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Beyond the Branding Iron: Cattle Brands as Heritage Place Names in the State of Montana

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For more than two centuries, American cattle ranchers have used hot-iron brands as the primary means of identifying and asserting ownership of their animals. American cattle brands consist of highly visible symbols containing letters, numbers, and/or images which may appear individually or in any combination. Every cattle brand symbol has a corresponding name that occurs in spoken and written (alphabetized) form. By virtue of purposeful naming strategies, cattle brands display a range of associations with other types of names. These onomastic relationships reflect underlying connections between cattle brands and various elements in their socio-cultural surroundings, and offer some fascinating insights into the history, culture, and social structure of American cattle-ranching communities. This paper specifically examines the practice of naming towns and ranches after cattle brands in the State of Montana, and explains how this phenomenon comprises a unique aspect of the region's cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS cattle brands, cattle branding, onomastics, names, place names, cultural heritage

Introduction

The term "cultural heritage" refers to those components of culture which are passed down as a form of inheritance from one generation to the next. Heritage theory posits that the determination of cultural heritage values is a form of social action, since decisions as to which elements of the broader culture are deserving of preservation are based on "active choices" about what has heritage value or significance (Blake, 2000: 68). In this regard, Lipe (1984: 2) states that

> value is not inherent in any cultural items or properties received from the past […] value is learned about or discovered in these phenomena by humans, and thus depends upon the particular cultural, intellectual, historical, and psychological frames of reference held by the particular individuals or groups involved.

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Buildings, architecture, monuments, sites, relics, artwork, and texts are some examples of tangible elements of culture that are frequently considered to hold heritage value for particular cultural groups. Non-tangible aspects of heritage include local knowledge, philosophy, music, and language (including oral traditions such as story-telling and poetry).

The role of language is somewhat understated in existing cultural heritage discourse. This situation is perhaps due to a general tendency to treat language as an assumed rather than a featured aspect of culture (Moore and Hennessy, 2006: 127). Nevertheless, if language is the primary vehicle for "cultural accumulation and historical transmission" (Sapir, 1985: 16), and if it plays a central role in defining collective as well as personal notions of social and cultural identity (Joseph, 2004), then language, including names, must constitute an important component of cultural heritage. Personal names, for instance, are often passed down from generation to generation within families, thus becoming integral aspects of individual and family heritage. As noted by Basso (1996: 23–24) and Raper (2012: 12), place names are frequently tied to the cultural heritage of specific groups of people. This article develops further discussion surrounding the heritage value of place names by examining the practice of using cattle brand names as settlement and ranch names in the State of Montana, which has a long and colorful history as one of America's prime beef-producing areas.

Historical overview of beef production and cattle branding in the American Northwest

Ever since the first cattle and cowboys migrated to the Northwestern US more than two centuries ago, hot-iron brands have been used as the primary means of identifying and asserting ownership of livestock. Commercial cattle production in the region began to develop exponentially during the early 1850s, shortly before the outbreak of the American Civil War, as a result of the demand for fresh beef brought on by thousands of emigrants who were trekking westward from the Eastern states to Oregon and California along the Oregon Trail. In the autumn of 1858, the discovery of gold in the Rocky Mountains, about 200 miles south of the Oregon Trail on the upper waters of the South Platte River, started a gold rush and brought about the establishment of mining settlements. In the early 1860s, the US Army arrived and built forts for soldiers who were to protect miners from Native Americans. When the Indian Reservation system was put in place, the US government provided food rations to the newly-formed communities on the Reservations. All of these factors brought about a sharp increase in population and a corresponding increase in the already heavy demand for beef in the Northwest. Cowboys herded cattle for thousands of miles along trails from California to Oregon, Texas to Montana, and among the territories of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia. Animals driven along these long routes were typically branded with a "trail brand" so that they could be distinguished from livestock belonging to other cattle companies, or outfits, that were using the same trail. Cowboys kept informal records of brands so that they could recognize which animals belonged to each outfit that was running cattle along the trail.

By the late 1870s the cattle boom in Montana Territory was well under way. As cattle were driven into Montana from the west and south, the western valleys became over-crowded and stockmen began to look to Montana's central and eastern plains for

grazing. At this time, Eastern Montana and the Western Dakotas constituted a vast area of unsurveyed public land that could not be privately owned or fenced, and this domain was referred to as the "open range." Large cattle outfits entered the area to take advantage of the seemingly unlimited grazing, and the cattle industry expanded rapidly (Thiessen, 1986). By 1883 there were an estimated 600,000 head of cattle on the range (Osgood, 1970).

Hot-iron branding was an essential means of declaring ownership of the numerous cattle herds that shared grazing space on the range, and cattle brands soon emerged as symbols of the range cowboys' way of life. The term "riding for the brand" was coined to express the loyalty displayed by cowboys towards their employers, who were known by the brands carried on their animals. The recording of brands for official purposes was first instituted in various range districts to combat cattle rustling and the consequential changing of brands on stolen cattle. Eventually the regulation of brands shifted from district levels towards centralized management, and in 1885 the Montana Livestock Commission was established to oversee brand recordings in the territory of Montana (Thiessen, 1986).

Legislative changes concerning the legal ownership of public lands paved the way for the gradual decline of the open range. The Homestead Act of 1862, for instance, offered settlers 160 acres of land on the public domain in return for residence and cultivation. These parcels of land could not accommodate large herds of cattle but instead attracted small farmers, including Civil War veterans (Paul, 1973: 44). Many cattle ranchers resented the arrival of homesteaders because the cultivation of arable land along with the erection of fences took away from available grazing, and the introduction of sheep to the range was said to ruin the grass roots. In 1867, an Act of Congress gave the government legal jurisdiction over grazing rights, in terms whereby land previously claimed by individuals was made available for grazing only to those qualifying for permits (Paul, 1973: 84). The decreasing open range area along with the rapidly increasing cattle population began to seriously hinder grazing in Montana, especially for the larger cattle outfits.

Overcrowding and growing competition for fodder on the range set Montana's cattle producers up for impending disaster during the winter of 1886–1887, which was said to have been the harshest yet in the history of America's West. The spring and summer of 1886 had been unusually hot and dry, the grasses were late in starting and springs and creeks dried up, all of which led to a severe shortage of both water and food for livestock. Cattlemen began to sell off their animals at low prices in order to reduce the size of their herds. In January 1887, a severe blizzard brought high winds, heavy snow, and bitterly cold temperatures to the region. Since ranchers had been entirely dependent on the range for winter feeding, no provision had been made to gather hay, and thousands of cattle starved to death in the treacherous conditions. Montana stockmen lost approximately 60 % of their herds, and more than half of the cattle companies in the territory faced bankruptcy the following spring. The events of that winter brought about irreversible changes to Montana's cattle industry. Confronted with a shrinking range area and depletion of forage, stockmen progressively gave up their "unhindered, unbounded grazing privileges" in exchange for smaller individual ranches where they could harvest and store hay and more competently attend to the welfare of their animals and the condition of their land (Paul, 1973: 18). The days of the open range were essentially over.

Today, many cattle ranches in Montana are family-owned and operated cow-calf ranches on which calves are weaned from their mothers at about eight months of age, and then sold directly to feedlots or to agents who transport the animals to feedlots. There are also grass-finishing ranches where cattle are grazed on grass and hay until they are ready to be slaughtered. A number of large cattle companies operate in the state, some of them belonging to wealthy absentee owners. There are still areas of public domain (open range) in Montana, managed primarily by the Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS). Many of these areas are leased out to cattle ranchers for grazing.

In recent decades, new methods of livestock identification have been developed, including, for instance, coded capsules which can be implanted and read with a scanning device, and radio frequency (RFID) ear tags. Despite such innovations, the "old hot-iron method" of branding still seems to be irreplaceable. In practical terms, brands are permanent and highly visible, whereas ear tags can fall off and get lost, and coded capsules can only be deciphered with scanners, a system that is highly impractical given range conditions in Montana. Brands therefore remain the preferred means of cattle identification in the state, where they are officially recognized as legal proof of animal ownership. All livestock brands used in Montana must be registered with the Montana Department of Livestock's Brands Enforcement Division.

Some modern adaptations have been made in hot-iron branding techniques. While some ranchers still build open wood fires to heat their branding irons, propane-heated fires are now widely used, as are electric irons where there is a ready source of electricity. Chemical (freeze) branding was devised in the 1960s, but at this time the State of Montana only permits the use of freeze brands on horses. The traditional method of "roping and dragging" calves from horseback to catch and position them for branding is still very popular. However, many ranchers have now turned to less labor-intensive methods such as putting calves through a branding chute and then onto a branding table which holds them in place while the brands are applied.

The ongoing popularity of hot-iron branding in Montana is based not only on its long-proven effectiveness as a quick means of animal identification, but also on the fact that brands and the tradition of branding are considered to be important and treasured elements of the heritage and culture of cattle-ranching communities in the American West. Paul (1973: 146) comments that

> present-day ranchers, many of them descendants of pioneer cattle families who registered the first brands, prefer to use the brand of their fathers. The feeling [a rancher] has as he holds his branding iron in his hand and puts it on a quality beef animal will be hard to forget.

Thus, in Montana, the legacy of the early American cowboy lives on, especially in rural cattle-ranching areas.

Onomastic features of American cattle brands

The system of American cattle brands is essentially a linguistic one comprising symbols as well as spoken and written words. Cattle brand symbols contain letters, numbers, and pictures which may appear individually or in any combination. Every cattle brand symbol has a corresponding name that is articulated orally and/or in writing. Cattle brand names are descriptive expressions that provide necessary verbal and written references

for brand symbols. The utterance of a particular brand name must be understood as a reference to a specific brand symbol; conversely, the visual stimulus of a certain brand symbol requires some kind of corresponding oral or written expression for the purpose of practical reference. The practice of reading or naming cattle brand symbols is an

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF PLACE NAMES WHICH INCORPORATE CATTLE BRAND NAMES (ADAPTED FROM LOMBARD (2015: 140–143)

No.	Brand Symbol	Brand Name	Ranch Name	Settlement Name
1		7 7 7 (or Triple Seven)	777 Ranch	
2		7 Hanging 7	7 Hanging 7 Ranch	
3		Bar Diamond	Phillips Bar Diamond Ranch	
4		Bar L C	Bar LC Ranch	
5		C Bar Z	Taylor's C Bar Z Ranch	
6		Circle	Circle Ranch	Circle, Montana
7		Diamond	Diamond Ranch	
8		Diamond Dot	Stevenson's Diamond Dot Ranch	
9		Dragging Y	Dragging Y Ranch	
10		N Bar N	N Bar N Ranch	
11		O X	OX Ranch	
12		Quarter Circle Reverse L E	LE Quarter Circle Ranch	
13		Rafter N Z	Rafter NZ Ranch	
14		Running N Bar or N Bar	N Bar Ranch	
15		T Diamond	T Diamond Ranch	
16		Two Dot		Two Dot, Montana
17		X I T	XIT Ranch	

acquired linguistic skill that is referred to in lay terms as "calling the brand." The reading of cattle brand symbols follows a general syntactic rule of left to right, top to bottom, and outside to inside. Cattle brand names are written in the same way as they are spoken, and are usually capitalized like other proper names. Examples of cattle brands and their names are provided in Table 1.

In addition to existing as names in their own right, cattle brands display various associations with other types of names, including personal, place, and business names. The onomastic relationships exhibited by cattle brands are created through purposeful naming strategies that are employed in local communities. In this regard, two primary naming conventions can be identified. The first is characterized by the integration of certain aspects of various types of names into cattle brand designs. For example, the two letters "N" in the N Bar N brand (example #10 in Table 1) represent the first letter of the last name of Frank and William Niedringhaus, two brothers who first registered the brand in 1885 (Niedringhaus, 2010), while the letters "L" and "C" in the Bar L C brand (example #4 in Table 1) represent the name of the Lutheran Church organization, which used to own several cattle ranches in the State of Montana. The second strategy involves the coining of various types of names from cattle brands. Of particular interest here is the practice of naming places, specifically settlements and ranches, after cattle brands.

American cattle brands as heritage place names

During the open-range era, official maps of the State of Montana used cattle brand symbols to indicate the customary range areas of various cattle outfits (Osgood, 1970; Thiessen, 1986). According to Osgood (1970: 182–183), "the early laws of states and territories [...] recognized the fact that by grazing a certain area, the stock grower was in a way gaining a kind of prescriptive right [... thus ...] because the Diamond J [... branded ...] cattle were accustomed to range along a certain creek, that area came to be known as the Diamond J range." While cattle brands no longer appear on official maps, their names have been incorporated into the names of towns and ranches in Montana. The town of Circle in McCone County, Montana, for instance, takes its name from the circular-shaped brand known as the Circle brand (example #6 in Table 1) which was originally owned by the Mabry Cattle Company. In 1884, the Company established the Circle Ranch (named after the same brand) next to the Redwater River in Montana (Aarstad, 2009; Cheney, 1983). Similarly, the name of the settlement known as Two Dot in Wheatland County, Montana, was coined from the name of the Two Dot brand (example #16 in Table 1) which was owned by a local rancher, H. J. Wilson. In a further onomastic twist, Wilson was nicknamed "Two Dot Wilson" after his brand (Aarstad, 2009; Cheney, 1983).

Historians have noted that, since the early days of America's cattle industry, it has been common practice to name ranches after the brands run on the owners' cattle (Adams, 1970). Research carried out by Lombard (2015) shows that the custom of naming ranches after cattle brands is still widely adhered to in Montana and this practice is indicative of strong sentimental attachments to brands. Many cattle brands that are currently in use today have been passed down from generation to generation within families and are cherished parts of family legacies. Interviews conducted by Lombard (2015) with local ranchers in Central Montana provide first-hand evidence of the personal heritage value

of cattle brands. For instance, in a personal interview with Lombard on June 1, 2012, Eldon Foster stated the following:

> Our brand […] goes back a long time […] it was [first] recorded to Phil Sanders, [my] Grandma Ellie's uncle. From the time he had it till now it's been in the family lineage […] because it's been in the family that long it has a different value to me than if I just bought [a brand]. It's such a subtle part of our heritage. It's just there.

Foster is the current owner of the T Diamond brand and the T Diamond Ranch (example #15 in Table 1).

Similar thoughts are expressed by Wes Phillips, who owns the Bar Diamond brand and the Phillips Bar Diamond Ranch (example #3 in Table 1). In a personal interview with Lombard on May 26, 2012, Phillips explained: "Our brand is a source of pride and thanksgiving […] it's part of our heritage. Working with the generations a brand becomes intrinsic in that sense, it becomes a part of you." Phillips has owned and used the Bar Diamond brand on his cattle for more than 40 years.

The heritage value of cattle brands in the lives of ranching families is particularly evident in ranch names which incorporate family names (usually last names) alongside cattle brand names. Names such as Phillips Bar Diamond Ranch, Stevenson's Diamond Dot Ranch and Taylor's C Bar Z Ranch (examples #3, #5, and #8 in Table 1) illustrate how this specific syntactic structure is suggestive of close connections between cattle brands and families. For example, the name Phillips Bar Diamond Ranch indicates a connection between the Bar Diamond brand and the Phillips family; the name Stevenson's Diamond Dot Ranch points to an association between the Diamond Dot brand and the Stevenson family; while the name Taylor's C Bar Z Ranch implies ties between the C Bar Z brand and the Taylor family.

The naming of settlements and ranches after cattle brands establishes associations between cattle brands and particular places. This onomastic strategy also draws attention to another important aspect of heritage: people's ties to the land. As illustrated by the examples in Table 1, the syntax of the noun phrases (NPs) comprising ranch names that include the names of cattle brands shows a tendency for the noun "ranch" to be preceded by a cattle brand name acting as an adjective or descriptor. This syntactic trend in the naming of ranches implies that the activity of cattle ranching (from which many families in Montana derive an income) is as important as the brands which are used within this context. The attachments that ranchers have with their land are reflected in the following comments made by Audrey Clark in a personal interview with Lombard on September 2, 2013:

> I think about the ancestors that ranched [here] before us first […] then our family and the roots we have established for ourselves [here …] I always think of the land (and ranching also because they go hand-in-hand) with pride and a sense of accomplishment. We are so blessed to be able to live the life we do. It is an extremely hard life, but if you're looking for rewards other than monetary, it is also extremely rewarding. Land is precious. If you're lucky enough to own a ranch you'd better do everything possible to hang onto it. Once it's sold, the odds are that you will never be able to buy it back. We really have literally poured our blood, sweat, and tears into the land to build the Clark Ranch.

Clark's comments poignantly highlight the inseparable connections that are established between people, the land, and animals through cattle ranching.

Many ranch owners erect signposts displaying their ranch names and cattle brand symbols at the entrances to their properties, which visually accentuates the presence of these names on the physical landscape and draws attention to the connections between cattle brands, people, and places. It is also interesting to note that it is not uncommon for cattle brands to "stay with the land" when ranch ownership changes hands. For example, the brands belonging to the N Bar Ranch (example #14 in Table 1) and the Bar L C Ranch (example #4 in Table 1) have been passed down through several successive owners of these properties, and the original ranch names also have been retained. Such actions maintain associations between cattle brands and places and indicate that certain cattle brands as well as particular places possess heritage value for individuals and families as well as for local communities.

Experts in the study of place names have noted that toponyms often carry historical and cultural significance on the basis of their associations with various (physical and non-physical) elements in their surrounding socio-cultural context. In this way, place names become tied to the cultural heritage of specific groups of people (Basso, 1996; Kadmon, 2000; Raper, 2012). It is posited in this article that cattle brand names are key components in the naming conventions used in the state of Montana and this onomastic phenomenon reveals how deeply cattle brands are embedded within the local socio-culture. The prominence of cattle brand names in the region's toponomy indicates that cattle brands are important aspects of Montana's history and cultural heritage and people take them very seriously. Certainly, the associations that are generated between cattle brands and various aspects of their socio-cultural and physical surroundings on the basis of the naming strategies discussed in this article infuse cattle brands with a wealth of non-linguistic meaning, which in turn reinforces their status as heritage symbols. The argument that the heritage value of cattle brands is manifested through the naming of settlements and ranches after cattle brands reflects Van Langendonck's (2007) position that certain things acquire "psychosocial salience" through naming. Furthermore, the practice of naming places after cattle brands lends support to the argument put forward by heritage practitioners that people "ascribe symbolic meaning to […] things which differ from their obvious and practical meanings" on the basis of "actions and imaginations" (Byrne, 2008: 152, 155). In this regard, the naming of ranches after cattle brands may signify the social acceptance of changes in Montana's social and socio-economic order which occurred when the large cattle outfits of the open range began to give way to smaller and more family-oriented cattle-ranching operations. At the same time, this onomastic strategy has provided a means of perpetuating the legacy of the open range, representing a unique linguistic expression of the cattle and cowboy heritage which remains a defining characteristic of Montana's cultural identity.

Conclusion

In the state of Montana, the names of cattle brands feature prominently in the local onomasticon as a result of two primary naming conventions: first, the incorporation of elements of various types of names into cattle brand designs (and thus their corresponding names); and second, the coining of other names, especially place names, from cattle

brands. These intentional naming strategies forge and maintain associations between cattle brands and diverse elements in their socio-cultural surroundings, including individuals, families, places, and other entities. On this basis, cattle brands acquire various dimensions of meaning that frequently reflect underlying social concerns about history and heritage.

The naming of settlements and ranches after cattle brands is particularly indicative of the importance of brands together with the tradition of branding and the activity of cattle ranching within the context of Montana's historical and cultural make-up. As such, the names of cattle brands emerge as symbols of family as well as communal history and heritage. Thus, when used as toponyms, cattle brand names serve not only as powerful onomastic reminders of days gone by, but also as linguistic symbols of an ongoing cultural heritage that continues to be constructed in the present. In this way, cattle brand names acquire the status of "heritage names." This remarkable phenomenon illustrates the strategic use of names as linguistic tokens of cultural heritage and draws attention to the significant heritage value of names and of language itself in local communities.

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