

USA

Changes in the law and advances in technology are making it easier to track rustlers down.

New help for the old problem of horse theft

By Kris Axtman
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MADISONVILLE, TEXAS - Back when the Wild West was being tamed and partitioned by the newly invented "devil's rope," a man could be shot just for carrying a pair of wire cutters in the pocket of his dungarees.

Officially, tampering with a barbed-wire fence was classified as a felony offense. Unofficially, well, justice for rustlers was often meted out outside the law.

Today, the ultimate scoundrels of the frontier still roam, targeting horses as well as cattle. But, while the penalties today may not be as harsh or swift, changes in the law and technology are making it easier to track these rustlers down.

In Texas alone, experts estimate that three or four horses per week disappear off the arid land. That's millions of dollars lost each year from an industry that now ranks second in the state, behind cattle.

A trend toward absentee ownership, with horses pastured on small ranches not far from cities, has made horses easier than ever to steal. But unlike 150 years ago, it's also getting increasingly easier to catch the scoundrels.

Inspectors are allowed greater access to horse-processing plants and auction houses, branding methods are becoming more humane for the animal and more convenient for the horse owner, and penalties have stiffened for the horse rustler - though capital punishment is no longer an option.

Using some of that new technology on a recent scorching afternoon are Kathy and Tom Fleming, founders of the Texas Horse Owners Association.

The town of Madisonville, between Houston and Dallas, is their most recent stop in a statewide effort to keep horses with their rightful owners.

The Houston couple first became aware of the problem more than 10 years ago, when they spent most of a day tracking down their five horses, which were loosed by a thief making off with two other horses.

Today, they spend their weekends giving freeze-branding clinics and lecturing owners about how to keep their horses safe. In addition, they plaster the state with Crime Stoppers Missing Horse Alerts.

As Mrs. Fleming talks about the horses they've rescued, she checks her stopwatch. "Seven seconds, eight, nine," she calls out.

Her husband pulls the iron away from the mare's left hindquarter and places it back in a smoking tub of liquid nitrogen. The new brand, a star with a K inside, will appear when the hair regrows. Instead of giving the animal a third-degree burn, like a hot iron does, this method simply kills the pigment in the hair follicles.

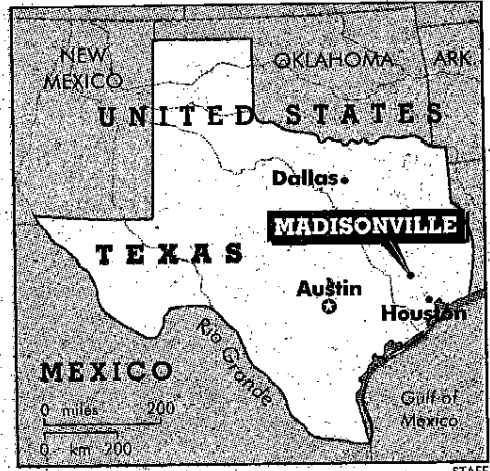
So a brown horse, like Queenie, will have white hair where it was touched by the nitrogen-laced iron. And it provides only a momentary stinging sensation. The couple has been using this technique for about 10 years now. Microchips imbedded in the horse's neck are also growing in popularity.

On this afternoon, the Flemings have only branded six horses. But soon, they'll have more work than they can handle. Next

month, the process of reregistering brands will begin, a ritual horse owners have to do every 10 years at the county level.

"People don't realize horse theft is a very, very big problem," says Mrs. Fleming, wiping the sweat from her brow. "And the things we do to make horses easy for us to own them is what makes it easy for thieves to steal them."

MANY horses, for example, are kept in pastures near busy roads, and they are trained to get into a horse trailer upon command. But even more significant, a large percentage of horses have absentee owners. The proliferation of ranchettes, suburban ranches, and stables



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL STRAVATO/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

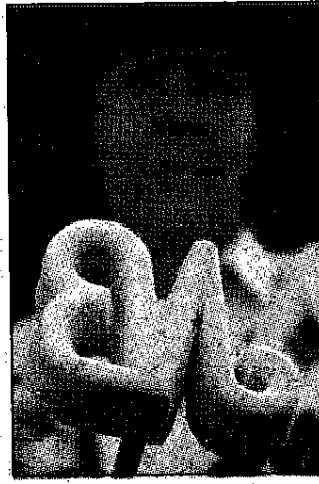
'FREEZE-BRANDING': Instead of the hot-iron procedure, Tom Fleming applies a nitrogen-laced iron, which kills the pigment in hair follicles. The horse will have white hair there.

just outside major cities such as Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio means owners often go days or weeks without seeing their horses. Of the 1 million horses in Texas, one-fourth are housed in Houston's outskirts alone.

"People tend to think of Texas as open land with horses roaming around on large ranches in rural areas, but the horses are where the people are," says Pete Gibbs, a horse specialist at Texas A&M University in College Station.

Absentee ownership makes horses easier to steal. And, just like 150 years ago, profit is the motive. "It's just like burglarizing a house or stealing a car. It's done for money," says Steve Westbrook, executive director of the Sheriffs' Association of Texas.

But unlike stealing a used VCR, a horse



ICY SIGNATURE: Only half of stolen horses are recovered.

will always bring market value. That means a 1,000-pound horse can bring \$800 at auction or the slaughterhouse for meat.

Even though "wanted" posters line the walls of such locals, almost half of the stolen horses never make it back to the rightful owners.

That's why a brand is so important. It's the equivalent of a VIN on a car.

Starr Towell has been working with horses for only two years now, but she knows the importance of identification. She spent the morning with the Flemings, getting all five of her horses freeze-branded.

"I live along a busy farm road, and I want them to be identifiable," she says, leading Queenie into the horse trailer. "They are my babies, and I don't want anyone to steal them. Plus, my 9-year-old daughter would be heartbroken."