



Repair Shop “Reading for Rustlers” Lesson Plan

Kindergarten to 2nd Grade

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Feature Description - Lesson Overview

Riding horses, throwing lassos, and shooting pistols are skills often associated with cowboys. But during the Open Range Cattle Era of the late 1800s, one of the most valued cowboy skills involved reading. Cattle brands, or hot irons used to mark cattle ownership, were the only way to tell whose cattle belonged to who on the open range. In this lesson, students will learn how to “read” the mysterious symbols used on cattle brands. They will also take on the role of cowboys and use their brand reading skills to find cattle thieves, called rustlers.

Tags

Blacksmith, brands, cattle, Open Range, Cowboys, rustlers, horses

Duration

25 to 30 minutes

Essential Questions

What does it mean to own something?

Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand how to read and identify various cattle brands.
- Explain why the knowledge and ability to read cattle brands was a skill valued by cowboys.
- Explain the historic purpose and use of cattle brands during the open range cattle era, and how they contributed to the mutual success of cowboys and cattle ranchers.

Thinking Skills

Remembering, Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating, Problem Solving

Background information needed for this lesson plan

Branding, or the practice of pressing hot metal symbols into the skin of livestock to mark ownership, dates back to ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire. The practice made its way to North America with Spanish colonists in the 1500s. They began importing cattle in 1521 to supply meat to their missions and settlements across the continent.

This practice gained immense importance during the growth of the **Open Range Cattle Era**, 1865 to 1900. Open range cattle ranching was characterized by ranchers allowing their cattle herds to roam free across public grasslands, from Texas to Montana. This system presented many challenges to managing cattle herds. Foremost was the lack of fences to separate one ranch’s cattle from another’s. When cattle intermixed, how could you tell whose cattle belonged to who?

It was done by the use of brands. Every steer was money in a rancher’s pocket, so using that brand to keep track of them was critical! And the skill of reading and recognizing those brands fell on the cowboy. They

had to develop the skill of remembering and recognizing hundreds of different brands. They also had to know the proper way to read brands. That way, if a cowboy was told to watch for a lazy G hanging K brand, they would know what that brand looked like.

This skill benefitted the rancher, but also the cowboy. If they became very proficient, ranches would hire them to work as a **representative**, or “**rep**.” A representative was hired by ranches to go out on the range and locate their cattle herds. During roundups, they would ride between roundup camps as a “representative” of their ranch. Cowboy E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott describes the work of a representative in his memoir *We Pointed Them North, Recollections of a Cowpuncher*:

“A rep traveled with a big string of horses, and he was a notch higher than a common cowboy. He had to be, to keep all those different brands and marks in his head... Another thing about repping was, it gave you a chance to go to all the different roundups and the roundup was something everybody looked forward to, on the range. You got to see a lot of people that way and hear all the news... But the biggest thing about repping was that you were on your own instead of working for a boss.”

(Source: Abbott, E. C. and Helena Huntington Smith, ed. *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939, p. 86-87.)

A cowboy’s ability to read brands was not only valued for locating cattle. It was also valued for catching **rustlers**, or cattle and horse thieves. Rustlers attempted to steal cattle by taking a hot **running iron**, which is a straight piece of metal with a plain end, and using it to change, or alter, the brand on the cattle. They claimed the altered brand as their own, and pocketed the money when they sold the stolen cattle. Rustling became a serious problem for Montana ranchers by the early 1880s. They were losing much money as rustlers stole their cattle. Ranchers came to depend on cowboys who were highly skilled brand readers to spot unfamiliar or unusual brands, which could indicate that rustlers were in the area. The greater challenge for cowboys came when they had to pick out a known brand from within the altered design.

Open range era ranchers attempted to put a stop to rustling in the 1880s. Some were violent acts of vigilantism, others were organization into political groups to pass laws. For more information about ranchers’ responses to rustling, be it violent or political, read this article from [Montana State University](#).

Rustling continues to be a problem for Montana ranchers today. Though there are new methods to mark ownership, including microchips, ear tags, and freeze branding, many continue using hot brands. Some ranchers believe that the mark left by a hot iron still makes it easier for brand inspectors to catch rustlers and stolen cattle, proving that this old cowboy skill is still valued on ranches today.

This lesson invites students to experience the value of brand reading by stepping into the boots of open range cowboys. Students will be given a series of Cattle Cards with images of branded cattle. Then they will be given a Brand Card with text descriptions of three brands. They will have to pick out the cattle with brands matching their descriptions. However, some of the brands have been altered by rustlers! Students are challenged to find their cattle with the altered brand.

Through this activity, students will gain an understanding of the skill needed to perform the work of a cowboy, and how the cowboy’s ability to read and recognize brands contributed to the growth of open range ranching.

Vocabulary

- **Open Range Cattle Era:** a time period from 1865 to 1900 in which cattle ranching was characterized by allowing cattle herds to roam free across public grasslands in the American West, from Texas to Montana.
- **Branding:** the practice of pressing hot metal symbols into the skin of livestock to mark ownership.
- **Representative, or “rep”:** a cowboy who was hired by a ranch to go out on the range and

locate their cattle herds. They often visited different roundup camps as a “representative” of their ranch.

- **Rustler:** a cattle or horse thief.
- **Running iron:** a straight piece of metal with a plain end, used by rustlers to alter brands on cattle.

Standards

- NCSS Standard 1.C. Describe ways in which language, stories, folktales, music, and artistic creations serve as expressions of culture and influence behavior of people living in a particular culture.
- NCSS Standard 2.D. Identify and use various sources for reconstructing the past, such as documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, and others.
- NCSS Standard 5.G. Show how groups and institutions work to meet individual needs and promote the common good.

Materials Needed

All materials are available with this lesson plan on the Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS website education page.

- Repair Shop Virtual Field Trip video.
- Brand Reading sheet.
- Cattle Cards.
- Brand Cards (each has text descriptions of three cattle brands).
- Teacher’s Answer Key

Procedures

1. Introduction 5 minutes

- Ask students to share something that they are good at. This could be running, a sport, reading books, singing, etc.
- Then ask students to share why they like those activities or why they think they are good at them.
- Cowboys were good at a lot of things, too! They were good at riding horses and throwing rope lassos to catch cows. But they also had to be good at reading! Why was that so important to them?

2. Watch the Repair Shop Virtual Field Trip video from 06:21 to 12:59.

3. Student “Reading for Rustlers” Activity 15 minutes

- In this activity, you may have students work independently or in small groups.
- Hand out the Brand Cards, assigning one to each student or group. For virtual classrooms, have students download their assigned Brand Card from the park webpage.
- Then hand out the Brand Reading sheet and Cattle Cards. For virtual classrooms, have the students download these materials from the park webpage.
- Students will use the Brand Reading sheet to “read” and pick out the Cattle Cards with brands that match the descriptions on their Brand Cards.
- They must be on the lookout! Some of the Cattle Cards have altered brands (each Brand Card will have one altered brand associated with it – each student or group will have to identify one altered brand). In this event, students will need to identify their cattle by finding their brand inside the altered brand.
- After identifying any altered brands, students will draw what the original brands should look like.
- After students have completed the activity, share out in a large group. Do they think they found any changed brands? If so, what did the original look like?
- Using the Teacher’s Answer Key, reveal which brands were altered and show students the original brand.

4. Discussion and Analysis 5 to 10 minutes

- Lead the group in a short discussion.
- How easy or difficult was it to find your cattle?
- How did knowing the different letters and shapes help you find your cattle?
- How did the letters and shapes help you find the changed brands?
- Was it important for cowboys to know how to read brands? Why or why not?
- What could happen if a cowboy didn't know how to read a brand?
- Would this make it easier or harder for them to work with cattle?

Extension Activity

Have the students design their own brand. Encourage them to create a brand that is highly recognizable and have them keep their design secret from the other students. Then, collect their brand designs and pass them back out, each one to a different student. Students will then redraw the brand and alter it to make it as unrecognizable as possible. Challenge them to alter the brand by adding as few lines or symbols as possible. When they have finished, display all of the altered brands and challenge students to pick out their original brand.

Assessment

The brand cards can be used to gauge student understanding of lesson content.