



# Irons in the Fire

## The History and Language of Branding

### Social Studies Lesson Plan Grades 3 & 4

#### How To Use This Lesson:

This lesson is divided into 3 separate discussion topics, each followed by a reinforcing activity. The lesson teaches the history, vocabulary, process, and purpose of branding livestock. Activities include learning the language of brands, creating an individual brand and branding a balloon for a “Round Up.” The discussions and activities could be combined into a single day or used over several days.

#### Overview:

In this lesson, students will learn how cowboys, ranch owners and farmers have used distinctive brands to identify cattle from Egyptian times until today.

In preparation for designing their own brand, students will learn the “language of brands” and how to decode and speak the name of a particular brand.

Students will also learn how the battle for control of cattle interests in New Mexico Territory led to the Lincoln County War which made famous a number of outlaws and cattle rustlers, such as Billy the Kid.

The lawlessness and violence in Lincoln County and other parts of New Mexico territory are significant to the westward expansion story, since the concerns about gaining control of the “Wild West” delayed the process of New Mexico moving from territory status to statehood.

#### Objectives

Students will:

- understand the purpose and necessity for livestock branding in the past and today
- learn how to read and speak the language of a cattle brand
- learn the history and process of cattle branding
- create a personalized brand of their own
- understand how two factions, fighting for control of cattle interests in New Mexico territory, were responsible for the Lincoln County War

#### NM Standards:

##### Strand: History

- **I-A** – Describe how contemporary and historical people and events influenced New Mexico communities and regions.
- **I-A1**- Identify important issues, events and individuals from New Mexico pre-history to the present.
- **I-B**- Understand connections among historical events, people and symbols significant to U.S. history and cultures.
- **I-B1** – Describe local events and their connections and relationships to national history.

##### Strand: Geography:

- **II-A1**– Describe how contemporary and historical people and events influenced New Mexico communities and regions.
- **II-C** – Be familiar with aspects of human behavior and man-made and natural environments in order to recognize their impact on the past and the present.

##### Strand: Economics:

- **IV-B** – Understand that economic systems impact the way individuals, households, businesses, governments and societies make decisions about goods and services.

## Background:

Imagine the early days in New Mexico territory, a time when the land was “open range.” There were no fences, no barbed wire, no visible boundaries to distinguish ownership of a parcel of land or to keep livestock close to home.

It soon became evident to ranchers, farmers and cowboys that if they were going to keep track of their livestock, they would have to have some way of distinguishing one from another.

Even though branding livestock using a super-heated, iron design is most commonly associated with the cowboys of the Old West, the practice actually dates back to the ancient Egyptians.

There were three main purposes for branding animals:

- to help identify and separate cows at rail yards or stock yards when they were being taken to market
- to identify the cow’s owner if she got lost or stolen
- to discourage cattle rustlers, or cattle thieves, from stealing them

Brands became almost like a coat of arms or heraldic crest. The brands not only identified the owner of a ranch, but provided a unique sense of identity and a set of traditions for the cowboys who represented the ranch. In fact, it was not unusual for a cowboy to claim that he “rode for the brand” more than for the actual ranch owner. Louis L’Amour described the term “riding for the brand” as a compliment of highest order and an expression of loyalty to an employer. Today, companies still work hard to create internal branding that will inspire their employees sense of loyalty, identity and keep them “riding for the brand.”

## Vocabulary

**open range** – a large area of grazing land without fences or other barriers

**brand** – an identifying mark on livestock burned with a branding iron, tattooed or painted on the animal’s coat or hide

**vaquero** – the horsemen and cattle herders of Spanish Mexico that were the precursor to the American Cowboy

**livestock** – domestic animals (especially on a farm) such as cattle or horses, raised for home use or profit

**serif** – a slight projection finishing off a stroke of a letter in certain typefaces

## Part 1 ~ The Language of the Brand

### Anticipatory Set:

Questions:

- What do you put on your backpacks, books, papers and folders so that you, your classmates, and teachers know that it belongs to you? How can you tell which ones are yours? (Answer: Usually your name. That’s the mark that distinguishes your things from other peoples’ things.)
- Once upon a time, the land in New Mexico Territory was considered “open range.” Does anyone know what that means? Think about the term itself. What do you think it might refer to? (Open range is a large area of grazing land without fences, boundaries or borders.)
- Do you think that cows care about things like boundaries or borders? How do you think the ranchers and farmers marked their animals to distinguish their cows from other ranchers’ and farmers’ cows?

**SWBATD** knowledge of branding language by matching the spelled out name of a brand with its symbolic brand.

## Discussion: Branding History

1. Explain to students that in the same way that they write their names on their property to help identify what belongs to them, ranchers and cattlemen in the Old West used a unique symbol to identify their livestock. Instead of using their name, they used a brand.
2. Explain that a brand is usually one or two symbols arranged in a specific way and that each ranch or farm has a unique brand that is different from everyone else's. The same way that students mark their things to identify them as personal property, ranchers would mark their animals to keep from losing them, not because they were pets, but because they were valuable.
3. Ask the students to guess when branding animals for identification began. After they have had a chance to guess, explain that branding of animals began long before cowboys and the cattle drives in the days of the Old West. Evidence suggests that livestock branding actually goes back as far as the Ancient Egyptians who were branding their cattle as early as 4,000 B.C.! (The Romans also branded their cattle, but they did it because they believed that some symbols could magically protect the herd.) Europeans brought branding to North America, but it was perfected by Spanish-Mexican vaqueros.
4. Ask students how livestock such as cows might have gotten mixed up or why it would be important to be able to identify them.

Branding animals had 3 major purposes:

- to help identify and separate cows at rail yards or stock yards when they were being taken to market
- to identify the cow's owner if she was lost or stolen
- to discourage cattle rustlers, or cattle thieves, from stealing them

5. Show students by drawing examples on the board as you explain that a very basic brand might be just a few simple letters and numbers, possibly combined with some shapes or symbols such as a circle, heart, diamond, arc or line. This brand is called the "M Diamond".



Alternatives:

- Basic characters could also be embellished with a serif, or a short "tail" on the end of a letter stroke. A letter with a serif might be referred to as having "wings" or "feet." If a letter is given wings, it may be referred to as "flying," whereas a letter given feet may be referred to as "walking" or "running."
- Letters or characters can also be rotated or reversed. A letter turned 90 degrees (or appearing to be lying down) is referred to as "lazy." A character flipped upside down is referred to as "crazy."



Flying A



Lazy A



Crazy A

- These designations of crazy, lazy, walking or flying are not just cute nicknames for the letters, but are actually spoken as part of the language of branding.
- Additionally, brands have to be “read” in a certain order:
  - left to right
  - top to bottom
  - outside to inside



6. Draw the brand at left on the board and ask students: Based on the rules I just mentioned, how would this brand be read? Is it E-Four or Four-E? (Answer: Four-E. Just like reading the English language, brands are read from left to right.)



7. And how would this brand be read? (Answer: O-W. Brands are read from top to bottom. The O is above the W, so it is read first.)

8. To avoid duplicating letters, some ranchers became very creative with arrangement of their letters to make sure that their brand stood out. Can you guess what this brand might have been called? (Answer: 2 identical letters together might be referred to as “Double” making this brand the “Double H”.)



9. A letter that is tilted is said to be “tumbling” while a tilted letter that has curved lines is said to be “running.”



10. Multiple symbols joined together is known as a ligature. Some ligature brands are read as “Connected.”

11. Location, location, location! It’s as important as design when it comes to getting a new brand approved. In fact, the same brand can be registered in the same country as long as it is located on a different part of the animal.

## Learning Activity: Brand Match Worksheet

Distribute the Brand Match Worksheet (easier) or Brands On the Move Worksheet (more difficult) to students. They will match the brand to its’ name based upon what they learned in the discussion about the language of brands.

## Part 2 ~ Iron Man

### Anticipatory Set:

Questions:

- Draw a long, straight line on the board and ask the class if it would be a good brand? Why not? (Answer: No, it's too easy to change into something else, the same way that a bad student might change a "F" on his report card to a "B"!)
- Some brands can be too simple. For instance, John Chisum, known as "The Cattle King of New Mexico", who was occasionally involved in the dramas of the Lincoln County War, had a brand that was a long, simple bar that stretched from shoulder to hip known as "the long rail." Unfortunately, it was easy to steal Chisum's cows and change the long rail into a different brand by simply adding a few lines or squiggles.
- Who do you think of when I say the words, "Iron Man?"
- Based on our discussion about brands and how a brand was applied to a ranch animal, what do you think might have been the job of an "Iron Man" on a ranch? (Answer: On a ranch, the Iron Man was the cowboy who used the metal branding iron to press the hot brand to the animals hide.)

**SWBATD** synthesis of knowledge gained on the language of branding by creating their own personal brand.

### Discussion:

#### The Branding Process

1. Explain to students that on the great plains of the West, ranchers began claiming large plots of land that had water and tall grass to feed cattle. The competition between cattle ranchers to control and protect their land was fierce.
2. Cows were often moved from place to place to give the land time to recover and grow new grass. Once the cows were fattened up and ready to go to market to be sold, they were driven to the next destination overland by cowboys, and sometimes taken through rail yards and stockyards. Along the trip, it was not unusual for cows to get lost or to get mixed up with cows from other ranches.
3. To identify their cows, ranchers would brand their calves with a distinctive marking (similar to a modern day tattoo) by pressing a heated metal symbol or design into the hide of the animal. The branding iron would burn through the hair and outer layer of skin on the calf, creating a permanent identifying mark that would last throughout the cows' lifetime. A brand never disappears and can even be seen after the animal is butchered.
4. The branding process was a difficult, dirty, and tiring process for the cowboys and it took a team to get the job done. First, the "ketch hand" would rope the calf and pull it up to the fire for branding.
5. Then a cowboy called the "flanker" would grab the calf by the ear and loose end of the flank, lift it up and lay it on it's side. Another cowboy would call out the brand of the calf's mother and someone would bring the correct brand to the fire.
6. Finally, while one man held the calf, an "iron man" would press the fire-hot, metal, brand against the calf's hide on it's shoulder, hip or rib, leaving a permanent scar.

## Learning Activity: Design Your Own Brand

For this activity, students will get to apply what they've learned about brand design and the language of brands by designing their personal brand. They may choose to use their initials, a number (such as their own number on a sports team or the number of a professional athlete that they admire), and symbols (such as arrows going in any direction, straight bars, squiggly lines, hearts or diamonds).

Instruct students that they may use their two pipe cleaners and scissors to shape their personal brand. They can cut their pipe cleaners into smaller pieces if necessary, but they should be careful to make sure they don't cut pieces too short.

Remind students that a brand should be simple enough to be shaped with metal and it must be easy to read. Also, a simpler brand is less painful for the livestock.

### Materials Needed:

- 2 pipe cleaners per student
- scissors

### Closure:

We talked today about branding techniques that date back to the time of the ancient Egyptians. Can you think of any modern technology that ranchers might be able to use to keep track of their livestock? How about technology that your parents use in the car or that you use on your phone to determine where you are on a map? (Answer: GPS) Also, DNA testing can be used to tell if an animal is a genetic match to others from a particular ranch or farm. Although both of these techniques give ranchers and farmers additional tools

to use against loss and theft (YES! Cattle rustling still happens today!), the technique that most livestock owners still prefer is good old fashioned branding.

## Vocabulary

**ketch hand** – in livestock branding, the ketch hand is the cowboy who would lasso a calf and bring it to the fire for branding

**flanker** – the flanker is the cowboy who would grab a calf by the ear and the loose end of the flank to lay on it's side for branding

**iron man** – the iron man is the cowboy who would actually press the heated branding iron to the hide of the calf or cow

**maverick** – Samuel A. Maverick was a Texas engineer, politician and rancher who refused to brand his cattle. His name became the term used to describe an unbranded or orphaned range colt or cow that has escaped from the herd. His name also became the official term used to describe individuals who refuse to follow the rules of social order.

## Part 3 ~ The Lincoln County War

### Anticipatory Set:

Questions:

- Ask, “how many of you have visited Lincoln?”
- If any students answer yes, ask “what was the thing you remember the most from that visit?”
- Who is the most famous person who was involved in the Lincoln County War?  
(Answer: Billy the Kid)

**SWBATD** knowledge of the importance of branding cattle to prove ownership in territorial New Mexico by recalling the cause of the Lincoln County War.

### Discussion:

#### Cattle Rustling Starts a War

1. There were two factions fighting each other during the Lincoln County War. Does anyone know what the word “faction” means? (Answer: A faction is a small, organized, opposing group within a larger group.)
2. The root cause of the Lincoln County War was competition between these two groups of people to get contracts from the federal government to provide meat and other dry goods to Fort Stanton.
3. Explain that like most wars, the Lincoln County War was a battle between two opposing groups of people. These two opposing groups are called **factions**.
4. One faction, known as the Murphy-Dolan faction, had made a lot of money selling beef to the Fort. Who knows how much a stolen cow costs? Right! Nothing! So Murphy and his partners would hire thieves, or cattle rustlers, to steal other peoples’ cows and then they would sell them to the government at full price! That’s a pretty good profit isn’t it?
5. As we’ve been learning, ranchers were desperate to protect their cows from cattle rustlers, and the way that they did that was by \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Answer: Branding)

### Learning Activity:

#### Balloon Roundup

Now that the students have created their own unique brands, they’re ready to brand their own cattle. Each student will trace or freehand draw their personal brand on to their cow (blown-up balloon) with a marker. (Alternative: To achieve the true branding experience, allow the students to dip their pipe cleaner brand into paint and then “brand” their balloon. This choice will obviously be dependent on whether or not you have time to allow the paint to dry.)

Tell the students that you are the livestock truck and go around the room collecting everyone's branded cattle in a large trash bag. As you collect, you can explain that too many cows in the truck can cause distress and result in possible death of the animal. If there are too few cows in the truck, the cows can move too much and might slip and injure themselves during transport.

Select a location to serve as a coral (a cordoned off section of the classroom, an unused portable, cafeteria, or gym) and deliver the branded balloons to the coral. Select a student to be the herding dog and let that student go into the coral to stir up the balloons. Then allow small groups of students to enter the coral and try to find their branded "cow." Be sure to remind the students that cows were valuable and so they don't want to pop a balloon because that would be a financial loss to the ranch.

## Materials Needed:

- 1 balloon per student (or more if you have a small class)
- markers or paint
- large trash bag

## Closure:

Look around the room at your classmates' backpacks, lunchboxes, clothing, and shoes and see if you can find examples of product logos, or sports team logos. Did you ever think of those logos as a form of modern day branding? Big companies like Nike, Starbucks, Harley Davidson, major sports teams, LEGO and Google all spend huge amounts of money on advertising and marketing their "brand". And if they're really successful at gaining loyalty from their customers, sometimes a customer will actually brand themselves! Can you believe that some people get Nike swooshes or Harley Davidson logos tattooed on their body?

**My name is Tiffanie Owen and I am an Instructional Coordinator for Lincoln and Fort Stanton Historic Sites and a former Middle School teacher. If you used this lesson plan in your classroom, I'd love to hear from you. You may also contact me to schedule a tour or a classroom visit at [TiffanieOwen@state.nm.us](mailto:TiffanieOwen@state.nm.us) or 575-653-4025.**

