

West Magazine
Branding – rustling sidebar
By Bruce Masterman

In the old dusters shown at Saturday afternoon matinees, cattle rustlers were bad hombres who ended up hung high from the nearest tree.

We don't hang 'em any more – actually, there's no evidence we ever did in Canada – but rustling is still a part of raising cattle in Western Canada.

“We're more likely to call it stealing,” says Cpl. Ed Turco, head of the RCMP livestock identification section in southern Alberta.

With Alberta ranchers producing about 6.5 million head of cattle for sale annually, criminals bent on making a few bucks off somebody else's beef have plenty of pickings from which to choose.

Back in the West's frontier days, rustlers used to sneak in under cover of darkness and separate a few cows from the main herd. Or they'd find an unbranded calf and take it, an act that wasn't even illegal back then since there was no way of saying whose animal it was anyway.

Nowadays, Turco says, rustlers are more liable to back a livestock trailer up to a corral off a busy highway in the middle of the day, then walk around until all the cows in it are loaded. It takes just a few minutes, and usually passers-by won't take notice because they don't expect rustlers to be so bold.

Another common scenario involves a neighbour who jumps at the chance to skim a few cows off the herd owned by the rancher next to him. Seldom does cattle rustling involve a well-thought-out plan.

“It's usually a crime of opportunity,” says Turco.

He and his northern Alberta counterpart, Cpl. David Heaslip, generally have several active rustling investigations on the go at any one time.

In late 2005, a 73-year-old rustler named Johnny Chinook was sentenced to a year in jail after being found guilty of theft over \$5,000. He'd stolen 36 cattle last fall from a rancher from whom he'd leased some land.

Court was told Chinook had put his own brand on the cattle, burning over the brand of the rightful owner. But brand inspectors working with the RCMP determined the original brand had been altered.

In another case that Heaslip investigated, a 43-year-old man from Roblin, Manitoba faces two charges of possession of stolen property after a total of 12 Saler and Red Angus cows were stolen in west-central Alberta and taken to Manitoba. A provincial brand inspector had discovered Alberta brands on the animals and contacted RCMP.

“This is a fine example of the importance of having livestock branded and tattooed,” Heaslip says.

Although both Heaslip and Turco are full-fledged Mounties, their positions are paid for by a private firm called Livestock Identification Services (LIS). The company was formed in 1998 when the provincial government privatized brand and livestock inspectors, and others involved with the identification end of the industry.

Now LIS keeps track of 47,000 registered cattle and horse brands. Its inspectors check the brands of 6.5 million head of cattle at auction sales and packing plants.

LIS assistant manager Cam Camden says the company doesn't keep records of how many animals go missing every year from rustling, predators, weather or other causes.

Mountie Turco agrees it's hard to put a number on cattle losses caused by rustling.

"Sometimes an animal is temporarily misplaced by a rancher, then shows up later," he says.

"We don't get involved until we know an animal has been stolen."