

On the Road Again — Protect Your Wallet/Purse before it is Stolen, and yourself afterward

By Harry {doc} Babad © 2007

Introduction

The other evening I was thinking about travelin' songs. Do you know what *On the Road Again* (Willie Nelson), the *Good Road Song* (Heidi Muller) and *I Come For To Sing* (Bob Gibson) have in common?

All of us travel at times but musicians, and truck drivers, as you know, do so more so than most folks. The good road beckons (thanks Heidi) and gigs call you far and wide.

Okay, that's Right — I've never had my wallet stolen but have worried about it. I'm just a hopelessly paranoid ex-New Yorker who recently, when leaving for Phoenix, got a case of what *if* stolen wallet thing.

I have only had a few good scares, an hour or three of panic, before finding my wallet under the driver's seat, or kicked under the bed after it had fallen out of my pocket getting ready to crash after a late night meeting.

What'll I lose — For me, a scant bit of cash, my driver's license, several significant credit cards, some crucial medical ID cards, and the spare car key I keep in it. Gone all gone! Worse yet, my credit and perhaps bank account pillaged, my credit rating destroyed, my budget shot in payback paying off, perhaps, falsely made purchases, and other things of untold horror to deal with.

We've all heard horror stories about fraud that's committed on innocents like us by folks stealing your name, address, Social Security Number (SSN), credit cards. Hmm, sounds like the usual stuff from a wallet or a purse. [I'm going to skip writing about phishing scams, perhaps another article in the future.] This article will stick to measures to assure a faster recovery [mitigation] and less loss should your wallet or purse be stolen. Prevention advice is not my gig, so all I can write about recovery to minimize (mitigate) your loses, both out of pocket and to your good name.

Angst is Real — Some of you may have, as I've done — trawled the Internet and read articles about what to do after you've lost your wallet. Hopefully you'll have noticed the loss in the 15 minutes to one hour after it disappears. At worst, it'll be shortly after you complete the gig and you're checking things out as you're packin' up.



But seriously, there's also things you can do before *bad luck strikes* and you get the sudden realization — *my wallet's gone!*

You might want to consider doing some or all of the things listed in this article, that's if you're not doing them already. As a paranoid worrywart ex-New Yorker, I have!

Cataloging Your Wallet & Mine

Keeping Track — (1) Place the contents of your wallet on a photocopy machine or scanner. Xerox or scan both sides of each license, credit card, medical card, you social security card, etc. You will know what you had in your wallet. (2) Collect a list of the account numbers and phone numbers to call and cancel these accounts in case your wallet or purse disappears.



Hiding the Information on Your Wallet's Contents —

Keep the *contents* photocopy in a safe place. [For the super-paranoid, I know you'll tell me, instead of my wallet, some can steal my list. Okay, you memorize hundreds of songs and arrangements; go memorize your list, or revert to an only cash basis!](#)

Fold your list up small and perhaps stash it somewhere in your car, or if so inclined in a hollow boot heel. I keep a copy in an encrypted file on my desktop, not portable, computer. I have granted access to the file to my wife and also to my daughter who lives here in town. My wife, who is less than comfortable with my Macintosh, has a paper copy stashed somewhere in her files, likely under unpaid bills.

...Not The Instrument Case, No, not ever! —

Instruments, alas, get stolen more often than our cars.

Wallet Content Protection Tactic, Sort Of

Credit Cards — Do not sign the back of your credit cards. Instead, put the words "PHOTO ID REQUIRED." Although possible, it is highly unlikely that a thief will look enough like you to pass for you at a store, even if they've also copped your driver's license. This will not help if you're dealing with a professional who replaces you picture with his or her own. However, we're dredging very low odds here.

Note this tactic does not protect you if the thief goes online to use your credit card on a spending spree. It only limits your loss! All you can then do is to quickly report the credit card loss. By doing that, you invoke the protective clauses required by law, and provided by Visa/Master Card, Discover, American Express and other card issuers



Debit Cards — This is a changing picture with only minimal consumer protection in place. Your bank or the issuer of the debit card calls the shots. Debit cards are less well covered by consumer protection measures. If you use them, check out their limitations relative to how much you are covered, and the reporting rules. Always remember, with a debit card, the money is already gone from your account. With a credit card, it's still to be billed.

Passports — Okay, it's not in your wallet but it might be in your purse. A good friend, shared that he, separately, now carries a photocopy of his passport when traveling either in the US or abroad. Since you now need a passport to travel even to Canada, the advice seems sound.

Social Security Card or Numbers — I no longer carry my Social Security Card in my wallet. I've also removed the SSN number from my Medicare card and a few other cards that use it as an ID; if someone needs it they'll ask. I've also written companies requesting an ID number that is NOT my Social Security number when their practice is to use a SSN is the norm. One complied; I've abandoned the other.

What the Big Deal – So My Wallet's Gone

Damn, It's Gone: Lost or Stolen... We've Looked, Looked and Looked Everywhere, Its Really Gone! —What now happens to you depends on how smart the thieving SOB is. Within days, a week at most, a competent thief can:

- Order an expensive monthly cell phone package and start calling
- Pick up an upscale rental car and get on the road again
- Create an approved credit line in upscale brick or online stores and start spending
- Apply for new major credit cards, in your name. After all your credit is good, a new cards... no problemo!
- Go on an online shopping spree in your name, with the goods delivered to a false address.
- Buy that Martin dreadnaught you've been lusting over.



Note, it's not a bottomless pit that could send you to the poor house. Federal law limits a consumers' liability for unauthorized charges to \$50 per credit card, and there is no time limit for reporting loss, theft, or unauthorized use of a credit card. But sooner is better because you show merchants and agencies for non credit card related thefts you've shown due diligence.

What follows is some critical information, coupled with that photocopy or your wallets contents, to limit the damage.

You'll still feel used, angry embarrassed, stupid ... all of the above but you will be mostly protected from major loss.

AN INSTANT ACTION LIST

File a police report immediately in the jurisdiction where your credit cards, etc., were stolen. This proves to credit providers you were diligent, and this is a first step toward an investigation (if there ever is one.) But here's what perhaps is the most important of all action.

Cancel, and put a fraud watch on your credit cards immediately. But the key to doing that ASAP is having the toll free numbers and your card numbers handy so you know whom to call.

Keep those where you can find them. As noted earlier my wife and daughter know where my list is kept. They are at most a phone call away.

There's an even better way to get quick action than calling the individual holders of your credit cards, one at a time. Call the three national credit associations and have them pass the word. They indeed have a list not only of all your credit cards but also your credit records. Have them immediately to place a fraud alert on your name and Social Security number. **The identity theft alert means that any company that checks your credit knows your information was stolen, they by law have to contact you by phone to authorize new credit.** Since I'm belt and suspenders kind of guy, I'd then spend a few extra nickels and all up all the creditors whose cards were in my wallet.



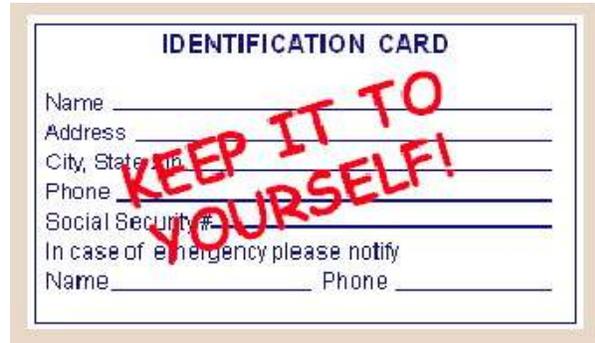
I personally never needed to file a credit agency report until advised last year to do so by American Express. They called to tell me an application for credit was made over the Internet in my name.

Then, it looks like in 2006 I was on a run, I get a letter from a former employer that my personal information has been hacked, information that included my SSN and the bank where my paycheck was deposited and where I still do business. Needless to say, I had the back create a password that was needed for every transaction, large or small. I could do nothing about the missing SSN except check my credit reports to make sure nothing fishy was going on.

Aside from card issuers, notify banks, creditors, and utilities. Close accounts that have been used by thieves or which you learn have been probed. Get your banks and the businesses you deal with to issue you new cards. Choose new passwords and PINs for all your accounts, compromised or not.

More Precautions

- Don't use your mother's maiden name as a password; your first love works better if less discrete. — It's not likely to be in the public domain. I use the ladies Hebrew name, anglicized of course.
- Notify merchants, in writing (registered mail helps too) that after your loss, issued credit or accepted bad checks in your name; use your police report or FTC affidavit as backup. They are obligated by law to limit your liability, if you showed due diligence in reporting a loss.



Credit Reports, by Law, are Available — Order your credit report each year. Get credit reports from all three credit bureaus, and study them closely. Some victims say that it takes years to clear their credit files. Also, until the Fed's punish the credit card companies and the data aggregators for not acting aggressively, it up to you to hound them, politely!

In addition you may find, buried in these reports, that new credit was sometimes granted in your name without your permission even after fraud alerts were placed on their accounts. [By Federal law, one report a year from each credit agency is now yours for free; **stagger them across the year**. <<https://www.annualcreditreport.com/cra/index.jsp>> Previously you had to claim a loss of identifying material such as a credit card.]

Now, here are the general numbers you will always need to contact about your wallet, etc., has been stolen – For more detailed information check out:

<<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/idtheft/consumers/defend.html - WhatarethestepsIshouldtakeifImavictimofidentitytheft>>

Equifax: 1-800-525-6285

Experian (formerly TRW): 1-888-397-3742

Trans Union: 1-800-680-7289

Social Security Administration (fraud line): 1-800-269-0271

Fill out a ID Theft Affidavit or call the FTC at 1-877-438-4338)

Remember, an ounce of prevention or how ever much a few pieces of paper weigh.

Doc

PS:

I have checked these suggestions, about identity theft against published advice from Consumer Reports <<http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft/>>, the AARP site <<http://www.aarp.org/>>, the Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Consumer Protection <<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/consumer.shtm>>, a few other federal and state sites, and to some degree those of the credit reporting agencies. Based on my review, I found my recommendations for mitigation, not prevention, are both valid and consistent.