

FIRE AND ICE

Whether done by fire or ice, branding cattle has both a practical and sentimental value for cattlemen.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor



Miles of green stretch out on the horizon. The sea of grass is disturbed only by the occasional silhouette of a black-hided cow grazing. Upon further inspection, the Angus cow's side isn't a blank canvas — a brand can be seen on her hip, a proud display of the operation the animal belongs to.

For David Horton, there's nothing more satisfying than seeing his brand on an animal. During the past 12 years, Horton has been freeze-branding the calves of his operation, Friendship Farms, in Canoochee, Ga.

"Always growing up, I loved to see those black-hided cattle with those white brands on their side," he explains. "Now, what's really cool, is when you're driving down the road, and you look out and see one of your bulls with your brand out there."

To David Orr, using a hot iron to brand cattle is a rite of passage when you're a member of the team at Daigger-Orr Angus in North Platte, Neb. Since he purchased his first female, Orr has been displaying his brand on every animal registered under his name.

"It's a simple and permanent way to identify cattle," he says. "Branding is all about simplicity and tradition."

While the two producers employ varying methods, they both agree

branding is a valuable tradition in the cattle industry that has been passed down through generations.

Ice identification

At Friendship Farms, Horton manages close to 1,000 females. He says he began freeze-branding his cattle when he first got started in the registered business. The process of freeze branding uses dry ice to actually freeze the hair follicles of an animal so the hair grows back white.

Horton prefers this "white" brand on his Angus cattle, as he says it stands out more when the process is done right. Freeze brands are not only highly visible, but permanent.

Ear tags can fall out and tattoos require proximity for any value, but Horton says his brands can be seen and read without even having to approach the animal.

With his years of experience, Horton has the details about branding day ironed out for his operation. He suggests waiting until calves are at least 800 pounds (lb.) before branding, so the brand does not stretch later as the animal grows. Cooler days with low humidity are the best for branding, he adds.

The process of freeze-branding is labor intensive, but Horton says the results make the process worthwhile.

Before branding day, Horton gathers dry ice (purchased from a local meat market), gloves for handling the ice and denatured alcohol to clean the application area.

He says it takes close to a pound of dry ice per animal and 30 minutes for a brand to freeze. After clipping and cleaning the area where the brand will be applied, Horton says it takes 55 seconds of contact between the hide and brand for the permanent mark to be made.

In addition to his farm's brand, Horton adds a combination of numbers and letters to showcase the age and sire of an animal to the freeze brand.

"It's helpful for us and the customers," he explains. While the mark allows Horton and his team to easily locate an animal or sort females into similar groups, he says it allows customers to see if they have common trend of cattle they like.

"If a group stands out to you from a single sire, you can identify a bull without going back through all the individual papers and information," he says. "Customers can identify commonalities in numbers and letters to see bulls they like."

Horton says he feels a deep sense of pride when animals leave his operation showcasing his farm's brand. Besides serving as an advertisement to potential future



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customers, he says branding helps his cattle stand out from the crowd.

“Branding helps customers identify your product from the products of others,” he says. “When people look at the animal, they see your mark.”

Feeling the fire

In Nebraska, Orr manages registered Angus and Red Angus females and sells more than 120 bulls with his father-in-law John Daigger. The pair has been hot-iron branding their livestock with a unique brand since each bought their first female.

Orr says the branding process is more than just a way to show pride of ownership — it has become a tradition he and his family are proud to pass down to younger generations.

Branding days around the state are a great time for comradery and networking, and an opportunity to see genetics from their own animals as well as new genetics other producers in the area are finding success with, Orr adds. With the addition of vaccinations and

castration being conducted during branding day, he says the day quickly becomes about more than just the branding.

“It harkens back to the old days,” he explains. “It’s really a great, springtime tradition.”

Orr says branding eliminates any confusion when identifying cattle. He describes brands as quick, simple and effective.

Orr recommends branding calves between one to two months of age. Modern technology has eliminated the need for a wood fire to heat irons, and Orr says most people utilize propane in a branding-iron pot, stove or heater.

Orr says there is no specific time for the actual branding of the animal, but he learned a trick of the trade from his father-in-law. He says when the iron is placed on the animal’s hide, smoke will be yellowish in color. When the hair is burnt and the hide is being branded, smoke will shift to grey and then transition to white, which Orr says is the signal to

pull the iron off. The area will look like leather when complete, he adds.

He urges producers to only brand clean, dry, healthy calves for the best results. He also stresses the importance of safety during the branding process, saying caution should be taken so no people or animals are injured.

Orr says he always looks forward to branding day at his operation. Besides marking the new generation of calves, Orr says the process reminds him of his first moments in the cattle industry and reignites his love for the industry.

“It’s more than just a form of identification or ownership,” he says. “It’s a sense of pride in your name.”

At the end of the day, whether done by fire or ice, branding is a strong tradition amongst members of the cattle industry. From its sentimental value to its ability to strongly represent an operation, branding is an excellent and permanent form of cattle identification. **AJ**