

Legend OF THE **LONGHORN**

Once nearing extinction,
these iconic beasts are making
a Colorado comeback.

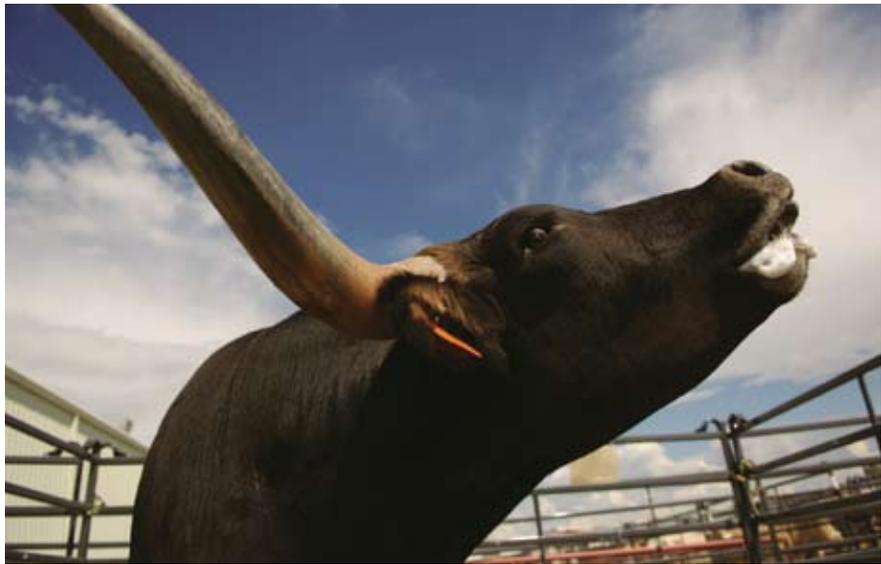


By Joy Overbeck
Photographs by John Johnston

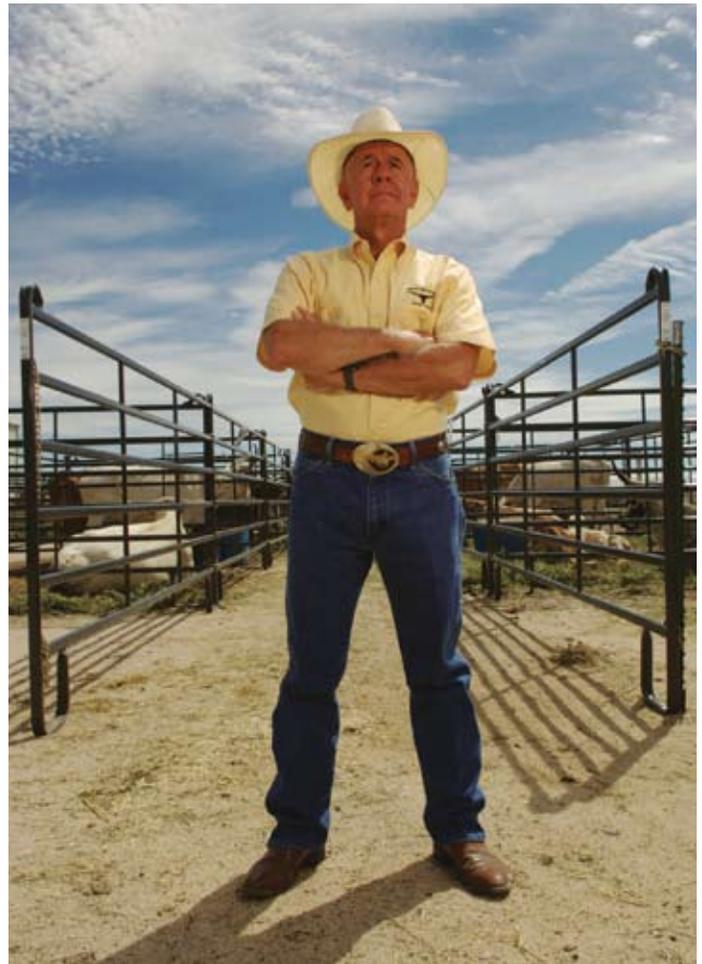


In the stout outdoor pens of the Latigo Trails Equestrian Center east of Colorado Springs, nearly 120 Texas longhorn cattle stand in stately calm, one or two or three to a pen, awaiting the start of the Rocky Mountain Select Sale auction. The heat of an August midday bakes their loamy scent into a sweet-earth aroma as dozens of longhorn breeders and their families stroll the aisles surrounding the pens, eyeing the cows. Like devotees of fantasy football, they're mulling their dream picks for their home herds. ¶ There's something about these animals that makes the heart beat faster. A herd of Angus is just a bunch of squatty black cows, identical as Harleys lined up in front of a bar. But Texas longhorns—high of hips, long-legged, uniquely colored, with horns like ceremonial sabers and a regal air—seem fully aware of their pedigree as the alpha survivors of 500 years in the Texas

HORNS, AND PLENTY Longhorns wait stoically in their pens at the Rocky Mountain Select Sale auction for prospective buyers to look them over. Originally prized for their hardiness, the breed is evolving with the whims of fanciers who prize splashy colors and spectacular horn. Right: Breeder Paige Davis of Whisper Crossing Ranch in Kiowa scans the available cows.







wasteland. In their every sinew they carry the ghost memory of the glory days when they rumbled across the vast prairie in a living floodwater.

Top breeders from the Rocky Mountain region as well as Texas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Michigan, and Maine mill around the pens set in the rolling green countryside of the Black Forest, just outside of Colorado Springs. The Select Sale is one of several annual events throughout the year that bring Texas longhorn breeders together, a combination of block party, gossip session, and marketing expo. The ranchers swap lies, catch up on old friends, grouse over the price of hay, and hatch dating plans for each other's cows and bulls.

The two longhorn registry organizations, the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America and the International Texas Longhorn Association, list more than 120 Colorado breeders, and members say there are a few dozen more that (Continued on page 160)

GOING, GONE Left: Auctioneers call for bids that will range from several hundred dollars to \$7,500 at today's event. This page, clockwise from left: Vanguard auctioneer Eddie Wood of Pay Day Ranch in Wynnewood, Oklahoma host's the day's sale. Ranchers Gary and Kay Cole break and train their longhorn steers to ride in parades and events. Show organizer Jim Hutchinson eyes the the cattle awaiting the gavel.

Legend of the Longhorn

(Continued from page 145)

haven't joined either group. Longhorn outfits dot our state from the grassy Western Slope high-country valleys near Fruita, Ordway, and Pagosa Springs to the eastern plains around Colorado Springs, Elizabeth, and Bennett.

Some ranchers have come to buy, some to sell, and some just to hoist a few with their old compadres in the trade. Texas twangs spike the air as breeders jaw about the drought and catch up on who is AI'ing (artificially inseminating) whom. These folks may live and breathe longhorns, but most have fallback careers—dentist, financial adviser, engineer, gynecologist—or have retired well enough to finance their passion.

And a grand passion it is, too. Ask any of the ranchers soaking up the cowy atmosphere what first drew them to the breed and keeps them at it decade after decade, and they get a dreamy look. The word “love” often surfaces.

Dr. Ron Jones and his wife, Jo, raised Gunman, a famous longhorn sire, at the Salida ranch where they've been running Texas longhorns for about 20 years now. “Why do it? Well, we get a better high out of this than cocaine or morphine,” laughs Jones, a retired dentist.



For these seasoned ranchers, the longhorn is a living link to their nostalgia for the old West. Like the longhorns themselves, these westerners are a fiercely independent breed apart—man and beast alike carrying on the traditions of a vanishing culture.

The longhorn can lay rightful claim to being the first cattle ever to set hoof on what is now the U.S.A. Historians relate that on Christo-

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT Ranchers Joe and Sue Knowles worry that “horn mania” is a trend that will weaken the breed.

pher Columbus' second voyage to America, in 1493, the explorer packed along a nice bunch of long-horned Spanish cattle for his ranch on the island of Santo Domingo, today the Dominican Republic. They were work cattle, bred for their docile dispositions and trained to

pull plows and wagons and build roads.

Over the decades, they made their way to the mainland. Coronado in 1540 gathered over 500 head, plus thousands more hogs, sheep, and goats, to provision his northward expedition in search of the Seven Cities of Gold. Though these longhorns were the first cattle to enter present-day Texas, their impact was limited to the explorers' dinner plates.

It wasn't until the first Spanish mission was built near the Texas-Louisiana border in 1690 and supplied with 200 head that the longhorn was here to stay. A quarter-century later, thousands of cows, bulls, and horses were ranging the lands near the mission, according to J. Frank Dobie, author of *The Longhorns*. Meanwhile, descendants of the Pilgrims' English cattle were moving westward with their owners, pulling wagons, plowing the land, and providing milk. The Texas longhorn evolved from the crossbreeding of the two, with 80 percent Spanish blood and 20 percent from the more "mongrel" English cattle. The term "cowboy" was used to refer to the young Texas renegades who would raid Mexican border ranches by moonlight and drive their stolen longhorn herds northeast in a 24-hour dead run.

By the mid-1800s longhorns ranged by the

Soon the great cattle drives took herds north along the Goodnight-Loving trail that ran to railheads in Abilene, and Dodge City, and Denver. Only the rugged Texas longhorn could have survived those thousands of miles.

millions in a triumph of exceptional genetics that included natural disease resistance and good teeth, the ability to survive on nearly any vegetation in an often harsh land, spearlike horns to fend off predators, and superfertility combined with easy calf birthing. Most of them ran wild and were hunted like game. Dobie reports that when threatened by wolves the animals would form a circle with the calves in the center and, with a spiked ring of sharp horns thrust outward, bravely defend their young.

After the Civil War, the fighting men came

back to Texas and began to gather and brand the wild cattle. Soon the great cattle drives took herds north along the Goodnight-Loving trail that ran to railheads in Abilene, Dodge City, and Denver. Only the rugged Texas longhorn could have survived those thousands of miles.

"With their steel hoofs, their long legs, their staglike muscles, their thick skins, their powerful horns, they could walk the roughest ground, cross the widest deserts, climb the highest mountains, swim the widest rivers, fight off the fiercest bands of wolves, endure hunger, cold, thirst, and punishment as few beasts of the earth have ever shown themselves capable of enduring," writes longhorn historian Frank Dobie. From the late 1860s to nearly the turn of the century, an estimated 10 million head were driven north to satisfy the nation's beef hunger.

The vast, unfenced grasslands of the Great Plains, empty of buffalo by the end of the century, soon were filled with huge herds of longhorns that ranchers brought from Texas to Colorado and Nebraska and up to the Dakotas. But the cowboys and trail bosses could never have dreamt that soon such a hardy beast would be headed for extinction.

AT THE FIRST TAP OF THE AUCTIONEER'S microphone, cattlemen and their ladies break off their talk and amble toward their seats in the metal stands inside the large, enclosed, dirt riding arena at Latigo Trails. Most of the men wear white summer straw cowboy hats, pressed jeans, and starched, pearl-snap shirts. Dress is more varied in the women, from workaday T-shirts and jeans to fancy skirts and blouses decorated with turquoise jewelry.

The gavel will be manned by 84-year-old auctioneer and living legend Col. Eddie Wood, who sits on a high wooden dais above the pen where the cows will be shown, flanked by cattlemen and show organizers Stan Searle and Jim Hutchinson.

Wood, with a white thatch of hair and amused blue eyes, moves like a man who has landed on the ground a few times. As a long-time longhorn breeder himself, Wood's presence is considered a rabbit's foot for a successful sale by all concerned. He's so beloved by the other breeders that they recently pitched in to give him a shiny new, white Chevy 4x4 truck. "Leather interior, OnStar, it's got everything," he marvels. "I sell cattle for nearly 50 years and they pay you good; you sure don't expect that. It makes an old man cry. When I die, just put me in this truck and drive me off one of

They're the most incredible colors: deep cinnamon with white splashes, or sides bracketed top and bottom in white; creamy, solid dark toffee or butterscotch; black and brown brindled; white speckled with tan or red; solid black or white; deep chocolate brown; cookies-and-cream black and whites.

the stone canyons at the ranch."

Wood calls them out and the cows trot into the sale ring one at a time, heads up and saucy, turning like nervous beauty pageant contestants. They're the most incredible colors: deep cinnamon with white splashes, or sides bracketed top and bottom in white; creamy, solid

dark toffee or butterscotch; black and brown brindled; white speckled with tan or red; solid black or white; deep chocolate brown; cookies-and-cream black and whites.

And their faces. Heart-melting eyes and the sweetest look, contrasting paradoxically with those gigantic horns that curve out in aggressive double scimitars. Many of the cows come with calves tagging along. Just a few months old, they sprint into the ring and then stop short, gawking at all the gawkers.

As I watch them a feeling totally unexpected spreads humming through my skin. I can't take my eyes off these creatures. I realize: I must buy a longhorn.

Wood's auctioneer rat-a-tat-tat gets speedier. He's banging his gavel with each bid, and they're going fast, trotting in and out of the ring in a blur. He drawls into the microphone, "Look at the paint job on this one—yes, indeed, she's the right kind," and, extolling longhorn survivability, "she came off a pasture where a jackrabbit had to pack a lunch." In seconds the cow is sold.

My heart jumps in panic: I long for one of my very own. Some of these beauties are affordable—going for \$800 to \$900—plus many have calves, and they're even gotten themselves pregnant again. A three-in-one package.

"That's only \$300 apiece, less than you'd pay

for a freaking cockapoo,” I say to Paige Evans, a rancher friend who sits at my left. More than eager to be my enabler, she chimes in, “And you could keep them at our place!”

Paige got into longhorns—also by impulse—over a friend’s kitchen table. The friend was moving and couldn’t take her cattle, so Paige bought them on a whim. Her husband, Greg, away on a business trip, didn’t find out until days later that he had become a cattleman. From the original four cows of 10 years ago, Paige and Greg now run 90 head on 600 acres at their Whisper Crossing Ranch in Kiowa. Longhorns are about twice as prolific as other breeds, so my young pregnant cow and her heifer calf will become an actual herd in a flash.

The fantasy begins to churn. I’ve seen Paige, who is a little thing, wade into a melee of huge, hooking horns to feed a dozen cows cake right out of her hand. It’s like watching a magician’s sword act, the way the big girls jostle around, clanking their horns but never hurting Paige or each other. They have better manners than commuters on a New York subway. And each one has a name and a personality all her own.

Into the sale ring frisks a gorgeous girl named Mallory’s Diamond. Only two and pregnant, she’s a sweet-faced black and white paint. She’s the one. The bidding starts pretty low, and I

determine she will be mine. But then I realize I don’t have a bidding card to hold up. And neither does Paige, having wisely decided thus to inoculate herself against auction fever.

Gradually I shake off the lingering spell, shocked at the pervasive power of this enchantment. And it’s not just me. People tumble hard for these animals and then they become collectors; it’s the very addiction to which Ron Jones confessed.

Yet beyond the wallop of star appeal, sound practical reasons can be cited to breed Texas longhorns. Due to their outstanding genetics, honed over five centuries of survival in the wild, they’re nearly maintenance-free. The longhorn is naturally disease-resistant, so they usually don’t need expensive doctoring or antibiotics. While most cattle are particular about dining, longhorns will eat weeds, leaves, scrub, and even cactus. They’re gentle and easy to handle, and yet fiercely defend their young from predators.

But the most important trait in beef breeding is fertility, plus the ability to have calves easily. Longhorns excel at reproducing: In a study of 11 different breeds, Texas longhorns were found to have the highest unassisted birth rates, at 99.7 percent. And because can they live longer than other breeds, they have far more calves, often



COW FOLK Former *Western Horseman* Editor Randy Witte and wife, Marsha, who raise longhorns in Peyton, Colorado.



still reproducing into their 20s.

Jim Cavis was raising black Angus at his Lamar ranch when he bought a few Texas longhorns just out of curiosity. He became a believer the first time he saw a longhorn cow calve. “I was feeding them hay, and she just walked off a little and had her baby, and in less than half an hour she was back at that hay feeder, just fine.”

Most Texas longhorns are raised simply on grass and hay, without the taint of antibiotics, steroids, or feed additives. Their naturally lean meat has less cholesterol and fat than other breeds, benefits becoming increasingly important to a health-conscious public. According to Texas A&M studies, longhorn ground beef has about half the calories as regular ground beef, and only about two-thirds of the cholesterol. Breeders generally conduct a good business selling meat—whether by the quarter or half carcass or as vacuum-packed steaks, roasts, and ground beef—to a circle of friends and acquaintances that may number from a dozen to over 100 families. The animals are processed at a local FDA-approved packing plant.

Ironically, it was this natural leanness of the longhorn, so prized today, that nearly spelled its demise over a hundred years ago, when fatter was better. Imported English “fat” breeds like the Hereford had become more common, and cattle ranchers found a more profitable animal resulted by breeding them with the native longhorns. But it wasn’t beef they were after. In an era when candles provided the major source of light, animal fat, rendered to

EASY, FELLA Despite fearsome horns on cows and bulls alike, the Texas longhorn is known for its gentleness.

make tallow for candles, was the creature’s most valuable asset. The cattle were bred for the most tallow-producing genetics, and that left the longhorn out.

By the turn of the century, dwindling marketplace demand and the loss of historic trails to the fencing of open lands had brought the huge cattle drives to a halt. Crossbreeding had nearly obliterated the true Texas longhorn. In the 1920s, some Texas cattlemen became concerned by the looming disappearance of the state’s most iconic resident and pressured the federal government to preserve the Texas longhorn.

Congress appropriated \$3,000, which two rangers used to piece together a small herd for the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. Another herd was established at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Nebraska. In the 1940s, J. Frank Dobie and longtime breeder Graves Peeler tracked down a few dozen head, which were relocated from private herds to three Texas state parks: Lake Corpus Christi, Lake Brownwood, and Fort Griffin. When the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America (TLBAA) was formed as a breed registry in 1964, fewer than 1,500 head of genuine Texas longhorn cattle existed, including the Texas and federal herds. But thanks to their remarkable fertility, well over a quarter million now are registered, according to the TLBAA website.

The highest priced cow at the Rocky Mountain Select Sale, a three-year-old hottie named Peaches, white with cinnamon brown shading and spots, brings \$7,500. The most valuable longhorns, like Peaches, combine outstanding pedigrees with huge horn size; “loud” color is good, too. In a business where anything above break even is considered success, everyone is looking to hit the big jackpot with an exceptional animal.

At the Legacy Sale in Fort Worth, the pinnacle of the top-money auctions, Paige and Greg Evans’ super cow, Joy Ann, banged the gavel at \$50,000, while the highest priced cow went for a showstopping \$150,000. Both animals boasted gigantic horns that buyers know they’d pass on to their progeny—Joy Ann’s horn measures over 70 inches tip to tip. The horns evolved for defense, but now breeders are on a quest for a flashy look.

“It was pretty thrilling because now we can pay our feed bill,” says Paige. “But who knows—some day these cows may need outriggers to manage their horns.”

Ranchers are increasingly focused on breeding for longer horns. Their genetic success is measurable: Today’s trophy horn starts at about 70 inches, compared with a few decades ago when 35 inches to 40 inches was considered big. A longhorn head and shoulder mount with horn from the 70s on up to a colossal 90 inches can go for \$2,200 or more, while just skull and horns can bring up to \$1,000.

But some breeders like Joe Knowles, who, with wife, Sue, runs a huge spread in New Mexico, contend that size emphasis—he calls it hornmania—is taking the breed in the wrong direction. “It’s a fad that’s gonna be over with, like the emus and the potbellied pigs, or big fins on Cadillacs,” says Knowles, a retired family-practice physician who has been raising cattle for more than 60 years. “Mama Nature has given us a genetic goldmine in the Texas longhorn that will help cattlemen produce better beef, but with the big dollars going toward bigger and bigger horn, we are losing some of those traits.”

Knowles quotes internationally known bovine expert Dr. Jan Bonsma, who warned that genetic selection for a single trait would result in undesirable characteristics as well. According to Knowles, those drawbacks include reduced fertility and milk production in the Texas longhorn cow.

Alan Clemmensen has also seen reproductive changes, both in Texas longhorns bred for the beefier body that wins show ribbons, and in those bred for longer horns. A fifth-generation Walsenburg rancher, Clemmensen judges longhorn shows all over the West, and has also

served as supervisor of the Longhorn Show at the National Western for many years. He reports that some breeders have huge-horned cows that skip a year or so of calving, or which don't have their next calf as quickly as their herd-mates.

The future of the breed lies in introducing the unique longhorn genetics into commercial beef herds like Angus and Hereford for more efficient lean beef production, according to ranchers like Knowles and Clemmensen. Knowles has developed a cross of longhorn and French Salers cattle (called salorn) that is an excellent beef producer as well as inheriting the longhorn longevity and other desirable traits. Clemmensen crosses his longhorn bulls with Hereford heifers to reap genetic advantages.

Ken Richardson, president of the TLBAA local affiliate, the Mountains and Plains Texas Longhorn Association, says there's been a steady increase of longhorn producers in our state during the last several years. Longhorns and Colorado are an ideal match, as the animal's famous adaptability is put to good use in the state's climate extremes. The hardy longhorns shrug off Colorado's wintry blasts, which can bring other breeds to their knees, and they don't mind scorching summers. According to Richardson, longhorns don't eat as much as Herefords or Angus, and they can get by on

less. During Colorado's drought spells, when grass becomes scarce, the longhorn's ability to consume nearly anything makes it a survivor. These cattle even use their horns as shovels to dig up roots to eat. Observes Richardson, "When you can put five cows where three cows normally would be, it does help economically—you can run more head of cattle per acre."

Strangely, the march of the suburbs has also heightened longhorn popularity. "In the increasing urbanization of the West, thousands of acres of Colorado land are being turned into subdivisions or commercial use every year," points out Monument longhorn rancher Stan Searles. "As cattlemen are crowded out of irrigated valleys to more arid and marginal rangelands, the Texas longhorn is the cow that can deal with the limited forage." The vigorous longhorn will descend steep canyons for water and climb mountainsides to graze; "most other breeds don't have the athletic ability to do that," adds Searle.

And then there's that bovine charm. "They have personality," asserts Richardson. "After you've been around longhorns a while, you're not real interested in those cookie-cutter cattle."

Longhorns can also be marketed multidimensionally, while most other breeds have just one use: on the end of a fork. Besides being favored

for showing, the beef market, and their unique hides and horns, some are bought as lawn ornaments to stand around in the pasture and impress the neighbors. Longhorns' star quality and good manners also make them a favorite of film producers for ads and movies. So amiable are they that breeders Gary and Kay Cole trained several of their 2,000-pound-plus steers to ride in rodeo grand entries and events like the National Western Stock Show's 100th Anniversary Parade down 17th Street last winter. Ranchers also sell stock for cutting competitions, steer roping, and other rodeo action.

Whatever its use, the noble Texas longhorn's place as an emblem of the American West is secure. Celebrated Western artist Charles M. Russell, who spent many a rugged year cowboying among the early herds, drew a longhorn skull as part of his signature on every painting. Russell pays tribute in his book, *Good Medicine*: "When it comes to making the beautiful, Ma Nature has man beat all ways from the ace. I have made a living painting the horned animal that the old lady I'm talking about made.... I would starve to death painting the hornless deformity that man has made." ▲▲

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