Brands Began in Egypt
About 4,000 Years Ago

Surprisingly enough, the use of brands as a means of identification originated not in the American West, but in Egypt about 4,000 years ago.

Branding has been used almost continuously since then, not only on domestic animals, but on other animals as varied as bees and men.

At the height of his successes, Genghis Khan commanded a cavalry of 500,000 in which every man had four mounts. The brand of the Kha Khan, or King of Kings, was carried by each of these two million horses.

In America Cortez brought the technique of branding to America in the 16th century. He came with two purposes, to convert heathen souls to Catholicism and to collect gold. Although his religious zeal was soon overcome by his greed, he still continued to use his brand design, three crosses representing the Trinity.

The open range became a characteristic feature of the West as cattle became its most important product. Thus branding as a means of identification became a necessity.

In spite of their business-like purpose, designs for brands in the West have frequently sprung from situations filled with pathos or comedy. More particularly, they have reflected the human responses to situations, as is shown by the tale of a wealthy rancher who bet his ranch and cattle against the poker winnings of a brazen young cowboy named Burk Burnett.

The rancher lost and Burnett never went to bed that night. Instead, he left immediately and began stamping his own newly selected brand on his cattle. The brand “6666” symbolized the poker hand with which he had won — six of hearts, spades, diamonds and clubs.

Ironically the fortune acquired by a good night’s poker was used to endow Texas Christian University.

Another legend in the history of cattle branding concerns the farmer’s daughter who was the prettiest girl in Texas. Because her father’s name was Tom Drake, the cowhands affectionately nicknamed her “Duck.”

One of the tales most widely repeated around rodeos and campfires is that of the “Murder” steer. A senseless murder followed a dispute over the ownership of the steer. The cowboys, disturbed over the killing, returned the next day to brand the word “Murder” in large letter on the animal’s side.

The steer roamed freely. Wherever it appeared, another murder took place. Stories mushroomed until it roamed an impossible wide range.

To this day, so the legend goes, it can be seen flashing in the dawn during a roundup or galloping through the sagebrush in a storm, snorting with the wind.

Such are the legends attached to the practice of branding in the American West. They clarify, if not the true history, at least the real character of this colorful area.