

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Branding Iron History**

"By their brands ye shall know them!" So today let us go back into the lore of the branding iron, which is scripture in the cattle county and just as sacred in a way.

In "The Salt of the Earth." Published in the King City Rustler-Herald a number of years ago, there appeared the fact that the oldest brand in the state had originated in Monterey County on the ranch of Alberto Trescony in 1846. That brand is now registered to Julius Trescony, present owner of the Rancho San Lucas.

Later the claim of the oldest brand was disputed, Roy E. Meadows Jr., once wrote the Peninsula Diary: "We do not know if our brand is the oldest in California, but we believe it antedates the Trescony brand. Ours, the Meadows brand was registered in 1845, and we have in the possession of our family the original registration papers written in Spanish and issued at New Helvetia. The original is signed by both Sutter and John Bidwell.

"It was issued to Santiago (James) Meadows, my great-grandfather, and has been used in our family for over a hundred years. Today (1951) the brand is used by my father, Roy E. Meadows of Carmel Valley, on a portion of the original James Meadows Ranch.

"The brand is in the form of an anchor, and the ear mark is a cross on one ear and a nick out of the other. I am not too familiar with the terminology of describing such things.

"In 1951 the original certificate was in the possession of Ernest Meadows, and through his generosity the Meadows family in Carmel Valley have a photostatic copy."

These facts started me on a search a number of years ago for more information on cattle brands and their history. Having been born a cattleman's daughter and having lived on a cattle range for some years, I thought it was time that I knew more about this interesting part of California's history.

In Bancroft's "California Pastoral," the first reference I found to any sort of brand was the following note under Stock Regulations: "One Villavicencio, May 17, 1839 was given a permit to go after runaway cattle between the Pinal del Temascal and the Sierra de la Ponocho. He was

to report the events which might take place, names of those who accompanied him and the marks on the ears, in order that he might be paid immediately according to custom."

In the San Diego archives as early as February, 1835, there appeared a notation in which the assembly declared that 150 head of cattle were needed to entitle the owner to a brand. The alcalde had to determine who should have the brand and who a mark.

It was also declared that any person desiring to use a particular iron for marking cattle must petition the "juez de paz" to that effect, facsimiles of the *fierre* and *venta* to accompany the petition and register the marks.

The municipal regulations of San Jose in the early part of 1835 said that none might mark, brand or kill stock except on days designated by the *ayuntamiento* and never without permission of the "juez de campo," who should in turn inform the alcalde of such. Penalty for the first offence, 20 reales; whoever lassoed or saddled a beast not belonging to him should pay \$9 and as much more as the owner claimed in justice, according to Bancroft.

As far back as 1770, every owner of horses, cattle, asses, mules and sheep was by law compelled to brand his stock. Each rancher had two private brands, one called "el Fierro para harrat los grandos" and the other "Fierro para ventear." No one could adopt or change his branding irons without permission of the governor of California. On May 17, 1834, Gov. Figueroa issued a decree granting to M.G. Vallejo permission to use a new branding iron for cattle and other animals of his estate.

Very often the ears of cattle are also marked and cut, and this brand is also registered with the state along with a facsimile of the mark.

Often times the brand is even more important than the name of the owner. Ranch names are often called after the brand and cowboys often ride for a certain "iron," to quote from "The Salt of the Earth."

The brand is a symbol a way of life and a manifestation of history. Brands are passed from generation to generation. The brands familiar to the writer are the F. H. and the H with a half circle above it—the memory of which brings back many happy days.