



Joe Paschal is actually holding two branding irons, both stamp irons of the type used by most cattlemen. The owners donated the irons to Texas A&M University after "branding" a stairwell set aside there to commemorate brands from each county in the state.

Brand Brand Branded! nded! ded!

By Stan Redding
Photos by Sam Pierson
Houston Chronicle Staff

□ Jim Hitson, a Colorado cowboy, rode out one early summer day in 1868 to look for strays and was never seen again.

But Jim Hitson made history of sorts.

Three years later, just below the Colorado border in New Mexico Territory, two line riders roped a longhorn steer with this message burned on its side: 7-4-68 INDIANS HOT AS HELL JH.

Frontier investigators who probed the mystery concluded Jim Hitson had been in the process of branding a maverick when he was attacked by an Apache war

party. Hitson had time to burn his obituary into the steer's hide before he was killed. The longhorn obviously eluded the Apaches.

It's the only recorded instance in ranching history of a branded epitaph on a living marker.

Of course, it is highly possible that Hitson might have been dealt with sternly if a group of his own kind had chanced upon him during his branding chores.

From all the evidence (the steer's hide), Hitson was using a running iron, a straight length of metal used like a pencil to alter, or "run"

a brand, such as making an 8 out of an S and a B out of an E. In those days, riding around with a running iron on one's saddle was considered a grievous, if not fatal, social error. It is still regarded as a no-no by cowmen today.

Branding, the burning of an owner's mark on the hide of an animal, is not original with the American West. The Egyptians and the Chinese were branding cattle before the existence of the Western Hemisphere was known.

The first man to domesticate a cow probably scorched its rump with his mark. The first man to tame a horse

probably slapped his brand on it, too.

Western cattlemen just made the practice famous, a part of the legends and folklore of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana and other cow country states.

The current breed of Texas rancher, in fact, is apparently branding at a more prolific rate than his predecessors. Today there are an estimated 350,000 brands registered in the active brand books of the state. However, there's a question as to how many of the brands are bonafide.

It only cost six bits to

register a brand in Texas, and any urban cowboy can register a brand with the county clerk. You don't even have to own livestock to register a brand.

But most brands in Texas, it's safe to say, belong to honest-to-pete cowmen. Most of them are simple brands, a letter or combination of letters, a meaningful symbol, numbers, zodiac signs, heavenly bodies and the like. But some seem to defy hieroglyphics experts and tax the artistic efforts of blacksmiths who make up branding irons.

One rancher, back in the

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Branded!

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1880s, registered a brand that looked something like the %& symbols on a typewriter. "What's it mean?" asked the puzzled county clerk.

"Damned if I know," said the rancher. And that's the way his brand is known in the books, the "Damfino."

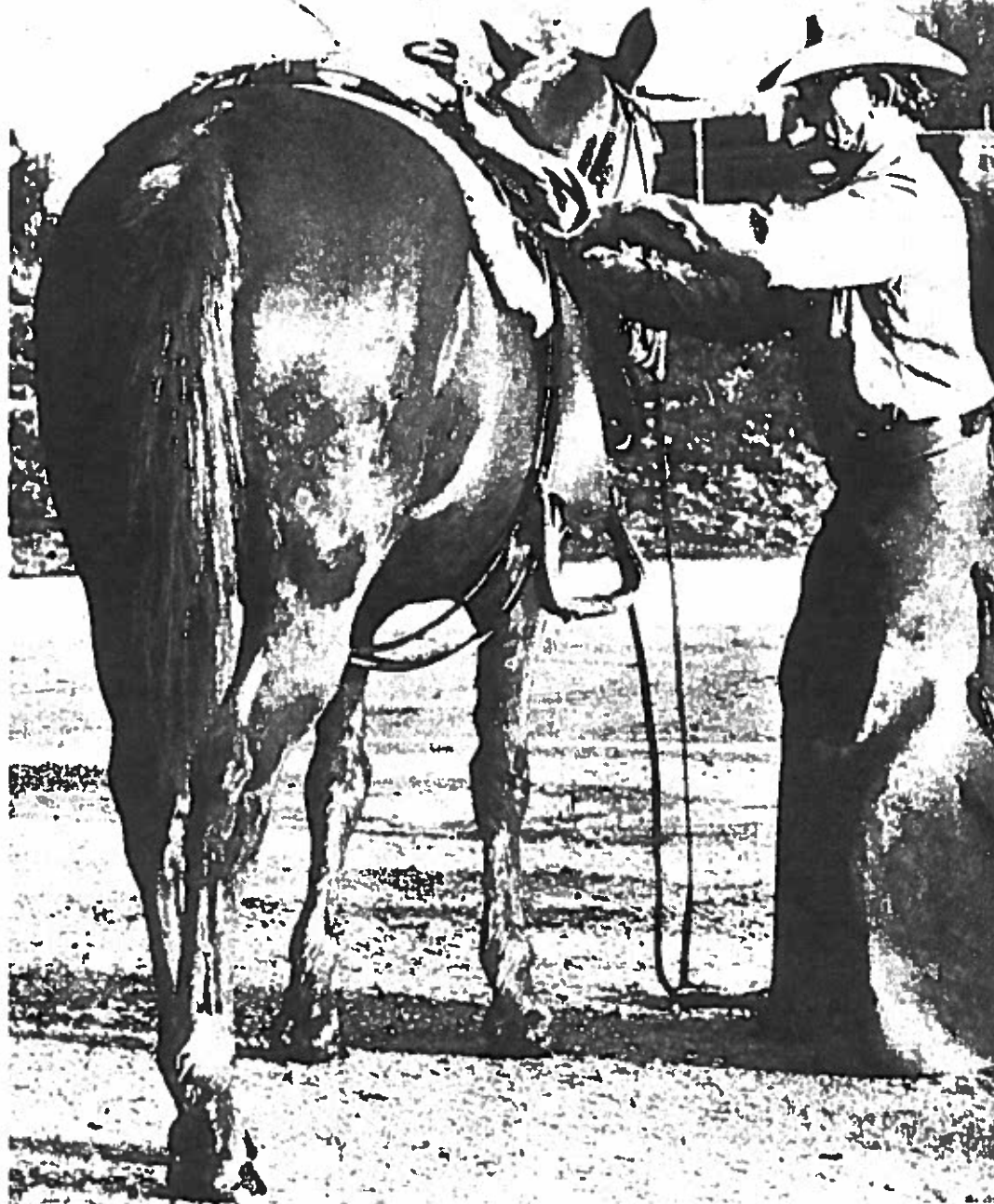
Some brands reflect the humorous, wry, satirical or cogent observations or opinions of their owners. One West Texas cattleman held cows — his own included — in low esteem. And the brand on his cows mirrored his feeling: the 2 ∞ P.

A county's brand marked the origin of cattle. Back in the old days, for instance, a longhorn branded HS on the shoulder and LH7 on the hip told an experienced cowman the steer was from Harris County and from Emil Marks' ranch.

Branding irons were usually stamp irons during frontier days, although today some ranchers use electrically heated branding irons or "freeze" brand cattle with intensely cold irons. Hide buyers don't like branding at all. It ruins too much usable leather, they say.

Brands incorporated not only letters, numbers and symbols (a heart, an arrow, a half moon and such) that were easy to decipher, but also lines, squiggles and other strange marks that needed some study to decode. They also leaned, slanted and assumed other positions. A Lazy S, for example, was an S lying down. A Slant C or Leaning C was a C tilted forward or backward. The Bar B brand looked like this: —B. But the B Bar brand was this way: B— JB connected (JB) would simply have the hook of the J coming off the bottom of the B's back. You had to know both the county and the people to really read brands.

According to the code of the West, a calf following its branded mother belonged to the man who owned the brand on the cow. An unbranded cow, steer, bull or weaned calf (a maverick) was the property of the man who took



Jack Phillips, shown here, uses brands registered in Brazoria County in 1840 and 1841 by his forebears, who founded the Battle Island Ranch near East Bernard.

the time and effort to catch it and brand it.

Some ranchers would put their brand on anything. Charles Goodnight was directing a roundup on his huge ranch when he and some cowboys chanced upon a camel.

The Army once experimented with camels as pack animals in Central and West Texas and a lot of the dromedaries escaped into the sagebrush.

"What is it?" asked one awed cowboy.

"I dunno," replied Goodnight. "But it's eatin' my grass. Brand it."

Brands and the stories that surround them have always fascinated Dr. O. D. Butler, the associate vice-president for agriculture and renewable resources at Texas A&M University and a man who has been close to brands all his life.

Reared on an Orange County stock farm, Butler felt real comfortable as a student at College Station in the '30s. The old Animal Science Department building, where he attended classes, was full of capital carvings depicting farm and ranch animals. The doors of the building were

overlaid with wrought iron grills boasting Texas cattle brands in the metal scrollwork: the Pitchfork, the 6666, the Backward DDD, the SMS, the Running W, the Spade and others.

Butler headed the Animal Science Department from 1952 until his retirement this year. The paneling in his office was scarred with burned-in cattle brands: the Heart, the Hat, the Rocking Chair, the OX, the Triangle, the Lazy S and more.

Butler learned the brands had been burned into the paneling by visiting officials

of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSWCRA).

"One did it and others followed suit, I guess," Butler surmises. "But I liked them. I have never been fascinated with brands to the extent that I became a collector of irons or brand books. I have no compulsions that way. But I have always been intrigued in the sense that brands in themselves represent a history of the state."

Hernando Cortez, the conquerer of Mexico, brought the first cattle to Texas and was the first man to run a brand in America. The first two brands registered in Harris County were recorded by women, oddly enough. Charlotte M. Alleus' CMA entwined, was registered on March 30, 1831, and Angelina James' AJ connected was registered July 30, 1832.

An official state branding law, assigning each county a brand, setting up methods of inspecting herds, banning running irons and generally putting into statute form what cowmen had been doing all along, went on the books in 1886.

"There are 26 counties that don't have brands of their own," said Butler. "It puzzled me, so I looked into it. Those counties didn't exist in 1886."

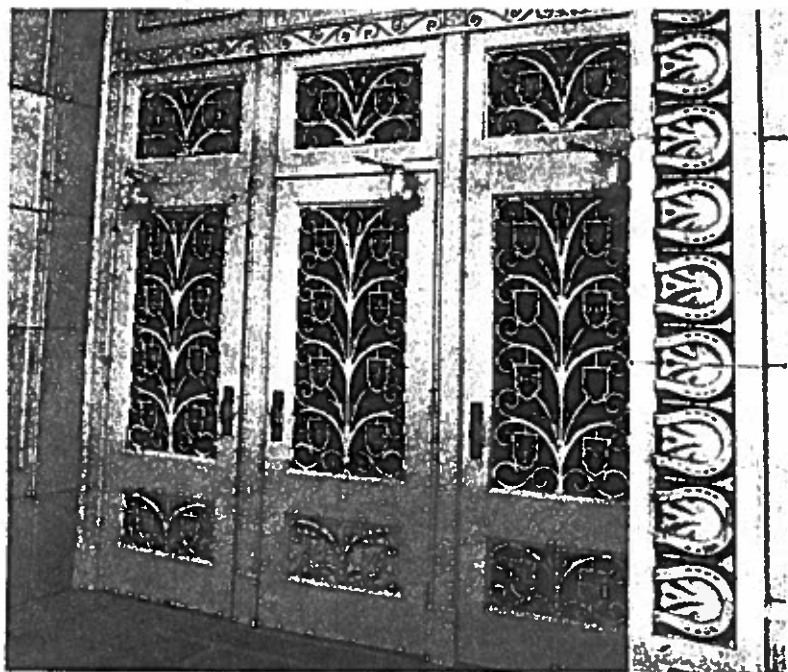
The State of Texas has two brands, a T and a five-pointed star. Brazoria County, which boasts the most cattle of any county in the state, also boasts the largest number of historic brands still in use.

Jack Phillips and his wife, Carolyn, operate the Battle Island Ranch, which was settled by Phillips' forebears in the 1820s. Their J-P was registered in 1840, and their JP connected was recorded in 1841. Phillips still runs several hundred head of longhorns among his herds, descendants of longhorns owned by his grandfather and father.

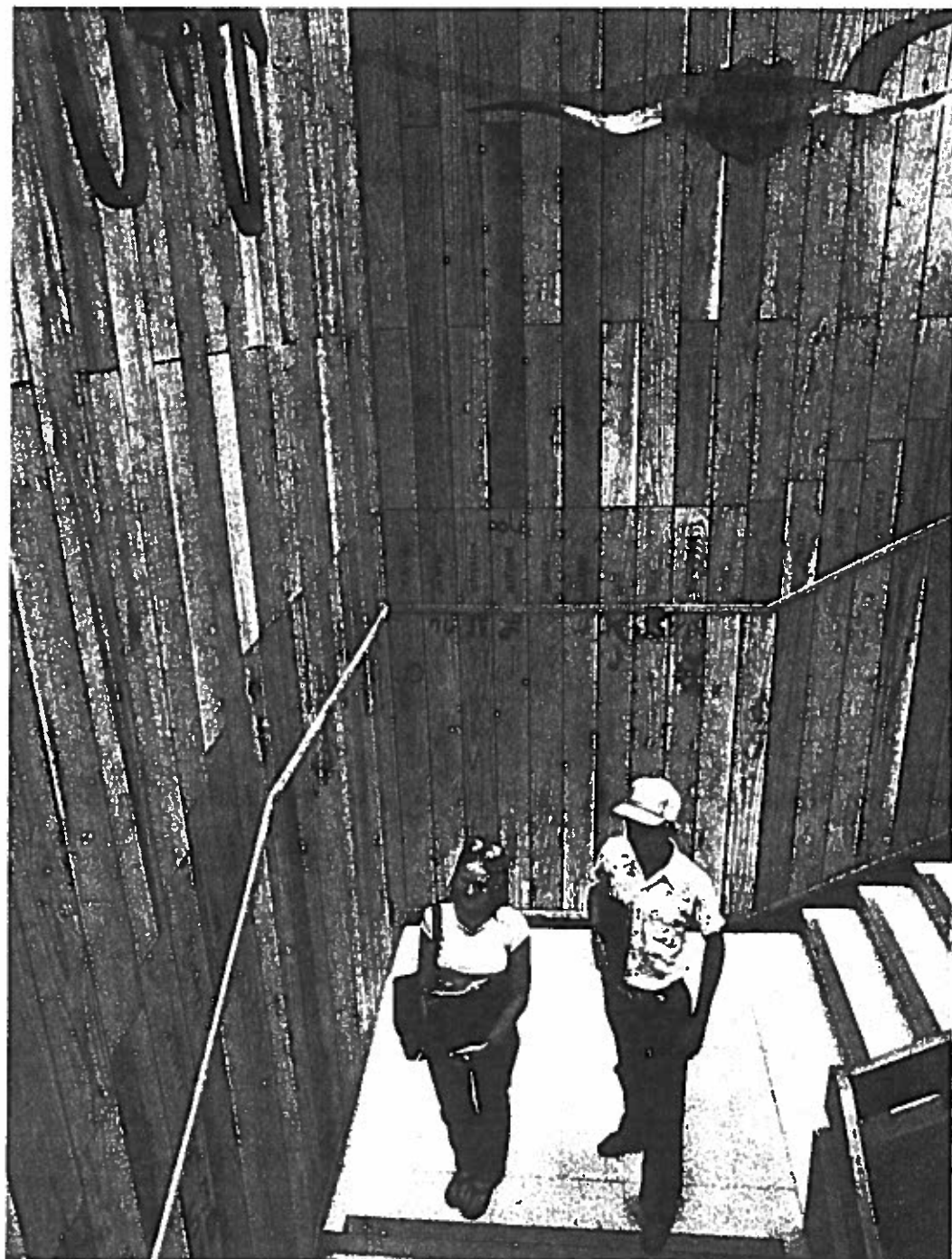
The Stanger Ranch, near Brazoria, is operated by Dr. Russell H. Stanger Jr., his



Frank Litterst, a beef cattle instructor, burns the state's brand, a T, into the Brazos County panel of the stairwell wall at A&M.



Wrought iron grills covering entrance doors of the old Animal Science Building depict famous brands of the Texas frontier, many still in use.



wife, Kitty, and their son, Russell H. Stanger III. Their 11 Bar (11—) has been branded continuously since 1865. The Stangers, too, still run longhorns, a breed they were instrumental in saving.

The oldest brand still burned on cow hides in Texas belongs to Hilmar G. Moore and John M. Moore III of Richmond. They are heirs of James Foster Dyer, who registered the JFD on October 3, 1839, in Fort Bend County, and who had his brand on 60,000 cattle when he died in 1882. That brand is also registered in Brazoria County.

Such things should be a part of our educational heritage, Butler believes.

As a matter of fact, Butler thought that brands are such an integral part of the historical warp-and-woof of Texas that when the new Robert J. Kleberg Animal and Food Science Center at A&M was authorized, he offered a bit of architectural advice.

Butler suggested that the main stairwell of the center be paneled with 254 handsome oak planks, one representing each county of the state and bearing that county's brand (with 26 exceptions, of course, in regards to the brands).

Butler proposed that when the building was dedicated, the officers and directors of the TSWCRA be invited to dedicate the stair-

well. The honchos of the cattle raisers association, all of whom are simon-pure, saddle-popping cowmen, could brand their symbols into the appropriate panels during the ceremonies.

Thereafter, brands of historical significance or those whose owners best represented the cattle industry in their particular counties would be eligible for the stairway.

Butler's idea for a "Branded Stairway" was enthusiastically adopted. In fact, the powers that be in such matters at Texas A&M thought it only fitting that the Branded Stairway be dedicated to Butler.

To tell the truth, that sort of embarrassed Butler, but

Texas cowmen allowed as how it was only right.

"O. D. Butler is sort of the archetypal cowman," said one university official. "You think of cows and ranches when you see him or talk to him. And I don't know of anyone who's contributed more to the cattle industry in the last 30 years than O. D."

Butler allows as how he could think of several, but he is also noted for his modesty. And he is a real cowman. He operates a working cow ranch in Brazos and Burleson counties, and his J— is registered in both counties.

The new center with its branded stairwell was dedicated this past summer.

It looked like a west-of-

"Branded stairway," being used here by students Vikki Owen of Bryan and David Freeman of Copperas Cove, is the innovation of Dr. O. D. Butler.

Branded!

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the-Mississippi cattlemens' convention. About the only people left on the ranges south of Wyoming, apparently, were a few line riders and some windmill mechanics.

"Well, like Winston Churchill once said, every important occasion has an aspect of crowding," observed Butler.

All the ramrods of the TSWCRA showed up with their branding irons and started looking around for a fire in which to heat them.

"And that proved a little embarrassing," said Zerle Carpenter, acting head of the Animal Science Department. "We had overlooked the fact that many of the officers and directors of the TSWCRA were from other states. We had to exclude them."

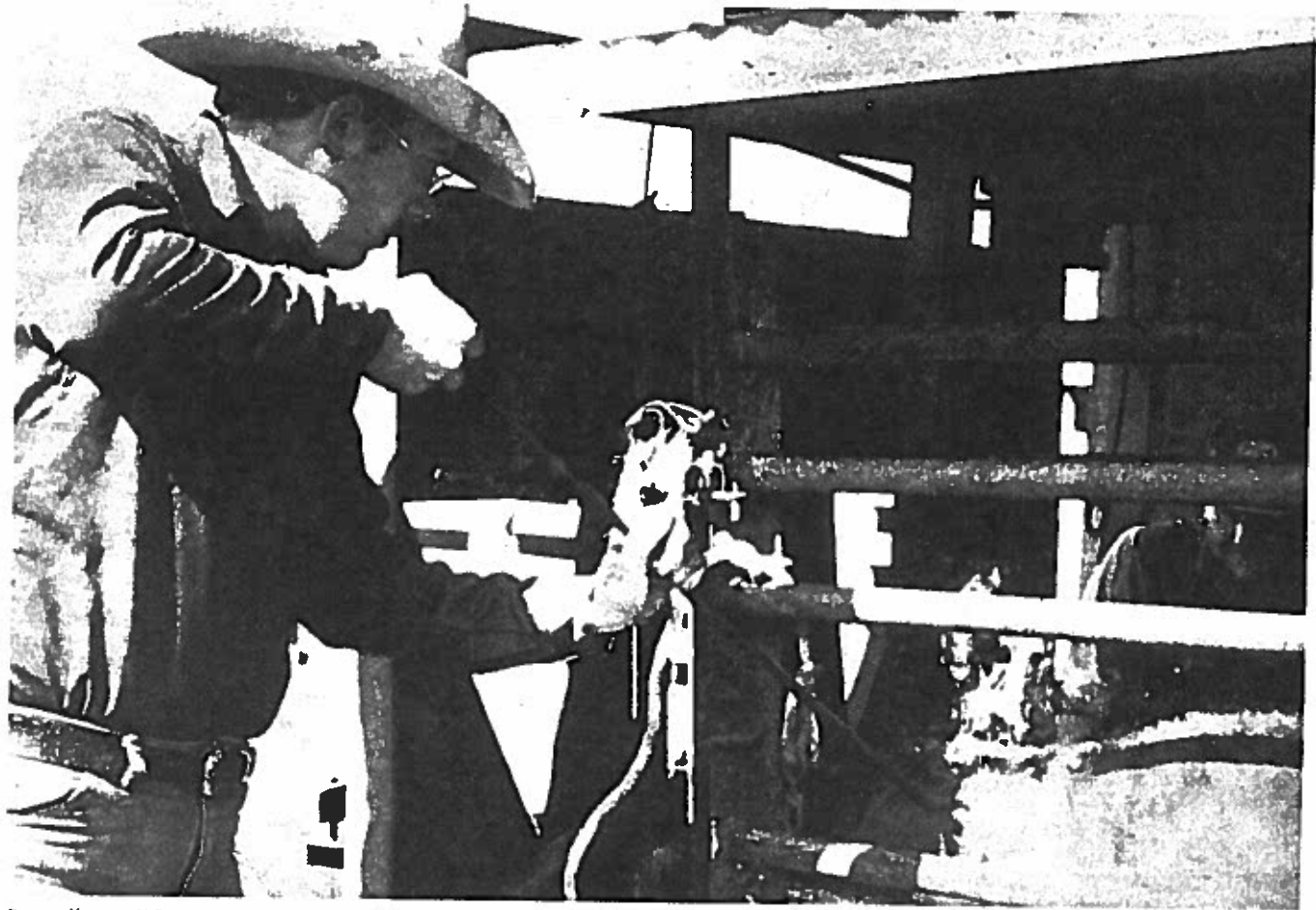
Carpenter presided over a handsome, leather-bound vellum brand book in which the guests (Texas cowmen only) wrote their names and made their marks.

"You know, there were once 255 counties in Texas. But earlier this century, the U.S. Supreme Court awarded Greer County to Oklahoma in a boundary dispute," said Carpenter. Then he grinned. "I'm from Greer County, Oklahoma."

Frank Litterst, a grizzled beef cattle instructor for the university, was in charge of the branding of the panels. Frank Litterst is the kind of guy who looks like he has smoked a lot of rump hair in his time. He had a coed branding crew headed up by his graduate assistant, Joe Paschal.

"Of course, we were just heating up the irons in the branding fires and cooling them off," said Litterst. "But it got pretty hectic. We had to cut off the automatic fire alarm, because all the smoke would have set them off.

"We had about 150 people wanting to put their brands in the stairway, and we had just so many buckets of water and sand for cooling. We couldn't handle them all, so I told the kids, 'Girls, you go in the girls' restroom, and boys,



Russell H. "Cowboy" Stanger III, manager of the Stanger ranches in Brazoria County, brands the family's 11 into the hide of a steer. The 11 (Eleven Bar) has been the Stanger brand since 1865.

you go in the boys' restroom, and you stick them hot irons in the toilet bowls and then flush them.' It worked."

The first brand burned into the stairwell was on Brazos County's panel. It was Butler's J Bar.

All the ranchers who burned their brands into the panels then donated their stamping irons to the university, and everybody then sat around and told brand stories.

Litterst has three barrels of branding irons in his office, awaiting suitable display space. "There's a couple of runnin' irons in there, but I ain't gonna ask no questions as to who used them," he said.

Now, before all you Gilley's galoots pile into your pickups and head for College Station with your registered but rangeless brands, Texas A&M University has enacted a branding law of its own, to wit:

The Beef Cattle Committees in the 254 counties will receive invitations from the Animal Science Department through county agriculture extension agents to nominate eight brands that best repre-

sent the livestock industry in their county.

County historical societies will be asked to nominate two brands that have historical significance but are not being used at this time.

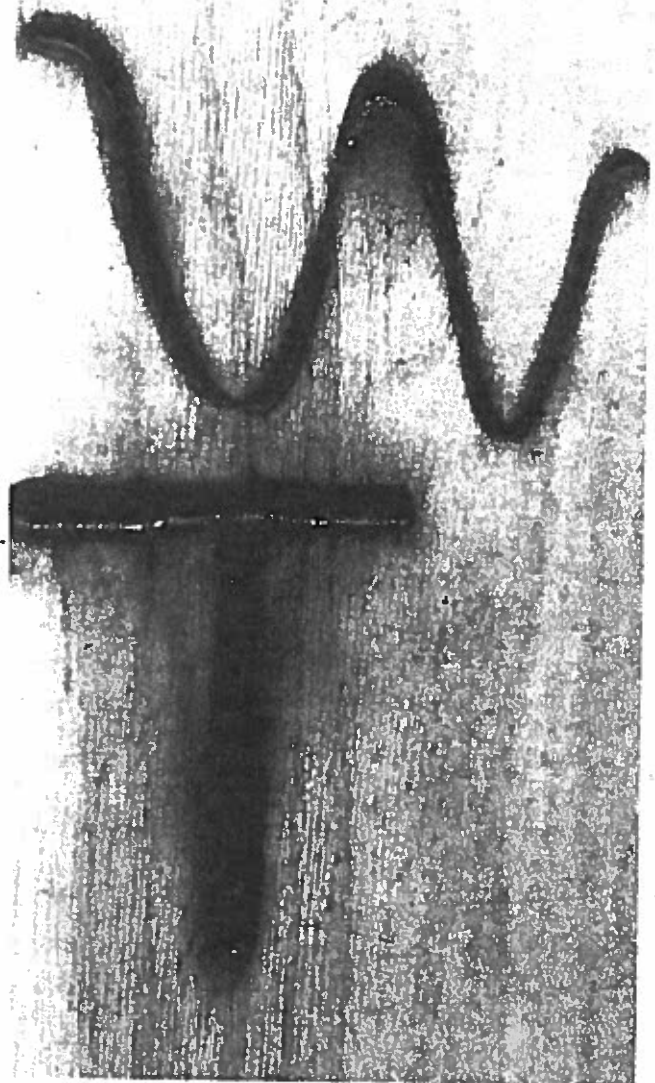
Folks like the Stangers, the Marks and scions of other pioneer cattle families who are still in business are exceptions. And officers and directors of other livestock organizations might get invites.

"I don't reckon we got room for more than 4,000 brands," said Litterst.

Two last words on brands. The 6666 was not won in a poker game with that hand, no matter how persistent the legend. The owner just liked sixes.

And the XIT did not mean "Ten in Texas." Ab Blocker, the XIT foreman, designed the brand which he insisted had no meaning. "The owners wanted a brand that rustlers couldn't alter with a runnin' iron," said Ab during an old-time cowboys meeting many years ago.

Then he sighed: "I dunno whether they altered the brand or not, but they stole us blind."



The State of Texas' big T appears below the Flying W's mark in Brazos County's panel. Brazos County is the seat of Texas A&M University.