Cow Brands Began Early

By MARIO MAMALAKIS

Proof that cattle raising in Acadiana began prior to the American Revolution and that cattle brands were recorded in Southwest Louisiana 23 years prior to the recording of a brand in Texas, can be provided through two rare volumes in the possession of the University of Southwestern Louisiana.

The second of two rare historical books of cattle brands was presented recently to Dr. Clyde L. Rougeou, USL President, by the University Libraries of Pennsylvania, Lafayette, a nephew of the late Mrs. Gradney Cochrane, Lafayette. Mrs. Cochrane in 1946 gave the first of the two-volume "Brand Book for Opelousas and Atakapas Districts, 1738-1888" to Southwestern and promised on her death to present the second volume to USL.

The gift of the two rare books was made possible through the efforts of T.J. Arceneaux, a member of the USL College of Agriculture. Also included in the gift of the second volume is the official document of Gradney Cochrane's appointment as branding official for the Atakapas - Opelousas districts signed by Gov. Newton Crain Blanchard on Jan. 27, 1906. Cochrane, who was the last appointive branding official for these districts, succeeded his father, Douglas, in the post.

Genealogical Value

Aside from providing one of the three important proofs that cattle raising is the oldest agricultural enterprise of Southwest Louisiana and was in fact, as an organized enterprise, much older on the east side of the Sabine than in the present state of Texas, the two volumes are a valuable, fascinating and important source for genealogical research.

The cattle brands recorded by the early settlers of the area became a sort of "Heraldry of the Range," or an iron "Family Coat of Arms." Members of a family who did not inherit the family cattle brand often in designing their poetic word picture of cattle in their own. adapted the family brand, thus retaining family characteristics.

The "Brand Book" reflects these practices and within the two volumes some 27,000 old cattle brands may be examined. The book is probably the oldest record of brands in the United States and represents the parishes of St. Martin, St. Mary, St. Landry, Iberia, Lafayette, Vermilion, Acadia, Calcasieu, Cameron and other parishes carved from these first established in the Attakapas - Opelousas districts.

Another common practice among the Acadian cattlemen was the practice of identifying a deceased cattleman's burial place by etching his cattle brand on the cross above his grave as identification instead of his name. Dean Arceneaux points out that "branded" crosses can still be seen in the Andrus Cemetery near Lake Arthur.

The West Began in Acadiana

"The West as a land of cowboys and life on the range was born in Acadiana on the prairies of Southwest Louisiana," Dean Arceneaux says.

"The opening of Texas and Oklahoma as cattle country was actually just an extension of a well-established Louisiana enterprise."

The Dean added that when cattle rustling became such a menace that cattlemen in Southwest Louisiana were forced to form Vigilante Committees the worst punishment meted out to cattle thieves was exile to Texas.

For his proof that Texas' and Oklahoma's entry into cattle raising was just an extension of a well-established Louisiana enterprise, he offers, in addition to the "Brand Book" William Darby's "Geography of Louisiana," published in 1816; Judge P.X. Martin's "History of Louisiana," published in 1822; and for "lagniappe" those passages from Longfellow's "Evangeline," which provide a poetic word picture of cattle in Louisiana.