

TEXAS LONGHORNS

A Piece of History for the Future

BY KIM NIKODYM • COMMANDERS PLACE LONGHORNS

When people think of longhorns, often the first thing that comes to mind are images of sweeping western landscapes featuring charging herds of multicolored cattle or the footage seen on television in the old western movies. They were hardy; they were wild; they were colorful; they had horns. Most of all, besides enjoying the occasional campfire song that calmed them, they stampeded! Sure, within the plot of the films there was the sporadic love interest, or a gunfight, but the pivotal drama almost always was the stampede. It was violent, often deadly. So let's take a closer at the history of this breed.

The Texas longhorn traces its history from Texas to Mexico, to Spain and originally back to Africa. He accompanied the Moors to Spain and there, the cattle were put aboard ships headed for Mexico. Space limitations allowed for a minimum of food and water, and as days at sea lengthened into weeks, the elements took a great toll on the animals unaccustomed to the conditions. It is probable that the losses were extreme, and hardiness first began to function as a genetic trait.

Explorers, settlers and expeditions to establish missions brought cattle to Texas. The cattle propagated as they escaped, were scattered by Indians or abandoned when missions failed. By 1860, the census recorded 600,000 people and four million head of cattle in Texas.

Overall, it can be said, that between 1493 and the mid-19th century, feral longhorns flourished in the Americas. During that three hundred fifty year period, they used principles of natural selection 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.

Therefore, the Texas longhorn was created, defined and redefined by nature, tested by time, found not lacking and became directly re-

sponsible for the economic recovery of Texas after the Civil War. Loose cattle were rounded up by the millions. By 1895, it has been estimated that over ten million head had been driven the length of the Chisholm, Goodnight and other trails from Texas and other southern states to the northern markets. During the cattle drives, those 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 they could not only survive but actually thrive under those conditions is a remarkable testament to the evolutionary advantages these animals had gained.

In a few short years, however, things changed. Texas longhorns began to be perceived as 'scrub' cattle in comparison to the heavier British breeds. This 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 other cattle that were not immune to it. Barbed wire had been invented, fences began to go up, and the longhorn was something now to be eliminated rather than propagated. Additionally, the demand for higher fat content in both tallow and beef also played a role in the drop in longhorn marketability. 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.

The Texas longhorn was nearer extinction than the buffalo or the whooping crane, when in 1927, the federal government appropriated \$3,000 for the requisition and preservation of a herd of Texas longhorns. Established at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, this herd became known as the Wildlife Refuge, or WR, herd. The WR herd, along with six other purebred herds that had been maintained by private families (Marks, Phillips, Yates, Butler, Peeler, and Wright) form the foundation stock of all Texas Longhorns.

So where is the breed today? There are four national/international organizations to belong to - the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America (TLBAA); Texas Longhorn Marketing Association (TLMA); International Texas Longhorn Association (ITLA); and the Cattleman's Texas Longhorn Registry (CTLR). Each of these organiza-



tions have their own priorities, and goals - but all have been formed for the love of the breed. There are also over three dozen regionally oriented 'local' affiliates associated with their parent organizations. Annual new registrations average over twelve thousand head a year. There is a show or sale opportunity somewhere in the country nearly every weekend in the spring, summer and fall. There are members of the above mentioned organizations in every state in the United States as well as countries such as Canada, Mexico, Australia, Brazil, Jamaica, New Zealand, England, New South Wales, Austria, Germany and Sweden. While some longhorn ranches are large operations with hundreds of animals - the majority of breeders and owners are much smaller.

That initial impression of longhorns that many have - perceived from watching those great old westerns - really only show a small portion of what makes the longhorn special. Texas longhorns are an easy and forgiving breed. They are wonderful foragers and will make good use of the landscape available. Body physiology in both mother and calf, plus low birthweights, allow for unsurpassed calving ease. I know ranchers that essentially camp out in their pastures during calving time - ready to pull calves and otherwise assist with birthing. Longhorn owners get to do an 'Easter Egg Hunt' to locate the new calves born the night before. That's another thing. ... one never knows what color the calves will end up being. The variety is near endless. J. Frank Dobie writes: "Their colors were more varied than those of the rainbow. There were brindles; blues - mulberry blue, ringstreaked blue, speckled blue; grullas - so named because they had the hue of the sandhill crane, ... all hues of "yellow", browns with bay points; blacks, solid and splotched with white, brown and red; whites both clearly bright and dirty speckled..." He continues in the description with

more colors, finally concluding with: "The shadings and combinations of colors were so various that no two were alike." So, paints, spots and stripes - we have them all, we even have some animals that have a light dappling to their coats. One can never get bored looking at a group of longhorns!

In fact, variety could be the Texas longhorn's middle name. We can start with color, and body type, continue with horn shape and length, and even talk about size (there are registered miniature Texas longhorns), but we are not done until we talk about what one can DO with a longhorn. You can have a few around just to look at - or to add interest to your property.

You can raise longhorn beef. The Texas longhorn's lack of fat, once a cause of near extinction, is now recognized as one of the breed's strong qualities. Health conscious modern nutritionists consistently condemn the heavy fat content of generic beef and wholeheartedly support the use of less fat, lower cholesterol meats like the Texas longhorn. Folks are constantly amazed when they eat a Texas longhorn burger - the cooked product did not shrink! In addition to the beef, horns, hides, and skulls (and some of the more obscure body parts) are also marketable.

Competition is not limited to the show circuits either, the TLBAA and TLMA both run annual horn measuring competitions. Horns can be measured tip to tip, along the entire length and curve of the horn (total horn), as well as a measurement that incorporates the circumference of the horn bases into the measurement (complete horn). Recently a class has been added that measures the total length of the

horn but follows the twist within it as well.

You and your children can show the animals in show circuits associated with the TLBAA or ITLA or many county and local 4-H programs allow Texas longhorns to be shown. They are one of the few breeds that can be shown unaltered as well as at halter. A little of that old west excitement can be revived when a group of longhorns new to each other meet in a large arena!

Longhorn cattle make great companion animals - as many people who take the time to halter break their animals can attest to. It is not uncommon to find a child using his longhorn as a pillow (or vice-versa!) while waiting for their class to come up at a show. Quite a few longhorns - steers, cows and even the exceptional mature bull have been broke to ride.

Texas longhorns can be of use in a commercial cattle program as well. Many use the low birthweight quality of longhorn bulls for first time heifers - for less stress during calving and a quicker breed back cycle. Longhorn cows can continue to calve well in to their late teens. This longevity allows for more market product and fewer animals that need to be kept back as replacements. Additionally, longhorn cross steers have been bringing in top results for multiple scientific studies and carcass competitions across the nation.

Interested in getting started? Don't know anything about cattle? Things that really helped us out were finding a large animal vet that can handle horned stock. It is important to form a good relationship

with your vet BEFORE you need them. We also found ourselves a great mentor that was willing to answer any questions I had - even the silly ones. She said, "Kim, don't worry. Here's what you do. One day you will laugh about this." Well, I wasn't laughing then, but I am now. We also found assistance through other longhorn breeders



that lived in the area, our local high school AG program and through the 4-H. Since there are so many different things that you can do with longhorns, I would suggest looking around a lot before you decide on a purchase. Visit websites, shows, sales, ranches, etc. Listen to why others love their cattle and explain what direction their programs have taken and why. Of course, there is no guarantee that you will know what you want before you start. We didn't. Don't be afraid to get 'starter' cattle. These can be the best cattle for you in the world...or after a while, you might want to start to expand your horizons and move in a different direction from where you started.

*About the author: Kim and her husband Nik established Commanders Place Longhorns in 2008 with two Texas Longhorn cows 'boarded' out. Although relatively inexperienced, they quickly fell in love with the breed, learned all they could and wanted to expand the level of interaction with their cattle. Their first pasture was the three acre backyard in which they cared for and halter broke three longhorn calves. Currently the central Oklahoma ranch consists of 250 leased acres housing a herd that stands at approximately 35 head with two senior and two junior herd sires. One of their bulls, Hustler 969, is a five time Total Horn Champion. Besides competing in horn events, Kim and their two children enjoy showing calves at the county and national level. For more info please visit www.CommandersPlaceLonghorns.com or call (405) 227-7127. Longhorn talk is always welcome! Information sources: TLBAA Official Handbook; TLBAA Office; ITLA Office; TLMA; J. Frank Dobie, *The Longhorns*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1941.*