

History of Longhorns in North America

By Michael Casey

Longhorn cattle have been a part of the history of North America since 1493 when Spanish settlers accompanying Christopher Columbus brought the first few long-horned Iberian cattle with them to the Antilles Islands (Puerto Rico, Cuba, Jamaica, and Hispaniola). Beginning in about 1519, many of those cattle (which had propagated profusely in the interim years) were taken by Antillean settlers when they traveled to Mexico in search of gold and other treasures. Antillean cattle were landed all along the eastern coast of Mexico during the 16th and 17th centuries. The most popular port of entry was Vera Cruz, but they also came ashore as far north as Tampico (less than 200 miles south of the Texas border).



From Vera Cruz, ranches were established quickly, and soon large populations of Iberian longhorns were seen throughout the Panuco Delta as well as south and west of the port of Vera Cruz. From there, long-horned cattle gradually migrated, with Spanish explorers, settlers, and mission priests, north along both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. The first known cattle in Texas arrived in the early 1700s with Franciscan missionaries as they began to build a chain of missions extending through the San Antonio River valley and out to the present city of Goliad. Spanish expeditionaries brought sheep, goats, horses, and "horned" cattle on their overland voyages both as food on the hoof to sustain them during their travels and also as seedstock for settlers once having arrived at their destinations.

While entry of long-horned cattle into Texas has been well documented in Frank Dobie's classic work *The Longhorns*¹, it is also established fact that long-horned cattle populated California as early as 1769.² Little, however, is known about the long-horned Iberian cattle for the next century other than they typically roamed freely on the large ranchos and mission lands as did cattle throughout the southwestern states as well as California and Texas. Since those early days preceded the introduction of barbed wire fencing, their range also extended well beyond the unsecured boundaries of those properties. It has been estimated that by 1860 about 4,000,000 to 6,000,000 wild long-horned cattle could be found in Texas alone.³ While census data for these animals in California has not ever been well documented, we do know that in 1800 there were 153,000 head of "horned cattle" in California and that by 1834 that number had grown to at least 396,000.⁴

By the 1780s the influence of the missions had declined greatly in Texas, and cattle raising largely passed into the hands of private ranchers, many of whom had acquired large land grants from local governors. Cattle ranching quickly spread throughout south Texas and particularly in the region sometimes referred to as the Nueces Strip (a strip of land in south Texas lying between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande). The area between Tampico and Matamoros (just south of the present day Texas border) is cited by Professor Jordan as today's remaining primary source area for feral "Texas Longhorns."⁵

Meanwhile, South Carolina became the primary cattle raising colony along the eastern seaboard of America. Although British settlers had brought British breeds to the new world the early cattle population in South

Carolina appears to have had significant Iberian influence. That influence traces back to 1704 when British troops and their Creek Indian allies raided Spanish strongholds in Florida in an effort to displace Spanish influence. They captured a number of the Antillean cattle, which had come north to Florida with Spanish settlers from the Antilles in the early 1600s, and they took them to South Carolina where they were crossed with the British cattle which already existed in that colony.⁶



By the end of the 18th century, the "British" cattle had migrated with their owners as far west as Mississippi. While the "cracker cattle herders" (i.e. Carolinian settlers) did reach Texas in the early 1800s, they seem to have initially limited their expansion to the Piney Woods area of western Louisiana and eastern Texas and to the westernmost portions of the longleaf belt in the lower Trinity River valley.⁷ More importantly, it would seem that by then the stock they brought with them were largely comprised of Iberian longhorn blood, including longhorns from Florida and also longhorns which had earlier flowed eastward into Louisiana from Texas during the 1780s after a permissive trade edict issued by the Spanish Government. That edict had enabled

Texas ranchers to round up and drive a "huge export of cattle and horses to Louisiana ... sufficient to cause herd depletion in the lower San Antonio Valley."⁸ Those cattle, which were driven east from Texas into Louisiana, must have been Iberian Longhorns since the influx of Carolinian settlers and their cattle into Texas did not commence until the first decade of the 19th century.⁹ Furthermore, as those Carolinian "cowpenners" continued their progress west along the coastal plains of Texas, it appears that they changed their management styles as well as the makeup of their cattle, adopting the Spanish/Mexican styles of loose management and also Iberian bloodlines in their herds.¹⁰

Between 1493 and the mid-nineteenth century, feral Longhorns flourished in the Americas, using natural selection principles to develop hardiness, disease resistance, ease of calving, strong mothering instincts, and other traits vital to their survival. What evolved was an animal which could survive in harsh environments, one which had sound legs and could walk miles to water, to breed, and to utilize available forage, and one which could also produce and raise a live healthy calf year after year. The evolutionary process, in which only the fittest could contribute to the gene pool, also produced a body commensurate with the availability of food, gave them hard hooves and lethal horns with which to protect themselves and their young, and provided them with a hardy immune system which made them largely resistant to disease. Furthermore, the cows developed excellent udders in order to be able to successfully feed their young in a harsh land of generally poor forage, and the bulls developed tight sheaths in order to avoid injury in the thick scrub they frequented.

One of the best descriptions of the hardiness that longhorns had developed as feral animals is contained in a passage from Frank Dobie's classic work, *The Longhorns*. Dobie described the following episode which occurred about 1850 on Noah Smithwick's property near Bushy Creek in Texas. Smithwick had a herd of domesticated cattle, but there were also wild longhorns nearby. He described the following:

"Two of the [longhorned] bulls took up with Smithwick's cattle and became 'quite domesticated'. About the same time, lobo wolves began to depredate. When the milch cows and other gentle stock were attacked, they would try to get to the house. The wild cattle, on the other hand, 'would form a ring around their calves and, presenting a line of horns, would fight the lobos off.'" ¹¹

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the commercial importance of longhorns (since they were at that time the predominant breed of cattle) was to supply the hide and tallow industries of Europe and, after the Revolutionary War, of New England as well. Before the advent of electricity in the early 20th century, candles were the world's chief source of night light. Tallow, the main ingredient in candles, soaps and lubricants, was obtained by rendering animal fat. Hides were important to the shoe, boot and leather industries. Therefore, "Hide and Tallow" companies (as beef processing plants were then called) became the major users of cattle

carcasses, first in California and later in Texas and other southern states as well. In the absence of refrigeration, meat was largely a byproduct and of little commercial value.

An effort to supply the hide and tallow markets began in Texas shortly after the end of the Civil War. During the war, many longhorns from Texas had been driven into the Southeast (swimming the Mississippi River enroute) where they supplied the field kitchens of the confederate forces.¹² Those first drives had taught the Texans that Longhorns could be driven long distances successfully and without much, if any, loss of weight. Having learned that lesson well, enterprising southerners began driving their longhorns north to the railheads at Abilene and Dodge City, where they were loaded onto trains and taken to Chicago and points east to supply leather and tallow (and to a far lesser extent, beef) markets of the wealthier northern states. That was the beginning of the glory years of cowboys and long distance cattle drives. By 1895 it has been estimated that over 10,000,000 head had been driven the length of the Chisholm, Goodnight and other trails from Texas and other southern states to the northern markets. These drives, which lasted in total less than thirty years and were often led by very young cowboys and "vaqueros", became a part of the romantic western lore as the "legendary cattle drives of the old west." Many of the more docile animals were also used, before being slaughtered, to pull wagon trains westward.¹³

During the memorable cattle drives, those millions of Longhorn bulls, cows, steers, and calves walked north along well worn trails and actually gained weight as they walked, all the while protecting themselves and their calves from predators, swimming rivers, and surviving desert heat and winter snows. The fact that they could not only survive but actually thrive under those conditions is a remarkable testament to the evolutionary advantages these animals had gained.

While the cattle drives of the 1870s and 1880s have become romanticized and legendary, the greater influence of these drives was in the exportation of the "Texas Longhorn system." This system embodied not only the longhorn animal but also the management technique used in Southern Texas¹⁴ that was characterized by "allowing cattle to care for themselves year-round in stationary pastures on the free range, without supplementary feeding or protection."¹⁵ While it worked well in the tropical climates of Mexico and south Texas, it was inadequate in the more hostile climates further north. The failure of this system in northern climates, plus the influence of "Cattle Tick Fever" (see below), resulted in the near demise of Spanish longhorned cattle in this country. Northern ranchers, who were enjoying relative success during those hard times by utilizing the British system of close penning and winter supplement feeding, lost faith in the longhorn. While it was probably unfair to blame the longhorns for the bad management practices of their owners, the fact remains that the "Texas Longhorns" were rapidly seen as scrub cattle that should be eliminated rather than propagated.

The downhill slide of the breed was exacerbated by one of the strengths of the longhorns - their immune system - which now worked against them. Their immune system enabled longhorns to survive while carrying a tick on their hides which, in turn, carried the disease, Cattle Tick Fever. Cattle Tick Fever was devastating to British and other cattle that were not immune to it. When populations of other breeds began to decline because of this disease, that was the last straw and the result was large scale destruction of the nation's longhorn population.



In a fascinating article appearing in the February, 1999 edition of the Western Horseman, Dwight G. Bennett, DVM, recounts the role of "Cattle Tick Fever" in the history of the demise of longhorn cattle. He attributes that phenomenon largely to pressures from other cattle ranchers intent on protecting their herds from the "Texas cattle" which were "poisoning their [pasturelands]" and killing their cattle. It turns out that the disease-laden ticks, engorged themselves with the blood of their host longhorn, then dropped from the cow, laid eggs on the

ground, and died. The disease is carried on when the ticks complete their life cycle by attaching themselves to passing cattle. That explains why ranchers complained that the longhorns had poisoned their pasturelands.

As noted by Dr. Bennett, Cattle Tick Fever was not just identified locally where longhorns were passing through. Indeed, it was recognized as early as 1868 among cattle breeders as far east as New York State who noticed their purebred British stock dying when Texas Longhorns were shipped into the state by railroad from the stockyards in Abilene and other railheads. As a result of public outcry throughout the country the market for longhorn cattle toppled, and, various states passed laws attempting to prevent the passage of longhorn cattle across their borders. Although the tick was later found to be controllable and Cattle Tick Fever has since been eradicated in the United States, those scientific advances came too late to restore the reputation of what had, by the mid 1870s, become, essentially, outlaw cattle.

By the 1880s, after consumers had slaughtered millions of longhorns, the demand for higher fat content in both tallow and beef also played some role in the drop in the marketability of longhorns. All things being considered the population of Texas Longhorn cattle went into a steep decline and by 1910 the breed, which only thirty years before had numbered well into the millions, was considered nearly extinct.

In 1927 Congress (at the behest of conservationists and historians) appropriated money to establish a federal herd of purebred Texas Longhorn cattle. Over the next several years, two U.S. Forest Service rangers inspected over 30,000 head of cattle and found only 20 cows, 3 bulls, and 4 calves that were in their opinion purebred Texas Longhorns. These cattle were taken to the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge near Cache, Oklahoma, as seed stock for what has become the "Wildlife Refuge (WR)" herd. Of interest, the WR herd was compiled only from "remote" herds and did not include any influence from six other purebred herds then known to exist (Marks, Phillips, Yates, Butler, Peeler, and Wright). Equally as interesting, no cattle were collected from California, Arizona, or New Mexico where there may well have been purebred herds still in existence.

Most present day Texas Longhorn cattle are descended from those seven families, each of which had its own distinctive attributes. To a Longhorn producer today, it is vitally important to have an understanding of an animal's pedigree and the degree to which it has been genetically influenced by one or more of those families.

In 1964 the first registry was established to perpetuate breeding records and confirm the purity of blood lines for breeders of Texas Longhorn cattle. Since that time, the numbers of registered Texas Longhorn cattle has soared and by the late 1990s it had exceeded 250,000. Breeders now exist in all 50 states as well as Canada, Mexico, and many other countries.

Endnotes:

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