

## Tools of the Cowboy

### Brands & Spurs

Close your eyes for a moment and picture a classic cowboy from the Chisholm Trail. What are some of the tools that you see the cowboy using? Many would answer they see the lasso, the boots, or a saddle. Two of the most important tools that a cowboy needed to know how to use though were the branding iron and their spurs. Both of these tools have a long history, but they also have a personal connection to the cowboys who would design their own. Join us today as we explore the history of these two tools, and create your own brand and spurs to make your mark on the frontier.

#### Marking the Cattle: Brands and Branding

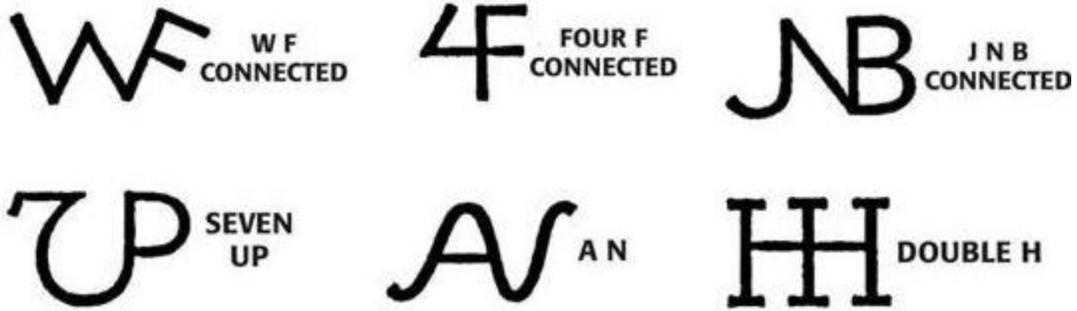
While a hallmark of the American cowboy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cattle brands are still in wide use today and have a history going back thousands of years. Evidence of brands being used on cattle date back to 2700 BCE in Ancient Egypt. While they can sometimes be hard to read to the untrained eye, to those who know how to read them a brand can communicate ownership of the cattle through a set agreed upon language. These make each brand unique to the rancher, and must be approved by the authorities who govern the brands.

On the surface, a cattle brand is made up of a few simple letters and numbers, possibly in combination with a basic shape or symbols like a circle, line, or heart. But to truly make the brand their own, ranchers can embellish these basic parts with extra flourishes (or serifs) such as “wings” or “feet” on the numbers and letters. What these flourishes do is help change the designation of the basic brand and identify the name of the brand through this unique language. Like most western languages, these brands are read from left to right, top to bottom and, perhaps unique to brands, outside to inside. Let’s take a look at some of these designs and what they mean.



Reading the brands above, we see that they are all an “A” brand. But what do those flourishes mean? The first “A” that is upside down is what’s called a crazy-A, and the second with the wings at the top is a flying-A. Next we have the “A” that is on its side, this is usually used to mean lazy, so it would be the lazy-A. And last we have an “A” that looks like it has two feet, or the walking-A.

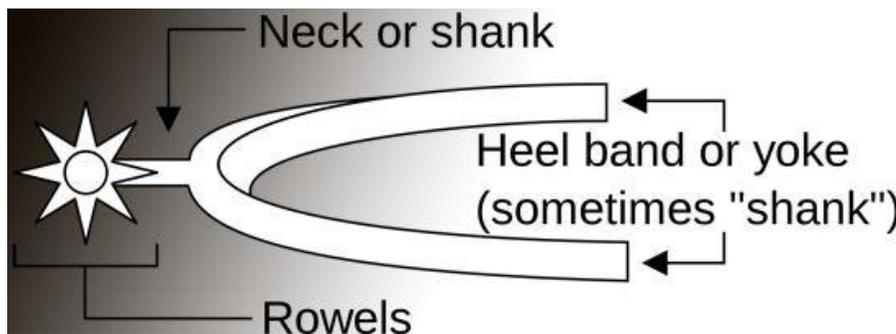
While adding these flourishes can change the meaning of the letter, they are not the only way to tell the language of the brand. Multiple symbols with their flourishes can be combined and form what is called a “ligature”, a term used to describe a single character representing two or more letters. Below we have some of these “ligatures” commonly seen in brands and the names that go with them.



While the tools and technology used to keep track of which cattle belong to which rancher have changed quite a bit since the days of the trail, the brand is still a reliable mark that has great personal meaning to its owner. Just like your signature, your brand has a lot to say about who you are, and becomes just as much a part of you.

### Spurs: Making a Statement

While not every cowboy would have their own brand (brands were for who owned the cattle), every cowboy worth their salt would need a good set of spurs to get the job done. The spur has a history just as long as that of the brand, and while they may have changed in appearance overtime the main job of getting the horse to move remained the same. But before we get to into the history, let's first find out what makes up the spur.



- Heel band – this is what fits around the heel of the boot and is usually held in place by straps that loop around the boot.
- Neck or shank – this what connects the rowel to the heel band and allows the rowel to spin free without hitting the band.
- Rowels – This is the business end of the spur, it spins like a while and is the part that actually touches the horse and makes the jingle noise when the rider is walking around.

The earliest evidence of spurs come from the Celts, who lived in what is now the United Kingdom and Ireland. These early spurs date back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and were made of either bone or

wood. The first metal spurs were made of iron or bronze and were used by the Roman's, but only for use with war horses. These early spurs did not use a rowel, but instead used a single long spike. The first rowels do not appear until the 11<sup>th</sup> century in France and the 13<sup>th</sup> century in England. It was the Spanish who first brought over the tradition of the spur to Texas, with their large spurs being known as the Espuela Grande, some examples of which we have on display in the Museum.



By the time of the Chisholm Trail, spurs were widely available in many different shapes and styles. For the regular cowboy, a plain store bought pair of spurs would work just fine and allow them to save some of their hard earned money. But just as we want our clothing to say something about our character, some cowboys would pay extra to have a custom set of spurs designed. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century many unique spur styles developed and grew in popularity throughout the American West. One of the more popular here in Texas were the Bianchi spurs of Victoria, TX. Started by Joe Bianchi at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his style is famous for what is now known as the "Victoria Shank" or the "Bottle opener spur". Take a look at some of these unique designs like Bianchi spurs and get a sense of what you would like your spurs to look like.





**Design Your Own:**

Now it is time for you to design your own brand and spurs and show off who you are and tell us a story! Be creative and paint, draw, or even make your own spurs and brand and send them to us the CTHM. We will be creating a display of all the designs sent to us that will be on display in our English-German Schoolhouse for all our visitors to see. So next time you come and see us, keep an eye out for your design on display!