

Branding Cattle for Identification and Theft Prevention

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Origination of Branding

The use of branding for identification of cattle can be traced to the ancient Egyptians. The practice was brought to the New World by Hernando Cortez in 1521. As the Spanish explorer unloaded cattle from the ship, he applied a brand to the animals. With the establishment of Spanish missions throughout the present southwestern United States, a cattle industry took root. Along with the cattle came a practice of branding to establish ownership. Records indicate a system for the filing of brands was started in California where the Spaniards were grazing thousands of head of cattle. To record a brand, the owner had to provide a section of hide carrying the brand or a piece of leather with an imprint of the brand.

Following the Civil War, there were thousands of unbranded cattle roaming the southern United States. As these cattle were gathered and branded, a way of life gave rise to a thriving cattle industry. The need to brand cattle and record brands became increasingly important. State governments and cattlemen realized the necessity of brand records to prove ownership and to protect against theft. In 1877, a group of cattlemen founded the Stock Raisers Association of Northwestern Texas to fight cattle theft in the region. Likewise, other groups sprang up in cattle country to enforce brand laws and to protect cattlemen.

The Use of Branding Today

For almost 4,000 years, branding has been the most effective and economical means of identifying livestock. Today there are new methods of identification available or in development. However, none can match a properly applied and registered brand as proof of ownership. A legible, recorded brand will eliminate many outlets available to thieves. Therefore, branding serves as a deterrent to theft as well as a ready means of identification.

Most states require registration of any brand used on livestock through the proper regulatory agency. Some breed registries utilize branding as a means of identification. In this case, you should contact the registry as well as your state agency as to availability of a particular brand when selecting and registering your brand. This will eliminate duplication of brands while identifying specific locations on the animal where the brand may be applied. Be sure to place your brand on the proper side of the animal that your registration sets forth. Misplacement of your brand could create problems when you market cattle. Sale proceeds could be held due to the conflict of misbranding.

Increased awareness within the cattle industry lends more readily to branding on the rear of the animal rather than the rib and shoulder areas when possible. The more desirable location and proper application of the brand will help to eliminate many problems with discounted or unusable hides.

Brands can be used to determine ownership of cattle on the

range or at the marketplace. Brands are also excellent to use as identification of animals within a herd. For instance, the 1992 calf crop could have a private herd number beginning or ending with the year number. The first calf born or first to be branded, depending on your management program, could be assigned the number "one" and so on. The first calf born in 1992 could be identified as 12 or 21. You can adapt a system to suit your needs and situation. By using a private herd number for each animal along with your holding brand, you have identified each individual animal you own for its entire life. In the event that the animal is lost or stolen, you will be able to prove ownership quickly and without question.

Types of Brands

There are three basic methods of branding available. The freeze brand involves a technique of using liquid nitrogen to produce an extremely cold iron, which when properly utilized, will kill the cells which produce pigmentation in the hair. This results in a white or colorless hair at the brand site. Freeze branding is not highly recommended for use as a permanent brand as it requires more expertise and the results of your efforts are not known for 60 days or more.

Electric branding irons are used the same way as fire-heated irons and are becoming ever more popular due to their safety and speed. An electric iron can provide heating at branding temperature in 90 seconds, but also requires a 110 volt power source.

The old-fashioned fire-heated irons are still utilized extensively by cattlemen. They hardly ever break and don't require electricity. They do, however, require a heat source. Popular sources of heat include butane, charcoal and wood. Wood fire is used satisfactorily by many cattlemen, but butane is popular because it is convenient and easily controlled. Coal fires, particularly with blowers are not recommended because they readily burn up the irons.

There are number sets for applying private herd numbers as well as custom-designed brands available. Contact your local farm and ranch supply for information on branding iron prices and availability.

Tips for Branding Cattle

Once you have selected your brand design, registered your brand properly and acquired the necessary irons, it is time to brand. The following are tips to follow as you pursue branding perfection. Following these recommendations will enable you to properly brand your cattle for identification and at the same time deter the possibility of theft.

Brand Design

Your brand should be as simple as possible. Sharp angles or small circles should be avoided. They create a concentration of heat

that will cause the brand to burn out and blotch. This may be partially overcome by cutting a groove or allowing a one-quarter inch gap at these points.

Branding Irons

A. Branding irons can be constructed of iron, steel, stainless steel or of a new rust resistant copper alloy, which provides a more even heat distribution and longer life.

B. It is recommended that a four inch iron be used for calves and a five inch iron used on yearlings to mature cattle. All irons should have a thickness of three-eighths to one-half inch on the face of the iron.

C. Sharp edges should be filed off. A thin or burned-out iron will cut deep into the hide and leave a narrow scar that will cover easily with hair.

D. Be sure irons are clean and free of rust, scale or burnt hair. Do not bang the iron against a post to clean it. A wire brush or sand bucket at the branding chute works best.

E. After use, the irons should be reshaped using a file or rasp if necessary. Clean your irons thoroughly and oil them lightly. Some store their irons in a bucket of oil.

Heating the Iron

A. Irons should be heated to an ash gray color. Acids or branding fluids are not recommended. If the iron is black, it will be too cold. A bright cherry red is too hot and will burn too deeply. The iron must be hot enough to remove the hair and outer layer of skin only.

Applying the Brand

A. Depending on age, hair cover, etc., a rough guide to time application of an iron at the right heat should be three to five seconds. Cattle with extremely long hair should be clipped.

B. Branding requires adequate time and consideration of various conditions. Never brand animals that are damp or wet as it will scald the hide and cause a scar or blotched, slow-healing sore. Also, never brand cattle after application of a pour-on liquid as it could ignite from the heat of the iron.

C. Application of an oil to the fresh brand surface after applying the iron will help healing and produce a better, more identifiable impression on the hide. Cattle will carry brands for their entire life, so much care has to be taken at the time the brand is applied.

D. The animal must be restrained in such a manner that it cannot move. Make sure the iron does not slip, which will result in a splotted, illegible brand.

E. When applying a branding iron to the animal, use a rocking motion with the iron firmly against the animal. Rocking the iron should assure a uniform placement of the heat on all lines of the brand. A properly applied brand should be the color of saddle leather when the iron is removed.

F. There should only be one application of the iron. If it is necessary to retouch the brand, do so with extreme care to avoid blotching.

G. Do not brand over an existing brand. If necessary, place your brand in front, behind, above or below an existing brand, but as close to your registered location as possible.

The objective of a good brand is a well defined scar from which no hair will grow. This is accomplished by burning only the outer layer of skin. A properly burned brand is easily read when hair is clipped from the brand location. Use of the proper equipment and technique, plus plenty of experience will help you to apply good, readable brands to your cattle. ■