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Hot iron brands remain a tradition in today's ranching world but are now heated by propane instead of being banked in a camp fire.

Origin of the hot iron

By RaeLynn Ricarte
The Dalles Chronicle

The act of branding livestock with ownership symbols began in ancient times but became a community activity in the American west during an era when 20 million cattle grazed and were herded long distances.

"Back in the day, there was a huge open range and cattle became intermixed," said Maupin rancher Keith Nantz. "On a particular day, the cattlemen would gather to sort and brand the herd so they could later round them up and drive them to market."

The origin of hot iron brands to prove ownership of lost or stolen animals dates back to 2700 B.C. The tradition continues today, said Nantz, because nothing else provides the same definitive mark of ownership.

Brands eventually became so numerous they were registered with the state and now must be applied to a specified area of the animal's hide as proof of ownership.

For example, Nantz is a business partner and general manager for Dillon Land and Cattle Company and their brand is applied to the right ribs of a calf.

Nantz said brands are usually kept fairly simple and have a language all their own.

Brands are made up of numerals, pictures and characters, such as a slash, circle or cross, and capital letters of the alphabet. There are many different combinations and letters and numerals can be upright, lying down or "lazy",

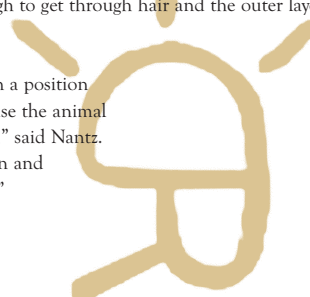
connected, reversed, used singly, joined, or hanging. Picture brands, such as a setting sun, are usually used alone.

For example, an upside down "R" would represent the "Crazy R" ranch or, if the letter is turned 90 degrees, the "Lazy R." A short horizontal line over the "R" would be read as "Bar R" and if the letter was within a circle, the "Circle R." The letter within a four-sided box tilted 45 degrees would be the "Diamond R."

Although brands can look like hieroglyphics to the untrained eye, the ability to read these symbols is referred to as "callin' the brand." They are read from left to right, top to bottom or, when one character encircles another, from outside to inside.

The rancher or cow boss typically runs the show on brandings and is usually the person who performs castrations on male calves at the same time. The brand must burn deep enough to get through hair and the outer layer of skin so the person applying it has to work very carefully.

"You want to have someone in a position of trust doing the branding because the animal is going to bear that mark for life," said Nantz. "You want the brand to look clean and precise - and be difficult to alter."





Mary Macnab of Wasco, above, has spent the last year researching the history behind about 100 brands burned by area ranchers into fencing at Cottonwood Canyon State Park.

stories burned into History

By Raelynn Ricarte
The Dalles Chronicle

Mary Macnab of Wasco has spent the last year researching brands that have been burned into the fence of a former cattle ranch that has become a public park along the John Day River.

She became intrigued by the history behind the brands after rallying about 100 ranchers to apply them to boards as part of the Sept. 25, 2013, grand opening of Cottonwood Canyon State Park, 99989 Highway 206.

"I just wanted to know the story behind those brands," she said.

An example of her research that has been put into a PowerPoint presentation is the story of Fred Justesen of Grass Valley, who wields the connected F-J brand.

"Fred remembers the flat flooding, covering the entire field (where the house was located). There was a cat sitting there with only the smokestack showing. He says there were eels in ditches and he was put in a cistern with a five-gallon bucket to clean it out. Years later, one of the Murthas offered Fred a drink. Remembering the cistern, he asked for whiskey. Here it came with ice cubes!"

Her 102 pages of research will soon be on display at the park's visitor center and people are welcome to add information that they may have about one of the brands.

The sprawling park covers 8,000 acres on the border of Sherman and Gilliam counties and has its own brand — the connected C-W-C — that tops the main gate.

Isabella Mills, Cash Helms and Jordan Barrett, all students at Grass Valley Elementary, designed the park's brand.

Cottonwood was sold to Oregon State Parks several years ago when the Murtha family decided the place should be shared with the public.

Mary and her husband, Bo, are newly retired wheat farmers so she had time to hunt down information on the owners of brands. Growing up in Wasco gave her an advantage on the mission, in that she knew most of the area farmers and ranchers.

She tracked down some she didn't know by accessing the state's brand registration list. Sometimes, as people heard about the project, they contacted her to provide information.

"We just moved to town (from farm) last year and I was having so much fun with this that we decided to be camp hosts at Cottonwood last November," she said. "This has just been a total experience for me."

But Macnab is not done yet. There are still stories to learn and she invites people to visit Cottonwood and write them down.

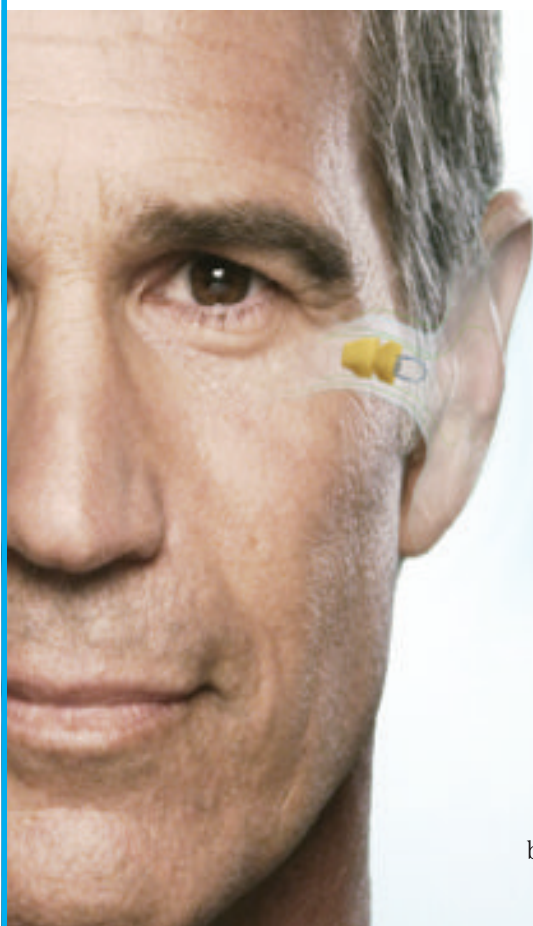
Ranchers wanting to add their brand to the fence can make arrangements to do so by calling the park at 541-394-0002.

Cottonwood is open daily from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. and visitors are asked to keep an eye out for rattlesnakes.



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Barbara and Bill Hammel have weathered many storms in life, including the loss of their oldest son to cancer. They use Brian's brand, the Rock-n Diamond B, on the herd of Beefalo and Belgium Blue Cross that he left as a legacy that is now generating profits for the family.

A legacy branded in beef

By RaeLynn Ricarte
The Dalles Chronicle

Brian Hammel left his family an unexpected legacy after returning from a bull-buying trip to Idaho several years ago with not only the livestock he was sent to buy, but two Beefalo yearling bulls and two heifers.

"I wasn't real happy, said Bill of his son's purchase. "I wasn't sure I wanted them."

Beefalo are a cross between domestic cattle and the American bison. As Bill and his wife, Barbara, have learned, there is a growing demand among consumers for the animal's meat because it is not only tender, but lower in fat and cholesterol.

"I am guaranteed top dollar no matter what the market is," said Bill.

Brian died in August 2010 of colon cancer at the age of 35. As a memorial to their eldest son, Bill and Barbara Hammel still use the Rock-n Diamond B brand on their 40 Beefalo at the Fifteenmile Road ranch.

"Diamond B was the name of Brian's guide service and he decided to also make it his brand," said Bill.

The remainder of the herd of 140 pair (cow and calf) bear the FH brand (for Bill's father Frank). Although most of the Beefalo look like any other breed of cattle, a few are born each year with the buffalo traits of narrower hindquarters and thicker neck and shoulders.

Bill was skeptical of the future of the beefalo herd after the first calves were weaned in the fall because they seemed to be smaller than their peers. However, they ended up weighing as much or more because their muscles are denser.

Originally bred in the south, Beefalo bulls weigh around 2,000 pounds at maturity and cows about 1,500 pounds.

Beefalo thrive on lower quality forage, a trait from buffalo genetics, and still produce rich milk for their calves. Their cattle ancestry is reflected in the fact that they are fairly docile.

Brian opted to become the fourth generation of Hammels to run the ranch after following the advice of his parents to explore some of the world before making that decision.



A work crew for a community branding at the FH Ranch several years ago included, from left: Hank Benson, Barry Hammel, Rich Remington, John Fulton, Will Ford, Matt Ruby, Brian Hammel and Bill Hammel. Also helping that day but not pictured are Barbara Hammel, Brook Remington, Scott Thomas, Guy Eisland, and John Ford. Contributed photo

“We felt he needed to go away from the ranch and learn some things about life,” said Bill.

By the time Brian was 20 he had worked for Les Schwab in Moses Lake and The Dalles, as well as Nelson Tire, and was ready to take on the family’s livestock operation.

He had been active in 4-H and FFA (Future Farmers of America) and spent plenty of time studying best practices for increasing profits and adapting to changing times.

In addition to Beefalo, Brian eventually added Belgium Blue cattle to the herd. His younger brother, Barry, had researched the benefits of the Blue, which is double-muscled and has the ability to convert feed into lean muscle. For that reason, the breed has a greater meat-to-bone ratio with reduced fat and cholesterol content, as well as a tenderness gene.

The brothers convinced their father that the Beefalo herd would benefit from being bred with the Blue because both breeds shared some of the same traits.

“One of the Blue’s steaks is about twice the size as a normal steer,” said Bill. “Brian never got to see the offspring of that match but that was another terrific choice the boys made.”

In the spring of 2008, Brian, then 33, began experiencing pain in his right side, which his parents thought might be due to excessive powerlifting.

Around that time, his truck slid off Emerson Loop Road during a winter storm and went over a 40-foot embankment. The family thought his discomfort might also be a residual effect of that trauma.

It was inconceivable to Bill and Barbara that their 6-foot 6-inch tall son who weighed about 375 pounds could be anything but indestructible, which made it more difficult to accept the cancer diagnosis. Their worries were compounded by the fact that Brian was the father of two children, Bailey, now 16, and Beau, 6.

“Everyone liked him, he was just a big teddy bear,” said Barbara.

“The only problem Brian had in school was talking when he was not supposed to,” said Bill. “He could make the wall talk back to him. I would send him to town for something and it would take him hours to get back because he was visiting with someone.”

The day that Brian threw his father against the wall during a wrestling match was the day that Bill knew it was time to acknowledge that he was no match for his son.

“At that point, I realized, ‘No more messing with this kid,’” he said.

After Brian’s cancer diagnosis, Bill and Barbara decided to get a colonoscopy. They received a second shock when the test revealed that she also had a tumor in her colon – and it turned out to be malignant.



Matt Ruby loads medicine into a syringe as he prepares to work cattle at the Hammel ranch. He is employed as a full-time hired hand.

Barry Hammel pushes a reluctant yearling into a squeeze shoot to be branded. He was instrumental in building the Hammel herd of Beefalo.



"Life became one day at a time," he said. "Brian walked over and hugged me at one point and said, 'It will be okay dad.'"

"Brian and I went to chemo together — what a way to bond with your kid," said Barbara.

Bill struggled to cope with the threat from a hidden enemy to his son and the wife he had been married to for 40 years.

He literally made a splash of his introduction to Barbara by dumping water on her as she sunbathed at Linfield College in McMinneville, where she was studying to become a teacher.

Although Bills says it was a three-gallon bucket of water, she said it felt more like five gallons.

"I wanted to get her attention," he said. "It was love at first sight."

Despite the soggy circumstances of their first conversation, Barbara was interested in learning more about the young rancher and agreed to a date that eventually led to nuptials.

As he watched his bride and their son fight a life-threatening illness, Bill had never felt so powerless.

"Life became one day at a time," he said. "Brian walked over and hugged

me at one point and said, 'It will be okay dad.'"

Barbara was told that if she lost any more weight, her last chemo treatment would have to be postponed. Determined to finish the ordeal, she loaded her pockets with fish weights and no one was the wiser.

When Brian's cancer returned in 2009, he was told by his first doctor that "there was no hope and he needed to start getting his affairs in order."

Hal Woods, a firefighter/medic with Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue, was Brian's best friend and was incensed by the diagnosis. He agreed with Bill and Barbara that Brian needed to find hope where he could and fight death as long as his spirit was willing and his body able.

Brian found another oncologist who was more positive about his cancer treatments. He went through two years of chemo, from the spring of 2008 until the summer of 2010, and then called off the treatments.

"The doctors said Brian was an experiment because he was so big they didn't know exactly how much drugs to give him for chemo," said Bill.

"We were always hoping that he would be one of those to beat the odds," said Barbara, who will be a five-year survivor in November. "I think we were all in denial right up to the end."

Brian was on hospice care when Bill's mother died. In the middle of dealing with those traumas, a wildfire sparked to life and burned 3,000 acres of the Hammels' wheat and pasture land.

"That was not a good year," said Bill in what seems like a monumental understatement.

The future of the ranch became uncertain with Brian's death. Barry, then 30, wasn't sure that he wanted to leave a good-paying job with Intel for the uncertainty of ranching, which has been on the decline across the nation during the past decade.

Barry hasn't yet made a decision about his career but comes home on days off to work on the ranch. Matt Ruby, another of Brian's friends, has been hired as the full-time ranch hand and taken on much of the daily farm work.

Each year, Brian's friends, including Wood, Mike Barrett and Ed Sallee, plus their wives, girlfriends and children, arrive at the Hammels to help with spring branding.

These reunions are good for Bill and Barbara, who will forever carry sorrow for the loss of a beloved son.

"You learn to live with the grief," said Bill. "At first you have a lot of bad moments and then over time it gets better."

Weathering the storms of life is something he has gotten good at.

After graduating from Linfield with a degree in business administration, Bill took over management of the ranch when his older brother became seriously ill. Their grandfather had homesteaded in Wasco County and ranching had become a way of life that Bill didn't want to lose.

"I wasn't about to let the place be sold so I came home," he said.

It seems appropriate that a family who has survived difficult life lessons would own a dog that never gives up.

Following them around during daily chores is "Toughie," their Red Heeler that once fastened onto the heel of a cow to move her in the right direction and then rode her kick in the air. He also survived a fall out of a moving truck that broke his hip.

"He's earned that name," said Barbara.

Bill's philosophy in life is simple – and complex.

"There are just a lot of things you have to learn to live with and you have no control over," he said.



Barry Hammel, left, and his older brother Brian, enjoy a triumphant moment on a hunting trip several years ago. In 2010, Brian died of colon cancer at the age of 35. He is shown with "Toughie," the family dog that has earned its name by surviving many accidents. Contributed photo



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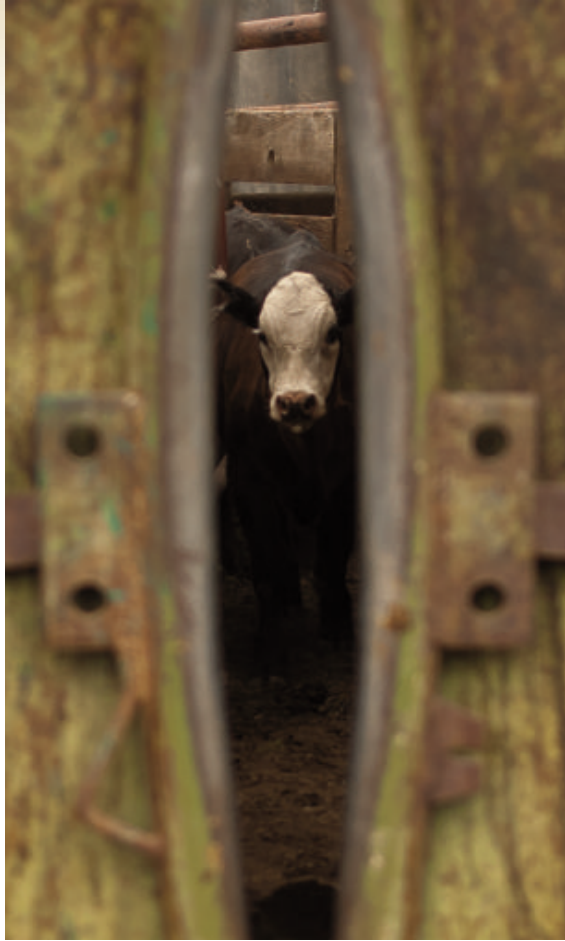


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YX

A GREAT way of life

By RaeLynn Ricarte
The Dalles Chronicle

The story behind the YX brand is simple enough. Gard and Maxine Fulton, second generation ranchers, found it in an outbuilding when they settled into the Eightmile Road property in 1941.

"They found out it wasn't registered so they got it registered and started using it," said John Fulton, who was born to the couple that year.

His parents ended up with a second brand, a capital "U" with a lowercase "s" inside, when they purchased the nearby Seufert family property. No one knew exactly how to read the brand and it was never registered but it still is in the Fulton's possession.



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John and his wife, Ruth, have raised six children in a blended marriage and the youngest of their four daughters, Jenni, and her husband, Will Ford, have taken over operations. Their son, also named John, recently completed diesel mechanic school and at the age of 20 has joined the family business.

The Fulton-Ford ranch has 200 head of cattle and raises wheat on several thousand acres of owned and leased land.

"This is the first year that I've been completely retired so I spend time with the (seven) grandkids and spend the rest of the time trying to stay out of the way," said John, 73.

His skills as a pilot still come in handy as he takes to the skies in a Husky A-1A to help find missing cows and track down newborns. He also performs these services for other ranchers in the area.

"Although it's changing, it's still a great way of

life," said Fulton. "You can be out and about on horses and ATVs – something that a lot of folks don't have the opportunity to do."

Above, Will Ford, an Eightmile Road rancher, gets ready to send cattle through a squeeze chute for de-horning.

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Mike Filbin
moves cows to a
corral for branding.

Passing the BRAND

By RaeLynn Ricarte
The Dalles Chronicle

Dufur Gap Road rancher Mike Filbin's paternal great-grandfather emigrated from Ireland, and settled with his wife in Oklahoma to raise thoroughbred horses.

He changed the spelling of the family name from Philbin to the current Filbin and Mike said his predecessors "burned out and were blown out by tornados." Despite these challenges, they managed to keep the operation going under the Half Circle F brand, which Mike later inherited.

His grandfather Walter moved to a ranch in Centerville, Wash., with May, his wife, and became, among other things, an auctioneer.

Walter was known as "The Colonel" because he had received command authority on a bloody battlefield in Europe during World War I because he was the highest ranking soldier still standing.

Walter and May's son, Chuck, had wanderlust and met Gwen, who was born and raised near Dufur during his travels. They married and Mike was born in The Dalles as one of five children. The family moved to Kalispell, Mont., when he was 6-years-old.

Walter had medical problems that forced a sale of the Centerville ranch, so Chuck took employment in the power industry. After Mike became a

teenager, the family moved back to Oregon and made their home in Hood River.

Following service as an Army sniper in Vietnam, Mike worked for many years in Oregon's logging industry before returning to return to the family tradition of ranching.

He re-registered the Half Circle F brand and purchased the holdings of his maternal grandparents, Warren and Margaret Stanley, about six miles south of Dufur, along with other properties.

Mike and his wife, Kitty, who grew up on a farm in Odell, also hold the LM brand that belonged to the Stanleys and it is registered but not in use.

Warren once told Mike the initials on the brand stood for "Little Mike," but Filbin doesn't know if that is fact or fiction.

He plans to pass on the LM brand to Nate, his son who is currently working in the oil fields of Montana and North Dakota but expected to return home to join the beef production operation.

When Mike, 64, does retire, the Half Circle F will also go to his son.



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The Chronicle started an on-going series in 2014 focusing on the agricultural industry, which is the economic engine for Wasco County and the source of many local jobs. We chose to feature the life of cattle ranchers for the inaugural year due to the continuing decline of small ranches. Our attention will turn next year to cherries and then to grains and other commodities.

Farmers and ranchers interested in participating in this educational effort can email reporter RaeLynn Ricarte at ricarte@thedalleschronicle.com or call 541-506-4604.



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Country Girl and proud of it



Hanna Seitz might be just 15 years old but she has big plans for a future that involves taking care of injured horses.

By RaeLynn Ricarte
The Dalles Chronicle

Hanna Seitz might be just 15 years old but she has big plans for a future that involves taking care of injured horses.

"Working with livestock teaches you things you didn't know about yourself," she said of taking care of her own horse, Pollyanna, a bay quarter-horse that stands about 15-hands high.

Not only does Seitz have the opportunity to test her riding skills, she has responsibilities to feed and groom the animal.

"I think that country kids learn to be more respectful of people and property because that's just the way of life," she said.

Seitz is a sophomore at Dufur High School and a cheerleader. She believes growing up in the small town has gone a long way to shape her into a young woman who will be prepared to face life challenges as an adult.

"There's a saying that 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child' and that's pretty true here," she said. "There's a lot of people looking out for you all that time - and that can be good or bad."

Hanna is the daughter of Tim and Carrie Seitz and works in the summer at Camp Morrow teaching children how to ride.

"A lot of them come from cities and are afraid at first to get on the horses," she said. "I live being able to show them how fun it is to ride."

Although she is committed at this time to training in physical therapy for horses, Hanna acknowledges that, as a teenager, her mindset could change.

She can't envision a life without an open range to ride on and would love to stay in the country once she launches into the world.

Her favorite movie is *The Cowboys* with John Wayne, which she has watched several hundred times.

Cowgirl Hanna Seitz grew up in the country and looks like she's ready to work.



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Dressing up cowgirl-style involves the traditional boots and hat, as shown by Hanna Seitz.

The plot of the 1972 movie is that Wayne loses his drovers to the California gold rush and is forced to hire school boys from North Dakota for a 400-mile long cattle drive.

He reluctantly trains the boys in riding, roping and branding and develops a bond with them. At the end of the movie, the boys honor him as a father figure.

"I love that movie," said Seitz. "He (Wayne) doesn't think they can do much but then they are awesome and it really turns his attitude around."


Her favorite book is "The Outsiders," a coming-of-age novel written by S.E. Hinton, then a teenager, and published in 1967. The book follows two rival groups, the Greasers and the Socs (for Socials) who are at odds over their socio-economic status.

"This group of misfits think they are the only one with problems and the book teaches that problems are everywhere and life is not just about you," said Seitz.

Her preferred song is Buckaroo Barbie, a cowgirl version of the Proverbs 31 woman who takes care of business and her family.

In school, Seitz is learning more about the lifestyle of a rancher, a way of life that appeals to her in a time when many teens are confused about their value system.

"My favorite class is agriculture science because we are learning about livestock judging and different breeds of animals," she said. "And I am an FFA (Future Farmers of America) member so I am learning a lot there also."



Mid-Columbia Health Foundation Board Member & Wheat & Cattle Rancher Cynthia Kortge: Cynthia Kortge was born in The Dalles and raised on a wheat farm near Dufur, Oregon. She works alongside family for Kortge Wheat & Cattle Company and volunteers for several community organizations. Cynthia joined the Health Foundation board in 2011 and is a major supporter. Join Cynthia in helping us build a health community.

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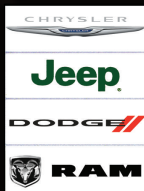
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