

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Earmarks of an Earlier Era

During the settlement of the Ohio Country and for decades after statehood in 1803, farmers placed great value on their livestock. Before wire fences were introduced in the 1870s, the only way to confine horses, cattle, sheep, etc. was to construct a wooden fence. But these barriers were expensive to build and required inspection and maintenance if damaged. Fences had to be strong and tight enough to contain animals and keep them from breaking free.

Some breeders of more expensive livestock erected board fences to enclose their herds and define the boundaries of their property, but they were a minority. The average pioneer had to decide whether the expense of a fence was worthwhile, or whether his animals could roam about at will. Settlers who raised hogs, cattle, and sheep adopted a method of identifying their stock – an earmark. The earmark was important. It was a cut/hole/incision (or a combination of these) made in an animal's ear for the purpose of documenting ownership. Though livestock could be branded, that was more painful to the creature, and brands often were difficult to read, especially when hair covered up the scar. Ears were more visible, and recognition of an earmark was a relatively easy task.

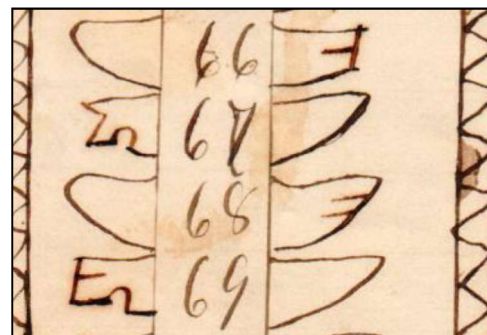
On the frontier, theft of livestock was a perpetual concern. Pioneers were usually cash poor, and animals were among the most liquid of assets. They were ambulatory and could be moved by a thief to the next town or county for farm use or consumption. If a stolen animal was butchered, the original owner had no recourse, as one carcass looked much like any other.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 made earmarks discretionary in the Ohio Country; territorial and later, state legislatures authorized township clerks to register earmarks to aid in the identification of livestock and to prevent duplication of marks. Registrants paid 25 cents for this service, which gave them exclusive rights to a particular mark. The penalty for defacing an earmark was a fine of up to \$50. But thieves sometimes cut off the animal's entire ear, destroying evidence of the rightful owner, a practice known as "grubbing". Honest people regarded livestock with grubbed ears as stolen property. People who kept these mutilated animals were assumed to be robbers.

Earmarks could be on either or both ears of an animal. They could be on the top, side, or underside of the ear. One commonly used one was the *penny*, a circular hole in the ear, or a *half penny*, half of a circular hole. *Slits* were also used; they were a notch, or separation of the skin. An animal could have 1, 2, or 3 slits. A *crop* of the ear was a vertical cut, which made the ear not round in appearance, and a *half crop* was when only half the ear was cropped. A *swallowfork* resembled the greater than or less than angle bracket on a current day keyboard or a sideways caret. Less common were the *poppleleaf*, when an open bracket was cut on the ear, and a *square fork*, resembling a closed bracket. Another cut was the *underbit*, wherein one or several *half penny* notches were made in the under ear.

The Columbia Township Records for Hamilton County (which encompassed part of Indian Hill) contain 169 recorded earmarks between 1791 and 1856. In 1800 William Drake's mark was "a crop off and slit in the right ear, and a half penny the underside of the same". William Armstrong's mark was "two slits in the right ear". Hezekiah Stites registered his stock with "a crop of the right ear and a penny in the left"; and Ira Broadwell had a "swallowfork in each ear". Five women registered earmarks during the six decades of the register. If a registrant left Columbia Township, his earmark could be transferred.

Today livestock do not wander about freely, and they are not as common in Indian Hill. Both Turner Farm and Green Acres identify their herds with ear tags. But this once common practice of earmarks is evidence of the agricultural practices of early pioneer farmers in the area.



**Samples of registered earmarks from
Columbia Township Records, 1791-1900.
William Armstrong registered #68, "Two slits
in right ear", on Jan. 8, 1808**