Cattle brands in Louisiana

In this fast-paced, high tech world, it may be a little surprising to learn that a low-tech practice like cattle branding is still alive and well. You would think that microchips would have replaced the time-honored method of marking animals. But think again.

According to Charles Broussard of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, which is charged with keeping track of cattle brands registered in Louisiana, there are 7,229 livestock brands now in use. The history of cattle branding in the state goes back to colonial times.

"Brands were like a family crest," said Willie Schoeffler, who has cataloged about 4,000 Louisiana brands. "Families were known by their brand.

Although most people might think that cattle brands were used only by wealthy cattle barons out West, the reality was quite the opposite, said Schoeffler's daughter, Glenda Schoeffler. "If a family had one head of cattle, with the open prairie land and swamps, they had to have a brand or there was no way to claim it," she said. "The Spanish ruled that if you had five heads of cattle or more, you had to have a brand.

Often, a newborn baby would be given his or her own brand, as did Native American tribespeople and free people of color. "Sometimes, it was an African hut or an African spear," said Willie Schoeffler. He has discovered brands belonging to 210 African-American families between the mid-1700s and 1900. Schoeffler was recognized in 1991 by the Louisiana State Archives for his efforts to preserve a little-known piece of history that was gradually being lost — old books containing the brands are deteriorating. But preserving history wasn't his original intent. "I did it to kill time," Schoeffler said. It was strictly a hobby for the retiree, whose occupations ranged from oilfield trucking to gun shop owner. He also holds 23 patents for drilling tools, with four patents pending.

His interest in cattle brands began in the 1970s, when he began researching his own genealogy and found that one branch of his family, the Bourques, had their own brands. Schoeffler and his wife, Ramona, pursued his hobby by poring over courthouse records. Then, they found a project was soon to include a spiral-bound book, "Cajun Cattle Brands," which lists the historical brands of Louisiana - Cajun and otherwise.

"Nothing is certain at this point, but Schoeffler said several cities have expressed interest in being the home of such a museum. "I don't feel comfortable naming them yet," Glenda Schoeffler said, but there are four contenders. They're all on the Old Spanish Trail, the cattle trail!"