everyday tool for folks who knew how to travel lightly and, accordingly, chose their tools carefully!

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About the Author

Dave Sticha is an avid re-enactor, history buff, and student of survival in all situations. He is also the founder of Hobo Hanky, LLC (hobohanky.com) a company dedicated to re-introducing the Kerchief, as well as other historical survival tools, back to the modern world.

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