

It's still hard to beat a

# HOT IRON BRAND

by Troy Smith

**A**s the beef industry shifts its merchandising emphasis from commodity beef to case-ready products, branding is the buzzword used to describe the development of products bearing a particular company's name brand. It's a term borrowed from the practice of marking animals for ownership. For centuries, stockmen have branded their herds by applying a hot iron fashioned into an owner's distinctive mark.

Hot-iron branding has been used for more than 4,000 years, and it wasn't always restricted to animals. Human slaves sometimes wore their master's mark, and some cultures branded criminals as part of their punishment. But scenes depicted on walls of Egyptian tombs prove that branding of cattle was adopted early in human history.

During the open range days of the American West, a cattleman's brand was as much a part of him as his name — and often as great a source of pride. His livestock wore it, but his brand might also be displayed prominently on ranch gates and barns. It might be used to decorate his home, both inside and out. Many modern-day cattlemen still take pride in applying their brands to home and business furnishings, as well as to trucks and trailers. And like a family surname, pride in a brand can pass from one generation to the next.



PHOTO BY CHASE KLEWER

► A hot-iron brand leaves a permanent identification mark that is hard to alter without detection. In states with brand laws and active enforcement agencies, inspection of brands and ownership documentation are required at points of sale.

## Needed tool

But cow-country folk claim the practice of branding livestock with a hot iron does not survive out of prideful ways, but because there is no better proof of ownership. It's permanent, and most western states have systems for recording brand ownership and for tracking branded animals.

Rampant rustling of cattle during the 19th century prompted cattlemen to lobby for legislation requiring registration of individual brands. Most states west of the Mississippi River adopted brand laws. New Mexico went so far as to require that all cattle within the state be branded.

Brand laws in other western states do not mandate branding, but they prohibit the use of unregistered brands and establish rules for use of legally recorded brands. Generally, only the owner of a registered brand may use it, and only on the specific side (left or right) and location (shoulder, rib or hip) for which it is recorded. Several states require brand inspection when cattle are sold or transported, thus creating a paper trail to document change of ownership and relocation.

But how could the ancient practice of marking an animal by searing a symbol on its hide remain relevant in the 21st century? Isn't it painful to animals? Besides, aren't the days of cattle rustling long gone?

## Branding means no questions

Nebraska cattleman Allen Bright says a *Los Angeles Times* writer called him recently, asking similar questions. Bright, whose operation is near the tiny panhandle community of Antioch, chairs a National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) committee that deals with animal identification (ID) issues. Bright says the reporter's query is nothing new.

"*The Call of the Range* [by Nellie Snyder Yost] is a book, published in 1966, about development of the cattle industry in our part of the country. It tells how questions were raised about potential cruelty as

well as [leather] tanners' complaints of hide damage due to scars created by the hot-iron brand," Bright says. "It also tells how university scientists started searching, as early as 1884, for a better way to identify animals. None has been found yet, so the primary advantage of hot-iron branding remains valid today. It makes an indelible mark that is hard to alter without detection."

Bright is quick to point out that cattle rustling still happens, particularly in areas where cattle graze remote pastures that owners or managers visit infrequently. Rustlers range from the trusted employee-turned-thief, to small-time crooks who make away with a few calves in a stock trailer, to bolder operations that steal stock by the semi-load.

To turn stolen cattle into cash, however, rustlers usually have to sell them. In states with brand laws and active enforcement agencies, inspection of brands and ownership documentation are required at points of sale such as auction barns and packing plants.

In Bright's home state, the Nebraska Brand Committee conducts inspections and investigates cases of cattle theft. During the last fiscal year (FY), according to Executive Director Steve Stanec, inspectors withheld payment on 23,000 head of cattle until additional evidence of ownership was supplied by the sellers. In addition, nearly 1,800 head of cattle (valued at \$1,168,000) reported missing or stolen were recovered by Nebraska inspectors and investigators.

In Texas, brand inspection is the responsibility of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), whose field inspectors are commissioned as special Texas Rangers. Last year, they investigated more than 1,200 cases of strayed or stolen livestock, including more than 5,000 head of cattle and 66 horses. The value of recovered property was estimated at \$4.3 million.



PHOTO BY GARRETT KLEWER

► Although hot-iron branding has associated disadvantages, such as hide damage and consumer concern, researchers have been unable to create a convenient and affordable replacement.

There are statistics emphasizing a disadvantage of branding, too. Scars created by brands can make portions of hides unsuitable as leather. Rib and shoulder brands are particularly detrimental to hide value.

According to the 2000 National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA), conducted by Colorado State University, Texas A&M University, Oklahoma State University and West Texas A&M University, value lost per hip brand was \$2.50, while rib/shoulder brands cost \$5. Some animals carried no brand at all, but the total of hide value lost due to branding was calculated to be \$51,436,070, or \$1.70 per fed steer and heifer marketed during 2000.

The 1999 NBQA, conducted by Colorado State University, estimated that 60% of beef market cows and bulls had brand scars that would detract from hide value. The year's total loss due to devalued hides was estimated at \$19,622,300, or an average loss of \$3.17 for every market cow and bull harvested.

#### A consumer issue

Anyone who has touched a hot stove knows that a hot iron will cause temporary pain or discomfort. Some animal advocates claim any pain and associated stress branding might cause provides sufficient reason to halt its use. And some consumer groups have urged grocery retailers and restaurant chains to scrutinize farm and ranch production methods, including branding.

"I do think animal welfare activists have gained media attention, hoping to make it a bigger issue among consumers,"

says Steve Sands of Meyer Foods in Omaha.

Meyer Foods supplies food products, including beef, to nearly 30 national and regional food retailers, hundreds of foodservice distributors and restaurants, and more than a few export companies.

"I've been selling beef for over 20 years, and I've never had a customer raise the issue of branding," Sands adds. "It probably is on the radar screen, though, as consumers' general concern over animal welfare increases. If specific practices like branding become significant issues, it will likely affect retail stores first — particularly niche markets that strive to serve special consumer preferences."

The Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the National Council of Chain Restaurants (NCCR) already have begun a collaborative effort to develop animal welfare guidelines for producers to follow. FMI members include more than 26,000 grocery retailers, while the NCCR represents some 50,000 restaurants. According to FMI President Tim Hammonds,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 110

**During the last fiscal year, Nebraska inspectors withheld payment on 23,000 head of cattle until additional evidence of ownership was supplied by the sellers.**



## Hot-Iron Brand CONTINUED FROM 109

goals include establishing measurable indices for desirable practices in the growing, handling and processing of animals in food production. That might mean sending “auditors” to farms and ranches to monitor how animals are handled, confined and transported.

To help establish production guidelines, FMI and NCCR have created an advisory committee of animal welfare experts, including Kansas State University (K-State) animal behavior scientist Janice Swanson. According to Swanson, beef producers should pay attention to what is happening. Concern over animal welfare is not just an invention of radical animal rights groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

“PETA will take credit for anything, but a variety of consumer groups are becoming more active in this area — groups that don’t oppose raising animals for food, but are concerned about how it is done,” Swanson says. “But if producers are to be put under scrutiny, it’s better that it come through private industry that is involved in the food chain, rather than [by] government mandate.”

Consumers will have to share the responsibility, too, Swanson says. If they want producers to raise animals according to certain standards, consumers will have to help pay for potential added costs of production through higher food prices. If consumers press for an alternative method of animal ID that costs more than branding, the added cost should be passed along. However, in Swanson’s opinion, there is no satisfactory alternative yet.

“We have to be real — use common sense,” she emphasizes. “Producers need a form of identification that works under range conditions, and we don’t have anything that works as well as branding. Technologically, we’re not there yet. I don’t

believe we can force producers to give up this tool when we have nothing to replace it.”

### Reliability built into the brand

Oklahoma veterinarian Bob Smith, Stillwater, says that for many range areas of the West, hot-iron brands are the only reliable means for proof of ownership. It’s important in the mountain or high-desert areas where several different owners’ cattle may graze together on public lands. Even on private land, some cattle run in pastures measured in sections (square miles) instead of acres. Cattle need a mark that can be read from horseback or from a pickup truck.

Smith, who is vice chairman for NCBA’s Cattle Health and Well-being Committee, says retinal scanning and nose print identification represent technologies that can determine individual animal ID, but they aren’t practical under less-than-ideal conditions. He says feedlots have moved away from branding cattle with a yard brand and pen number, calling it a positive step toward reducing losses to hide value. In feedlots or places where cattle are confined and watched closely every day, ear tags may be sufficient ID.

“But cattle sometimes stray from where they’re supposed to be, and ear tags get lost. Retinal scanning and nose prints can’t be used from a distance. They require that each animal be

**“Producers need a form of identification that works under range conditions, and we don’t have anything that works as well as branding.”**

**— Janice Swanson**



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

► For centuries, stockmen have branded their herds by applying a hot iron fashioned into an owner’s distinctive mark.

restrained, and in many remote areas, facilities for confining cattle aren’t the best, if they exist at all,” Smith adds. “Brands are permanent and, in some situations, may be the only reliable method.”

Advocates of freeze-branding call it the best substitute for the hot iron. Rather than using heat, a super-cooled iron is applied to the animal’s skin, affecting the hair pigment and causing the hair to grow in white. Some states now allow registered brands to be applied by either method, but Allen Bright says the time required to prepare and properly apply a freeze brand (a few minutes as opposed to a few seconds for a hot-iron brand) makes it less practical for producers handling large numbers of cattle. In addition, freeze brands may be altered with hair dye, and animals must be dark in color for freeze brands to be legible.

“The argument that freeze brands don’t scar the hide isn’t holding up either,” Bright adds. “They can cause some damage.”

According to Bright, the electronic ID tag is a much-touted tool for tracking individual animal performance and evaluating genetics. But “bar-coding” of cattle also falls short as proof of ownership, since tags may be lost, purposely removed or changed by rustlers.

“So far, attempts to make the tags tamper-resistant have been unsuccessful. There are some other technologies in the wings, like an implanted microchip that could be read by satellite.

However, the chip can migrate within the animal, and might be hard to retrieve when the animal is harvested. Do we take a chance on it ending up in somebody’s burger?” Bright asks.

“I’m sure the right technology to replace the hot-iron brand is coming, and producers will change when there is a practical and economically feasible alternative,” he says. “It’s just not here yet.”

