

The Laredo Western Club History.

Laredo was founded in 1971 by keen western enthusiast John Truder, and a group of likeminded friends. John (JT to his friends) had been around horses since he was a young boy, and had owned and bred them on his small-holding for years. He liked to ride “western style” and encouraged the group to follow his lead. The group eventually built a log cabin, and corral so that they could hang out, ride and exchange views on the Old American West. Back then it was difficult to actually find period clothing, or western riding tack, most of it was made up of what looked right! American Old West history books were hard to come by, and the few that were available had to be imported from the States. At the time period re-enacting was just developing and starting a Living-history camp was NEW. Young people having gone through the 60's 'liberation revolution' thought that anything was possible, more so in the UK than anywhere else in the world. John and his friends felt this way, and started what was to become the Laredo Western Club.

The general public had seen English Civil War battle re-enactments taking place at local fates and stately homes across the country for some time. Eventually Laredo Western Club was asked to put on a show. This was the beginning of a Wild Western Show that started like most early re-enactment groups, with limited resources, ingenuity, but most of all plenty of determination. They become one of the first and very successful Western Show groups in the UK.

As this was going on more enthusiasts joined the Laredo Western Club, at the same time the small accumulation of cabins and buildings also began to grow. The club started to make its first rules. This was an opportunity to become something more than just putting on a pair of jeans a gun rig and hat. It was the forethought of the founder members to make everything as period correct as possible. Research was the main criteria. They had found out long ago that the Hollywood version of the Old West was nothing like what really had gone in the 1800s. The romanticised Hollywood version was not what Laredo was going to be about!

The club started its quest for authenticity! Pulling down non-period buildings, renovating others. Eventually making way for a full-size double-story hotel, (The Silver Palace) taking nine years in the making. It is a splendid tribute to the dedication shown by the members. Resourcing the correct types of materials, and patterns for period clothing also took time to develop. Strict dress codes in the town were introduced, limits on member numbers, vetting, and probationary periods. Laredo members attend every two weeks throughout the year, apart from holidays; illness etc. 'Progressive Re-enacting' as it is known now was rare in the 90s. In today's Re-enacting circles it is more common and accepted, and is indeed demanded if you want to be taken seriously. The

Western Shows also progressed, combined a Living History Encampment with a slick fastmoving Re-enactment. It was this uncompromising attitude by the early members to detail that has made Laredo Western Club what it is today. All Laredo members have a say at town meetings, there is no committee or overall body in charge. Everyone is equal; ideas are talked through until the majority agree. Requests from other western groups to visit the town are always welcome, most western clubs know of each other, so it's good to meet up and exchange views etc.

The Town is open to club members at any time, or though most meetings are at weekends. Themed weekends are posted throughout the year; these weekends enable the club to invite other western enthusiasts. This way the club is able to draw new members, and keep everything moving on.

The Town Fair is one of the highlights of the year when everyone gets into the spirit of an Old West get-together. During the day, which is mostly for the children, games are organised. Egg & Spoon, Tree Legged, Hobby-horse and Piggy-back races are just the beginning. A Tug-of-war for all the adults. At the same time, individual members are putting on shows of Lassoing, Bullwhip displays, Gun and Knife skills, Log rolling etc. Period clothing, needle/leather work, and furniture, sales are ongoing throughout the day. Everyone has 'open-house' so that guests can take a look inside at how members live. As the evening progresses the Silver Palace Hotel is the centre of a hoedown. The towns men folk can put on their best evening attire and the lades their ball gowns. As the evening light falls oil lamps are lit outside the buildings and on the boardwalks, it's all looks very atmospheric. Other theme weekends include, Gambling, End of Trail, Thanksgiving, Christmas, or special event weekends.

Laredo has been used on many occasions for Filming, TV Advertising, and Feature Programs, The BBC, SKY, Channel 4/5 and many other independent TV companies keep the town on their records as the only complete Wild West town in the UK. The BBC has used the town to film many times over the years. Red Dwarf, Collectors Lot, Strange but True, Way Out West, French & Saunders, Watchdog, Morning TV, Big Breakfast, the list goes on. The town has also featured in Pop Videos, and Feature films. While filming Never Never Land for the Disney Corporation the crew actually laid eighty tonnes of sand along the main street to make it look as though the town was in the middle of the desert. Featuring Johnny Depp the film has been seen around the world. Earlier this year Fruit of the Loom photographed some of their latest clothing range. The buildings can also be used for filming inside as they are decorated with authenticity in mind. The Hotel has a 36' x 30' floor space, with a double staircase leading to the boarding rooms upstairs. Complete with a typical western style bar, Tables and Chairs, it's certainly a must see. Sometimes members have been asked to act as extras, that's always an interesting time. In

the Livery Stables are stored a Stagecoach, Chuck wagon, an everyday utility wagon, plus other props and period items that can be called upon to serve the town in its various themes, and time periods.

Each building is individual, General store, Photographer, Bakers, Gunsmith, Undertakers, and even a town Jail. Most of the thirty odd buildings have a use, or are occupied by an individual with a profession of some description or another.

Everything is kept as period correct as possible, no gas or electricity, no running water, no mobile phones. It sounds a hard life! The practicalities, having to lug water back to the cabin, and then having to dispose of it when you've finished the washing/washing-up sound gruelling. Using paraffin or candles for light, and cooking on a wood burning stove, they all take getting used to. But that's what it's all about, taking that step further and actually living the 19th century. Little things mean a lot, writing a letter with an ink 'dip-pen'. Carrying a winding pocket watch, and seeing that wood pile is kept stocked. Hand grinding coffee, trimming lamps, keeping milk cool, waiting for hot water. When we enter the town, everything starts to slow down, it has too. What must it really have been like not to have cold milk in cartons, slice-bread, having to grow or kill what you eat, getting good or bad news months out of date? These are things you learn actually, Living History.

Laredo is also a community that has a life of its own, friends meet on the street; others are invited back for a coffee/tea or an evening meal together. Friendships are made, and everyone knows everyone else. During the day that odd job or repair is done. Others members that have taken on a complete rebuild of a cabin, sometimes taking months or even years to build, are hard at work. General maintenance is done by the community, some weekends everyone that is available is on hand to help with town projects or heavy tasks etc, town life goes on. But life is not the hustle & bustle of the modern world. This life is a very special place, that Laredo members have worked at, and made their own.

Dave Thompson, (Laredo Town Marshal) summed it up for all club members when he said to me recently "After forty years I still get a thrill walking over the field from the car park when I see Laredo".