

Ferdie J. Deering

FEB. 24 1977

Code Helping Rural Theft Fight

IN pioneer days, an unlocked door was a gesture of hospitality to strangers who might happen by. Now an unlocked door is an invitation to criminals to rob, rape or vandalize.

So the custom of unlocked doors is disappearing. Locks may not always stop outlaws, but they discourage some and could result in more serious charges against those who break and enter.

Owners also are becoming interested in marking property for identification, if found. Use of Social Security numbers has not helped as much as anticipated because laws prevent tracing owners by these numbers.

Another system of property identification that is coming into wider use utilizes codes available to all law enforcement officers in the handbook of the National Crime Information Center, operated by the FBI.

First numbers in the 10-digit marking indicate the state, the next show the county and other numbers

reveal owners of property who have registered with their local sheriffs.

The system was introduced into Oklahoma by Jeff R. Laird, director of the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation, after he had observed it in other states. It is being promoted by the Oklahoma Farm Bureau and is now in use in 20 counties.

A recent example of how it works turned up, in a Georgia pawn shop, a farm welding machine that had been stolen in Missouri. The serial number had been ground off, but the hidden identification mark enabled the sheriff to trace the out-of-state owner.

Whether urban outlaws may be taking to the countryside in Oklahoma in greater numbers is not known, but studies show this is happening in other states. It probably is occurring here, too.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture observes that more people are moving to rural areas, where law enforcement officials have more territory to cover. Rising affluence of residents and improved high-

ways make isolated rural homes attractive targets.

Recently, a study by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) in Ohio showed an alarming increase in rural crime. More than one-third of the crimes reported in the study were acts of vandalism committed by persons under 18.

Wide-ranging gangs have been found trafficking in stolen tractors and other major farm equipment or oil field machinery, to be sold at bargain prices far away. Individuals or sheriffs would have considerable difficulty in tracing such property unless it were marked with an interstate identification code.

Officers and prospective buyers who know where to look can quickly have suspicious machinery checked out. This is one more weapon that citizens can use in the war against crime.

Although it was designed for use in the country, there does not seem to be any reason why it could not be adapted by businesses, industries and urban residents.