

Texas sheep and cow people are in the process of conforming to the new law to re-register their brands and earmarks. Herders have until Feb. 29 to have their symbols of ownership on the books. Legislators had to grant a long grace period for registration. Taxpayers are becoming so courthouse shy that you nearly have to blindfold one to get him through the doors.

I went up to the clerk's office to register the ranch's brands, yesterday. It took more time than I thought it would. The clerk had to go through her book to check to be sure that ours wasn't going to conflict with some other outfit.

She has to be mighty careful that the brands are different. Lots of the ranch citizens wear tie clasps made with a monogrammed brand set in a miniature spur. These small clips save wives plenty of trouble at parties and dances. Any time during the evening, they can cut their man from the herd by merely glancing at the old man's tie. At the big Christmas parties to come, it'd be mighty troublesome to have to pair up the eggnog drinkers one at a time. The clerk has lived out here a long time; she knows how serious her responsibility is.

For a calf shipping brand, I selected a period. Most ranches west of San Angelo leave calves unbranded until they are yearlings, but I decided that I'd change next year.

Dots (like a period) don't blotch like numbers or letters do. Tender calf hide, as you well know, is easy to overburn. Too many slashes or circlec end up in illegible scars. So I figured a period on either side or hip would make a neat job.

As soon as I told the clerk my choice, she started acting uncomfortable. I'd already seen the sheriff peeking through the door several times.

Coffee house gossip was evidently the trouble. Some of my neighbors have been doing a lot of unnecessary talking about a small string of off-color calves that showed up in our shipment.

High cattle prices make folks overly conscious of livestock movement. Short counts get awfully sensitive when the calf market is on the boom. An old boy can lose five head of steers worth \$200 a head and he'll carry on just like it was \$1000 out of his pocket.

Even on an outfit as small as this one, we can't match every calf to every cow. Besides that, I didn't invent the law of genetics. Black hens bred to black roosters lay brown eggs. Why can't a black cow on a black bull produce, say, a dun steer? It's not my fault that the color scheme will vary. Ranchers can't be held accountable for the works of the Maker. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life trying to teach a bunch of dumbheads about freak color marks. County agents can bear that burden.

The clerk ought to have been appreciative of a man who wanted to register a brand as simple as a punctuation mark. Fancy brands or four-digit numbers aren't to be cherished. The cavalry used to cover an old pony's neck up with firebranded serial numbers. Ask any of the old time stable boys whether that made Army horses any better than horse-horses. I'm sure they'd tell you no.

Simplicity is a virtue in these numbered and coded times. Area codes added to zip codes, plus computer accounts combined with social security numbers make our lives miserable. Einstein was lucky he didn't live until now. There wouldn't be any way for him to get his mind off his business. Numbers are getting thicker than the smog.

I won't know until February if the brand will stand up. The next time we ship, I'm going to rent a grandstand for the spectators. Having your neighbors make snide remarks gets mighty nerve wrecking.