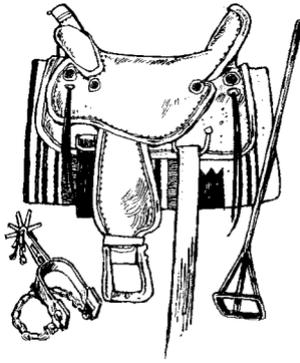


When the Cowboy Was King



The cowboy slides out of his saddle and onto the hard-packed dirt. The setting sun streaks the sky with purple, but he's too tired to notice. The smell of strong coffee wafts from the bunkhouse. All he can think about is washing up and getting some grub, before he falls into his bunk for an exhausted sleep. His work will start again at first light tomorrow. He pats his sweaty horse gratefully, leading it over to the barn for a rubdown and its feed bag before taking care of himself.

The cowboy was the king of the west, because pretty much everything to do with cattle depended on him. He wore special leather boots and a hat just like cowboys wear today, but he didn't drive a truck. He went everywhere on his horse. That horse was the dearest creature in the world to him - sometimes even more than his wife or kids!

In the early days the land wasn't fenced in, so the cowboy would have to ride many a mile around the ranch, to bring

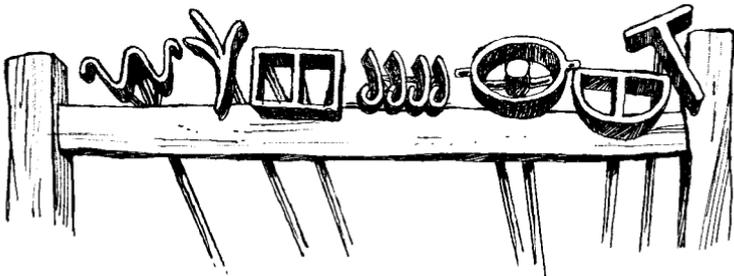
back an animal that had strayed too far. Some of the ranches were enormous. The King Ranch in south Texas covered an area of land about the size of Rhode Island in the US, or twice the size of Greater London! It is still a working ranch today.

As he rode the ranch, the cowboy had to watch out for rustlers. Even after the open range began to be fenced in, thieves on horses could cut the barbed wire and ride off with a whole herd of cattle. The same thing happens today, only the rustlers load the cattle into trucks and drive quietly away.

That's why every head of cattle had to be branded with the symbol of that ranch. (A 'head' is one animal.) Of course, the calf wasn't in the mood to stand still while being stuck with a hot iron! Two cowboys known as 'flankers' would sit at opposite ends of the calf. They held its legs stretched out so the 'brander' could do his job.

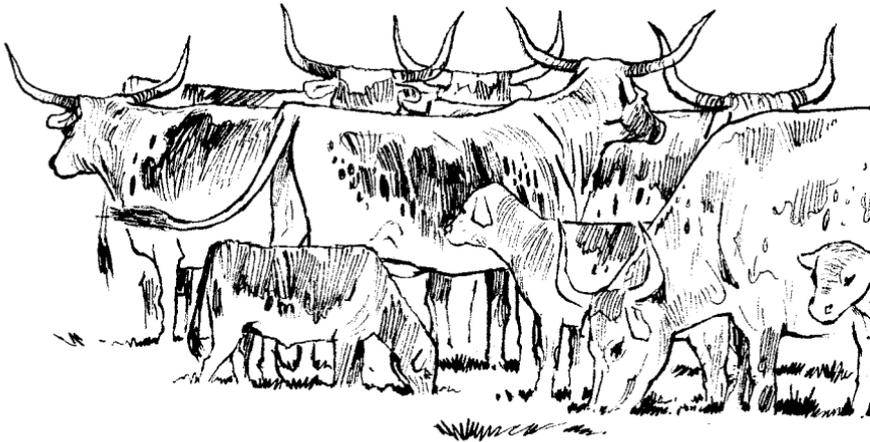
The brander would stick the flat end of the metal branding iron into a fire and hold it there long enough to get really hot. Then he would press it into the calf's rump with just the right pressure and a rocking motion, to make sure the whole brand showed up. Here are some famous cattle brands:

Running W; Three Feathers ; Bible; Four Sixes; Hog Eye; Bow and Arrow; Tumbling T.



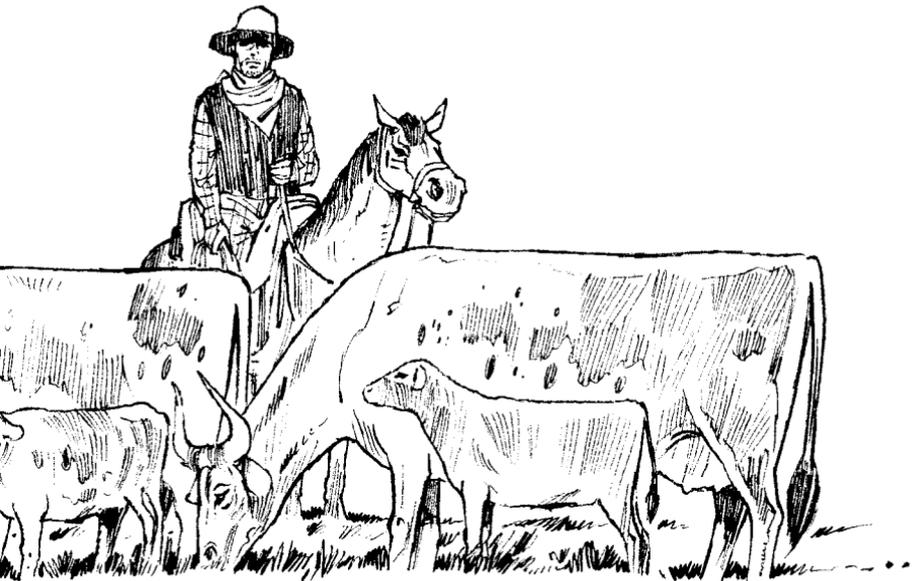
A calf was always branded just after it was weaned from its mother, if possible. Any unbranded animal over six months of age was considered a 'maverick'. In the mid-1850's in Texas, a cattleman named Samuel A. Maverick owned a large herd which he had no time to brand, so they were left to run wild. After a while ranchers began to say 'That's a Maverick' whenever they saw a head of cattle without a brand, and the name stuck.

Branding a calf may sound cruel, but an animal loose on the range without a brand is fair game to anyone who wants



to steal it. If it has a brand, rustlers have to brand over the original marks to make it look like their own. For example, a *C* could easily become an *O* or a *V* could be turned into a *W*. In the days of the Old West, a rustler could be hanged for changing a brand! The best brands are ones like the famous 'Four Sixes' brand which can't be changed into something else.

It's not only calves that are mavericks. People can be too! Today we use the word to mean anyone who is unruly and wants to go his or her own way, without bothering about what a teacher or parent says.



Sheep can also be mavericks. Maverick sheep may wander off looking for greener grass, and have even been known to leap off a cliff. If another follows, then another, pretty soon there will be a big pile of dead sheep at the bottom of the cliff!

Jesus sometimes referred to his followers as 'sheep' and he described himself as the Good Shepherd. He knows we can wander off sometimes, just doing what we want and not paying any attention to him. We can get into trouble ourselves and also lead others astray. Or maybe we're in trouble just because we've followed the wrong person, like the flock of sheep that plunged over the cliff. If we do stray, Jesus will come looking for us. If we belong to him, he has promised that he will never abandon us. If you are not sure you belong to Jesus, keep reading - I will talk about that in the next chapter.

One of the cowboy's main jobs was working the big 'roundups' every spring and fall. All the cattle were herded together for branding and to decide which ones would go to market. If a cow needed to be given a pill for de-worming, the cowboy would put the pill in his palm with some whiskey or tobacco to sweeten it - then he would stick his arm all the way down the cow's throat and drop the pill inside its stomach! Fortunately for him, cows have no gag reflex and have front teeth only on the bottom of their mouths.

In the Wild West days the type of cattle raised in Texas was called the Longhorn. The horns of the Longhorn steer could be longer from tip to tip than the height of a man. They are still bred today but are not as popular as other breeds for eating.

In the late 1800's, just after the Civil War between the northern and southern states, Texas cowboys came back home to find cattle running loose and wild all over the state. Texas had too many cattle, but back East there were hardly any. In the northern and eastern US, a head of cattle would bring up to forty dollars (about £22). That was nearly as much as a cowboy made in two months!

Texas didn't have a railroad system at the time, so they had to figure out a way to get the animals up to the railroads or markets in Kansas. As a result, the famous 'cattle drives' began. The cowboys would round up the steers that were ready for market, and herd them the 800 miles (1300 kilometers) up the Chisholm Trail or one of the other cattle trails. These were broad areas for the cattle to travel on, where they would be able to find plenty of grass and water.

Imagine being a cowboy on the drive - the scorching heat, the constant smell of cattle dung, the taste of dust in your mouth as you rode in the hard saddle day after day. The cowboy always wore a scarf or 'bandana' around his neck, so he could cover his mouth if the dust got too bad. It also kept the worst of the sun off the back of his neck. His hat was a good sun protector too, and could be used as a drinking bowl if needed!

It took about three months to drive the cattle to Kansas, at a slow pace of 10 miles (sixteen kilometers) a day. The cowboy had to look out for Indians, as well as cattle thieves. When the herd was driven too fast, they would lose weight and be too scrawny to sell. If they went at a relaxed pace and had plenty to eat and enough water, they could arrive even

fatter than when they started out. Contented cattle were also less likely to charge.

Even so, cattle were easily spooked. The crack of a rifle could set them off, or a crash of thunder, or even a loud sneeze. And then - stampede! The terrified animals would bolt in panic.

After the stampede died down, the men would round up any runaway steers. A cowboy had to be able to hit the moving target of a panicky steer while his horse was galloping at full speed! He carried a long coiled rope called a 'lariat' or 'lasso'. When he was close enough the cowboy would quickly tie one end of his rope to the saddle horn and toss out the loop end to drop down over the steer's horns. His horse knew what to do - it would stop dead still so the rope would go taut.

A cowboy's gear was designed to help him in all his tasks. His leather boots would quickly slip out of the stirrup when he had to jump from his horse to catch a calf. The raised wooden heels would rest firmly in the stirrup while he was riding. Boot leather was thick - if a rattlesnake struck it, the fangs wouldn't



go in. Cowboys also wore metal spurs for nudging their horse to go faster. Leather ‘chaps’ covered their trousers, to protect them from underbrush or from the swinging horns of a frightened steer.

Being a cowboy was a hard, dangerous job. Cowboys (as well as a few cowgirls!) could drown in a river, freeze in a blizzard or be crushed in a stampede. If a horse caught its foot in a prairie dog hole, it would go down and take the rider with it. The possibility of death was real, as seen in the words of a cowboy song:

*O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild coyote will howl o'er me
Where the buffalo roams the prairie sea
O bury me not on the lone prairie.*

Many think of the cowboy on a cattle drive when they hear about the Wild West. Yet the drives lasted less than twenty years. Settlers began to fence in their land with barbed wire, and the railroad came to Texas. After that, cattle could be loaded on boxcars and ride to market. It was the end of the cowboy era. Nonetheless, there are plenty of cowboys around today. They still wear hats and boots and ride horses, even though ‘driving’ cattle means transporting them in a truck!

The Wild West cowboy had to occasionally fight Indians or chase cattle rustlers, but his life was not full of exciting adventures. He probably felt more like a slave than a king. Yet if he was lazy and slacked off, the cattle wouldn’t be healthy. His job might have been boring, but it was an important one that needed to be done well.

Any time God gives you a job to do, it's an important one! He wants you to do it to the best of your ability even if it's boring. Maybe you think homework or household chores are dull. If you know God wants you to do a job well, that can make it easier to keep going, even when others don't notice what you're doing. Doing a task for God can even make it seem exciting!

And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the father. (Colossians 3:17)