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: 7-448 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 these 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 bona fide.

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-god 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

Continued
Branded!

Continued

1860s, registered a brand that looked something like the © & © symbols on a typewriter. “What’s it mean?” asked the puzzled county clerk.

“Dammed if I know,” said the rancher. And that’s the way his brand is known in the book, the “T" mark.”

Some brands reflect the humorous, wry, satirical or cogent observations or opinions of their owners. One West Texas cattlemen 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 LHF on the hip told an experienced cowboy the steer was from Harris County and from Emil Mark’s 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 varied, 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- © B connected, © B would simply have the hook of the J coming off the end 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 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 drudgery escaped into the sagebrush. “What is it?” asked one awed cowboy.


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.

Rearred 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 ®, the Backward DD, 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 DX, 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 (TSCRA).

“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 iron 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 conqueror 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. Alles’ MCM intertwined was registered on March 30, 1833, 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. These 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 has 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 1846, 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 Stagner Ranch, near Brazoria, is operated by Dr. Russell H. Stagner Jr., his
wife, Kitty, and their son, Russell H. Stagner 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 Hilmor 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 25 handsome oak planks, each representing a 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 TSWCHA be invited to dedicate the stairwell. 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-3 is registered in both counties.

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

"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.

Continued
Russel H. "Cowboy" Stanger III, manager of the Stanger ranches in Brazoria County, brands the family's 1- into the hide of a steer. The 1- (Eleven Bull) has been the Stanger brand since 1865.

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