

## NOTES

The Brand is a humorous essay and should be performed by a male and be entered in Prose Interpretation. In this essay, author Ray Dillard revisits his youth as he reflects on the powerful role television played in his day to day activities. Where else would a young boy get the idea to ‘brand’ his family’s prized bird dogs? This is story-telling at its finest. The innocence of the narrator, along with the sincerity of wanting to protect the family pets, is the foundation for all of the universal humor found within this selection. Play that humor; however, remember, humor is best played with 100% honesty. Comic timing also plays an important role in the performance of this selection. The performer should take special care to make sure the story builds in intensity as the selection rises to the moment of truth: will the bird dogs be branded or not? This is a charming essay about the rites of passage, as a young boy tries to emulate the actions of the cowboys he so admires on television. It is a throw-back to a simpler time. If the performer can tell this story with simplicity and ease, the audience will certainly appreciate the nostalgic, Norman-Rockwell-like magic of two boys, who like most young boys, have the best of intentions at heart. The drama mask icons simply serve as suggestions as to when to turn the pages in the manuscript.

It was 1961, and our world was rapidly outgrowing her britches. The estimated population of the third planet was four billion and people were in a hurry to leave. Yuri Gagarin and Alan Shepard had been launched into space, and the United States and Russia were at odds with each other over Cuba. The Berlin Wall was established to further separate the East and West. Those who were lucky enough, or rich enough, could now follow these world events on television.



I was seven years old at the time and none of it meant a hill of beans to me, except for television. It may have been the first time I ever heard of Communism, but, I knew what television was. And, I liked it, *alot!* Much to my pleasure, Dad liked to watch *Rawhide*. He pictured himself a bit of a cowboy and weekend horseman. And quite frankly, I’m sure he could have whipped all those TV cowboys. Even Rowdy Yates!

It was while watching an episode of *Rawhide* that I first learned the purpose of branding cattle. Rustlers were using a running iron to

change the brands on cattle and then selling them as their own. Of course, our heroes were quite bright and figured the whole thing out. But, the seed had been sewn...



While we didn't own any cattle, we did own the two very best bird dogs in the whole entire world. Dad had been offered a thousand dollars for the pair! Groucho and Jake were the best pets in the world, too! They played with us, protected us from strangers and snakes and such, and let us repay their friendship with little more than a daily ear scratching and some gravy train. Yup, they could hunt and play and we could pick 'um out of a herd of dogs if we had to. But, how would we prove to the world that they belonged to us.

Yes sir! Our dogs needed a brand! That way nobody could steal them from us. Everybody would know they were ours and leave them alone. Not a bad idea for a couple of kids only six and seven years old. We just needed to formulate a plan! We needed a recognizable branding iron and a good hot fire. We searched the garage and the out buildings for anything that could be used as a branding iron and couldn't find a thing! Then while running through the kitchen, I saw Mamma cooking dinner. There she was, mashing potatoes, with what was surely the most recognizable branding iron in the county. Yes sir, there was the M bar H, the rocking lazy H and now, the tater masher brands.



Fire was no problem at all. We burned the trash two or three times a week, and guess who was in charge of making sure the pasture didn't catch on fire? You got it! Once, an aerosol can exploded in the trash and started a fire that soon spread to the nearby cotton patch! Somebody had to prevent that from happening again, and who better than the most responsible seven year-old in the family.



So it was set. The next time we burned the trash, Ralph would sneak the tater masher out of the house and we'd brand the dogs! We didn't have to wait long. On Saturday, we volunteered to do our chore and burn the trash. The wind was low and blowing away from the house. Both were requirements of a careful dad. Before long we had a big flame going, and the water hose was handy just in case.