

WEST Magazine – Branding
By Bruce Masterman

The smell of burning hair and hide hangs heavy in the spring air, and dust wafts around the corral like smoke.

Separated cows and calves call for each other, the high pitched bleating of the youngsters contrasting sharply with the low moos of their mamas. Cowgirls and cowboys move around inside the dusty corral, each one doing an assigned job. Horses whinny as their riders swing lariats to catch the calves by their heels and drag them towards the centre of the action.

It's branding season in Western Canada, and it's time to get down and dirty.

The West is a land of tradition, and few traditions run as deep as spring calving. It's when ranchers burn their signatures on their calves to establish their ownership before turning them out to feed on grass.

It's a time of hope and renewal, when the herd is growing again, the calves getting bigger and stronger by the day, when riders can gallop their horses across lush green fields of grass dotted with prairie crocuses in various shades of purple.

It's a time when rural people gather and help each other as neighbours do, roping and riding and branding, then tucking in to a big meal of beef, or turkey, and fresh pies and maybe a cold Coors or two. It's a time for stories: who got bucked off, who was the best roper, who got kicked by a calf, who died and who got hitched in the past year, or maybe who had a baby.

For more than 125 years, ranchers in Western Canada have branded their cattle in the springtime. And most do it about the same way as it was done way back then.

Actually, using a hot iron to burn a readily identifiable mark on livestock dates back much further than the late 1800's.

It's been traced all the way back to 2700 BC. Paintings in Egyptian tombs document oxen branded with hieroglyphics. Ancient Greeks and Romans marked livestock and slaves with a hot iron.

Explorer Hernando Cortez brought branding from Spain to the New World in 1541. His cattle were stamped with the mark of three crosses. The practice spread through Mexico and Texas. Branding didn't become common in the U.S. until after the American Civil War. Eventually, it made its way north to Canada.

Initially it was used when several ranchers gathered their herds together for large cattle drives. Brands proved ownership at the final destination. Branding also helped curb cattle rustling by providing ready proof of ownership.

Rustlers sometimes tried to outsmart ranchers by using "running irons," a simple brand with a single character, such as a bar, which they used to alter other brands. In the American Old West, stories abound of rustlers being lynched for just being in possession of such an iron.

The first law requiring livestock to be branded was passed at the second session of the North West Territories government on Aug. 1, 1878. Brand registration became the

law the next day, making it necessary for ranchers to record every brand used in the territory.

Just as branding was used back then to establish ownership of cattle, so is it today. An unbranded animal, known as a “slick,” is virtually impossible to identify. It’s an easy target for rustlers, because it can never be positively traced back to its rightful owner.

“Branding your cattle is a heck of an insurance policy against theft,” says Cpl. Dave Heaslip, head investigator of the RCMP’s livestock identification section in central and northern Alberta.

Provincial and private agencies in the four Western provinces keep records of all registered brands. If a cow shows up where it’s not supposed to be – perhaps at an auction where the owner hasn’t shipped any cattle – the on-site brand inspector likely will spot it and stop it from being sold. And the person who brought it there will have some explaining to do.

Made of iron, brands are generally of one to three characters, figures or letters. They can be made of almost any shape, from a letter such as C to a solid bar. They must burn on clearly enough that ranchers can spot them at a distance in order to quickly identify their cattle.

Most jurisdictions require cattle brands to always be burned on the same place on a calf. In Alberta, for example, brands always must appear on the animal’s shoulders, ribs and hips. Ranchers choose where to brand on the body, and on which side of the animal.

In the old days, brands always were heated over an open fire, preferably built with a hard, hot-burning wood such as diamond willow. Now ranchers are more likely to fire their irons with propane. It’s faster and not as much work.

The weather, which dictates so much of a rancher’s working life, is key to a branding. If it’s snowing or raining – or even threatening to snow or rain – the event is postponed until the next dry day. Branding a wet hide causes scalding and can produce a wound that takes some time to heal.

Any old-timer will tell you that the best brandings are the ones where everyone knows exactly what they’re supposed to be doing, and when.

The best ropers are on horseback, moving slowly among the cattle and throwing a loop around a calf’s hind leg. Then it’s dragged through the dirt to where the wrestlers – generally burly men or women – await.

One grabs the head, the other the hind legs. Calves, which are generally about three months old and weigh up to 300 pounds, don’t always take too kindly to this treatment. They struggle and kick and bawl for their mothers.

Then the assigned brander steps in with a hot iron, pushing the brand deep enough to burn the hair and outer layer of skin. A successful brand, which under optimum conditions should take three to five seconds to apply, is the color of dark brown saddle leather.

In recent years, some ranchers have gone to a more mechanized system of chutes and a squeeze-type gate to hold the animal steady while the brand is applied. That method doesn’t require as much manpower but can be slower if large numbers of calves need to be done.

In addition to branding the immobile calf, teams are ready to inject it with vaccinations, apply an ear tag, dehorn it, perhaps clip an ear for extra identification and

castrate any bull calves. When a good team's on the job, the whole process takes about five minutes.

Then the calf is released, grateful for its freedom. Soon they're back with their mothers and suckling happily.

In many parts of Western Canada, branding several hundred calves in spring can be spread over several days. It's a tough and dirty job, but the ranchers don't mind if they've got a good crew and cooperative weather.

After all, they've been doing it for more than 125 years.

In this ever-changing world of computers and constantly advancing technology, branding is a heritage-steeped tradition they can always count on doing, spring after spring.