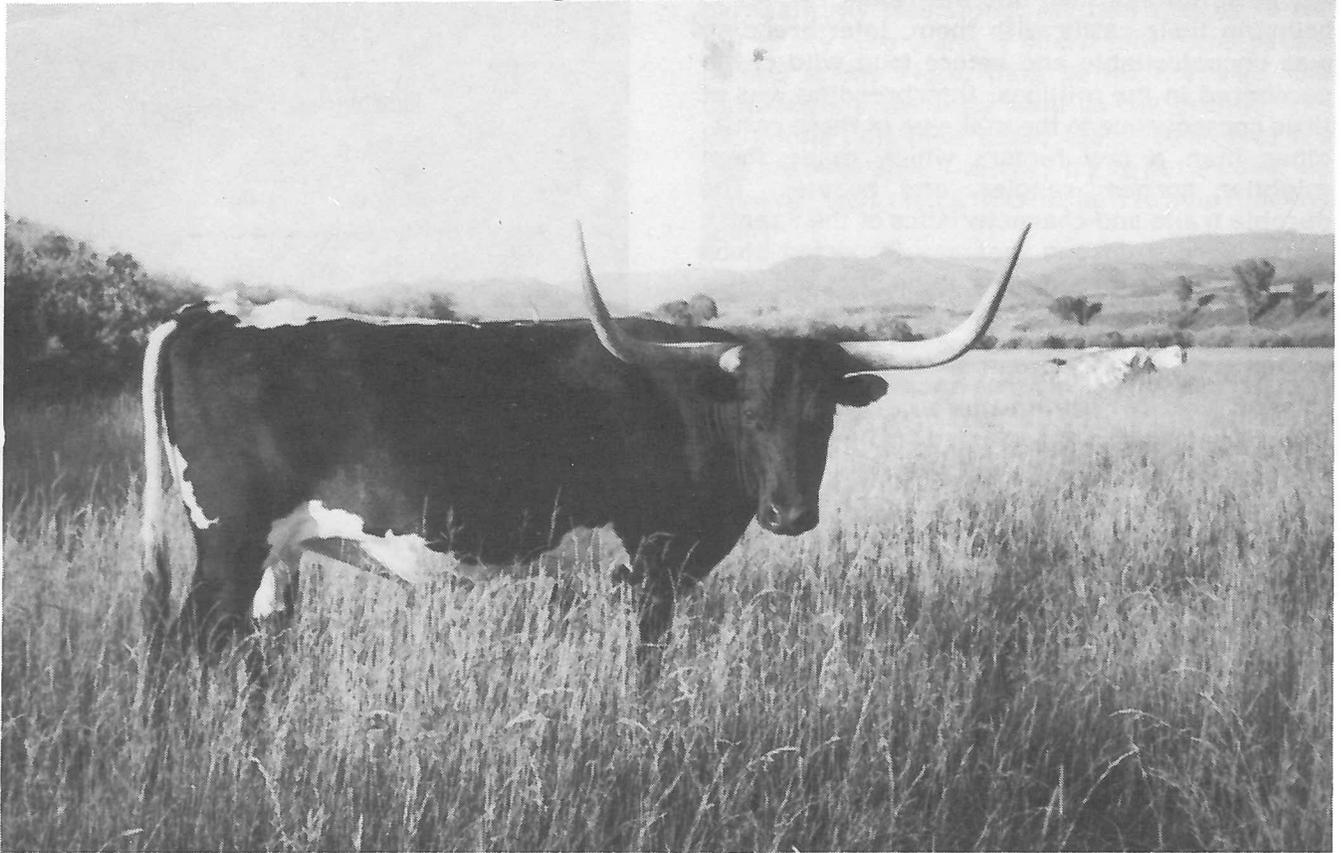


TEXAS LONGHORNS

By TY ZABEL & DAVID VANWINKLE



Freeloader

My family raises Texas Longhorns on our Lower Elk River ranch near Steamboat Springs. After my dad purchased our first Texas Longhorns I really became interested in them and their history. I did a research paper on the Longhorn for an English class and this year decided to do an article on them for Three Wire Winter. David VanWinkle and I talked with Curtis Zabel about his cattle, but first here is a little history on that legendary survivor of the past — the Texas Longhorn.

The Texas Longhorn has made more history than any other breed of cattle the world has ever known. The Longhorns were more than a breed — they were a race.

In 1521, a Spanish ship landed in a land called New Spain. Below decks, in the cargo hold, was a small group of calves. These cattle, known as Audalusion, were not the first cattle to set foot in the New World, but they were the first of their kind and the only ones to adapt to their new surroundings.

As Spanish explorers traveled North into what later became the United States, they trailed Spanish cattle with them. Many of these cattle

escaped or were abandoned to run wild and survive on their own. The highly adaptable Spanish cattle began spreading in all directions, providing food, clothing, and many necessities for not only the Spaniards, but the Indians as well.

By the year 1800 the cattle industry of the Southwest was on its way. Hundreds of thousands of Spanish cattle were in Southern Texas, exploding ever northward. The story of the Texas Longhorn and its place in history was beginning.

These cattle, because of their adaptability and toughness, expanded at a much faster rate over a greater area than the cattle of the English colonies in the East. The cattle lived a life of the survival of the fittest. They were shaped by nature. From natural selection and adaptation to the environment, they are the only cattle breed, without aid of man, that is truly adapted to America. They were able to graze marginal range lands. They had high fertility. Living as wild animals good mothering instincts developed as the threat of predators was always present. They developed a long life span and a resistance

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to most diseases. All of these characteristics were developed without the aid of man.

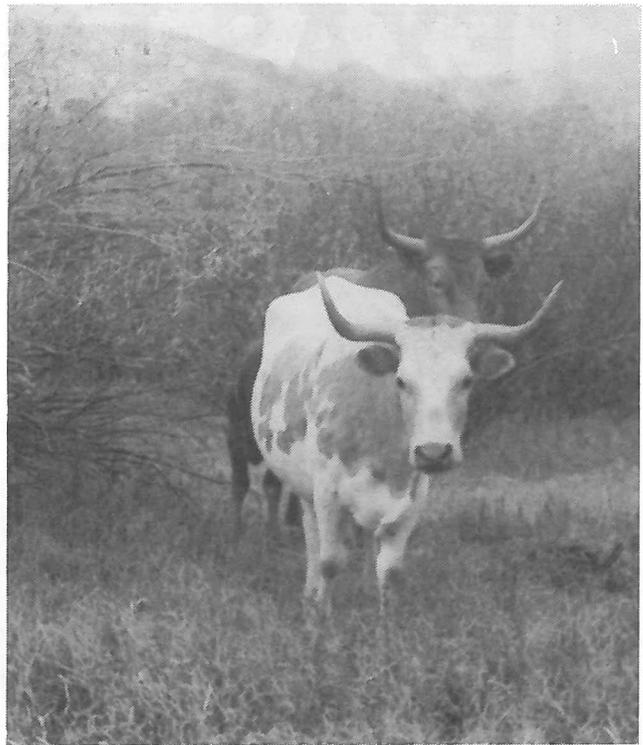
Around 1800 interbreeding first started with Spanish cattle and European cattle in Louisiana. As the settlers pushed into the Texas Territory, bringing their cattle with them, inter-breeding was uncontrollable and before long wild cattle numbered in the millions. Interbreeding was of little consequence to the make-up of these cattle, other than a few factors which made them mightier horned, rangier, and heavier. The durable traits and characteristics of the Spanish cattle were so strong that any imported blood was merely absorbed. One thing that did alter was the color of these longhorned Texas cattle. The shadings and combinations of colors were so varied that no two were alike.

South Texans, having more cattle than they knew what to do with, started trailing herds of cattle to the Gold Fields of California, Missouri, New Orleans, and other points as the cattlemen tried to establish a market. These herds of cattle varied from pure Spanish to crossbred animals which were predominantly Spanish. No distinction was made between these cattle — they were simply “Texas Longhorns.”

Established ranching operations were just beginning to flourish when the Civil War started. The war years were disastrous for the cattlemen. Ranches were left in the hands of women and children and only a small percentage of the cattle found a market.

After the Civil War men returned home to find abandoned ranches and homes. These men had no money, but they had hope and tens of millions of Longhorns just waiting to be rounded up. These Texans turned these cattle into gold.

The Texas Longhorn was the foundation stock of the American cattle industry, but translating these wild cattle into hard cash meant an epic



struggle between man, beast, and the elements — from this grew the romantic legends of the Western Cowboy.

Following the Civil War an estimated ten million Texas Longhorns were driven north to fatten on the lush Midwestern grass or to be shipped directly to the beef-hungry East.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw many changes in the range cattle industry. Thousands of head of improved breeding stock were being shipped to the plains area with no other end in sight than the total overstocking of the range. Many cattle were dying of the Texas Fever and this was blamed on the Texas Longhorn. Laws were passed limiting the movement of the Texas Longhorn and a massive propaganda campaign was launched against them. Orders were even given to shoot them on sight in some areas if they were found running wild. The hardy Texas Longhorn was definitely on his way out.

Soon sundown came for the Texas Longhorn. By 1920, with the introduction of the newer improved English breeds, the Texas Longhorn was closer to extinction than the buffalo.

Back in 1916 two forest service rangers noticed the diminishing numbers of Texas Longhorns. These two men, Will Barnes and John Hatton, approached the United States government with plans to preserve this gritty breed of cattle. Will Barnes thought the Wichita National Forest in Oklahoma would be a great place to put together a herd of government Texas Longhorns. This area was long a territory of the Texas Longhorn. On January 17, 1917, the Congress of the United States came through with \$3,000 for the purchase



“They are a browser and a traveler.”

and maintenance of a herd of Texas Longhorns at the Wichita National Forest.

The two forest rangers themselves were to select the Texas Longhorn cattle most typical of the breed for the herd. The team was warned that finding a Texas Longhorn bull would not be easy. Most cattlemen were then concentrating on the English breeds of cattle and therefore any Texas Longhorn bulls were steered. The men were to buy a herd of 24 animals: 18 cows, 3 bulls, and 3 steers. The job of buying the Texas Longhorns was almost impossible. Motion picture companies were paying more for the animals than the government could afford. Several pioneer ranchers had maintained small private herds, mostly out of a sense of history, and eventually the two men put together a fine herd of Texas Longhorns.

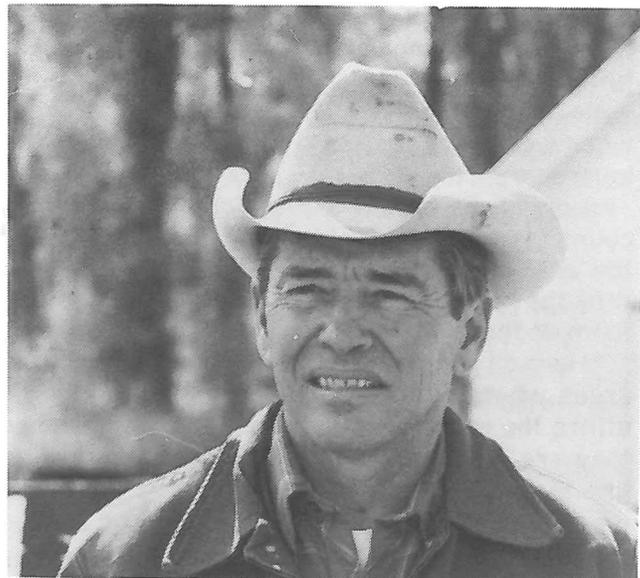
Gradually more breeders started raising private herds, recognizing the value of the Texas Longhorns. The need grew for breed standards and a direct line of communication among the Texas Longhorn breeders. In 1964, the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America was created. Since the breed registry was formed, the Texas Longhorn has experienced a steady growth in popularity. The genetic gold mine of the Texas Longhorn — unrecognized for nearly a century by the commercial cattle industry — has gained tremendous acclaim in the past few years.

Curtis Zabel has always been interested in Texas Longhorns. We asked him why he started raising them. "I always wanted a Longhorn because of our western heritage and they are the cattle that formed the American cowboy, which has always interested me. And besides that, I'm intrigued by their horns.

"About 1965 or somewhere along there I talked to Darol Dickinson about buying some heifers, but at that time I didn't have the money and my job wouldn't have allowed me to have them. I kinda gave up on getting any until 1980. We were out at the Denver Stock Show at the Texas Longhorn sale. I didn't have any intentions of buying one, but as the sale went along I couldn't stand it any longer so I bought a registered cow. My wife and two boys thought I'd lost my mind.

"Most of the older cows I have in the herd I bought over on the Eastern Slope, around the LaVeta area. One of them I bought from a breeder that lives at Elk Springs. About half our cows were bought by private treaty and half at auctions — raised my arm once too often, I guess.

"There isn't much difference in raising the Longhorns as compared with the other cattle we have, which are Hereford. I don't dehorn them and they are pretty self-sufficient because they don't get sick very often. That's one good thing about a Longhorn, they are almost disease resistant.



Curtis Zabel

"Some of the good things about Longhorns is that their calves are small at birth, their longevity, their disease resistance, and their ability to browse and utilize the range.

"The longevity of most cattle is maybe 10 or 12 years, maybe up to 14 years. The Longhorn cows have been known to breed and raise good calves up through 20 years. In fact I have a picture of a 32 year old cow that's had 29 calves.

"The Texas Longhorn is known as 'the cow too tough to die'. When we brought the first ones over here to Steamboat the winter was pretty cold and they were humped up all winter. They got used to it and next year had more hair. Here a few years ago we bought a bull at the Denver Stock Show and it was really cold here in Steamboat. It was after dark when we got home and turned him out into the pasture. The next morning I couldn't see him anywhere and



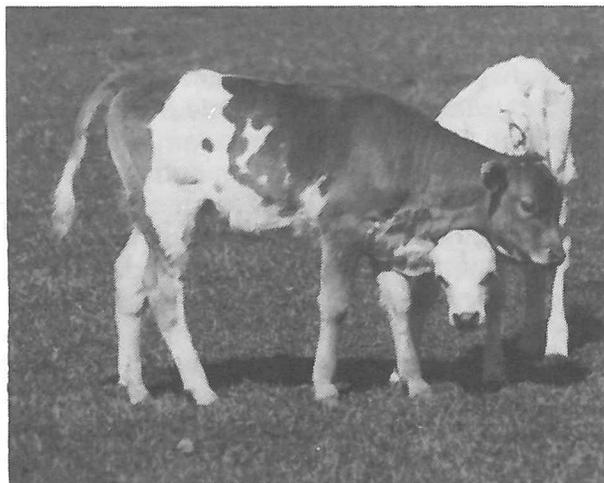
"Cars are always stopping on the road."

thought he'd left the country. That's another thing about Longhorns; they aren't dumb. He'd jumped into the corral and went into the barn with the 4-H calves. Every night after that whenever it got very cold he was waiting at the barn door.

"Longhorns might do better in a warmer country, but they adapt to the cold too. I do think the cold affects the horn growth. Some of the time the horns will freeze. We had two or three of them do that and the tips of the horn will fall off.

"Here on our place we have lots of grass, but in areas where the feed is scarce the Longhorns utilize the range better than most cows because they are a browser and a traveler. They really like to get into the willows and the brush up on the hillside over across the river. They go around this pasture out here at least once a day. They travel a lot.

"The Longhorns don't eat as much hay as the other cattle. I would say our Hereford cows eat about 25 pounds of hay a day apiece. A Longhorn eats about 20 pounds, but then the Longhorn isn't



same reason a person likes to buy Western art — it's a part of our Western heritage that is disappearing.

"Right now the market for Longhorn-cross calves is not good. They get probably five to ten cents a pound less than the other breeds, but I can remember not too many years ago that the same thing happened to the Charolais and other crosses, but it's been proven that the Longhorn crosses perform good in the feed yard. A lot of people don't like the color of them, I guess, but you don't eat color and if the meat is leaner, that's what the people want, isn't it?

"Some people say Longhorn meat is tastier. To me meat is meat and I honestly couldn't say that there is any difference. Ty had a crossbred calf for a 4-H calf and it was just as tasty and good eating as any other calf we've ever had.

"A lot of people talk about a skinny-hipped Longhorn cow, but I've seen a lot of range cows that our Longhorns will put to shame as far as meat, body length and size. There is good and bad cattle in every breed. All cattle have the



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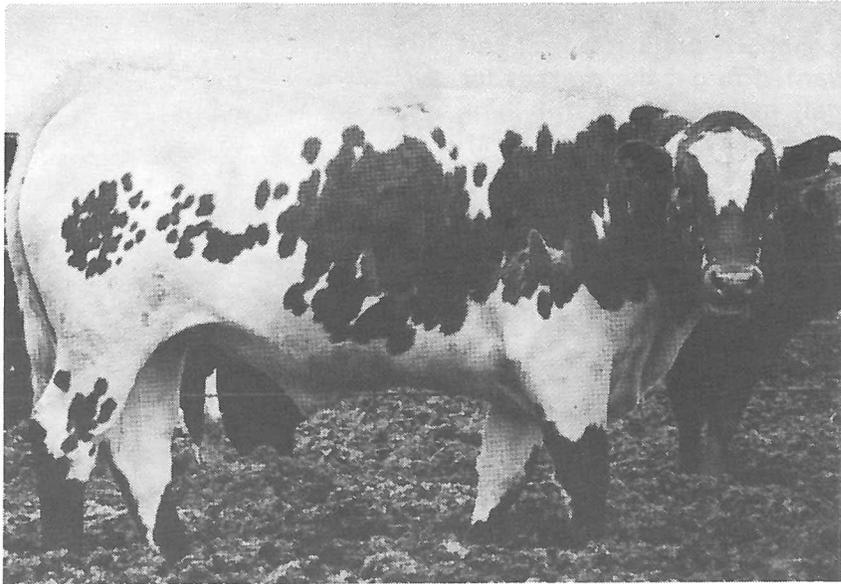
going to raise as big a calf as a straight Hereford. Everything is getting oriented so big anymore, like the 1200 or 1400 pound steers they butcher — that's too big. I think there is a trend to go back to a smaller type animal."

We asked Curtis about crossbreeding. "We crossbreed some Longhorn bulls with our Herefords. I think one good thing about the crossbred calves is that everybody is striving for leaner meat. They can get this from a Longhorn because they are naturally a lean cow. A range cow that is half-Longhorn would be a good range cow because of her ability to browse and travel, and they are really good mothers.

"I'd rather breed Longhorn to Longhorn because right now there is a market for the Longhorn roping calves. I'd like to keep them straight Longhorns just because of what they stand for. They are kinda a hand hold to the old West. Another reason I like them is because of the art work I do. I like the Longhorn for the



"Good mothering instincts developed as the threat of predators was always present."



"Longhorn crosses perform good in the feed yard."

same muscle structure; it's just like people. One might be short and fat and one tall and lean, but basically they have the same muscle structure and it's the same with cattle. I guess I kinda like the looks of a Longhorn. They are a little taller and have a little more daylight under them. I like a tall type animal rather than a short, compact, big-bellied one.

"I do think the good characteristics of the Longhorns carry over to the crossbreds. They are really hardy calves. In our particular cow herd the straight Longhorn calves are not as big as the straight Herefords. However, in some range cattle the Longhorn crossbred calves are bigger."

We asked Curtis if he sells any of his Longhorns. "I haven't really tried to sell any of my Longhorns other than the calves for roping calves. I kinda like to keep them for a small herd for us to enjoy. I'm not into it in a big way, but if I ever have an outstanding cow or bull I would probably try to promote it and sell it to a breeder. Right now there is not a real hot market

for them, but for awhile there was and some of the cows and bulls brought high prices. I know of a bull last summer that was sold for \$103,000.00. For the most part a cow that was worth \$4000.00 four or five years ago is probably worth about \$1500.00 now. They were really a hot item for awhile, but it's slowed down. For the last ten years an average cow was worth about \$3000.00. The top cows would go for maybe \$10,000.00 to \$20,000.00. Those that sold high had big horns, good conformation, and raised good calves. They had to have the ability to outperform themselves. Colorado probably has as many Texas Longhorn breeders as any other state, especially the Eastern Slope and southeastern corner of Colorado.



"There isn't much difference in raising Longhorns compared to other cattle."

Curtis' intentions were to get commercial cattlemen to use Longhorn bulls for first-calf heifers. "I really wanted to get the market for the bulls for first-calf heifers and I still think that's the way to go. If I ever have anymore first-calf heifers they will be bred to a Texas Longhorn bull. You don't have to watch them as closely. In fact, our heifers that were bred to Longhorn bulls were just turned out with the rest of the cows. Always before I kept them close where I could check them every two hours or so during the night. After breeding to the Longhorn bulls I have never had any problems. Not only that, but the Longhorn calf is a vigorous calf and gets up real quick and keeps after his mother until he gets something to eat. It's great for first-calf heifers because they have a small calf that grows fast. The heifer will have it easy and get up and claim it. The best thing of all is that she will breed back quicker. The heifers that we bred to Longhorn bulls are some of the first to calve the next year and always before they were some of the last ones to calve.

"For some reason the buyers don't want to buy the Longhorn-cross calves. I don't understand this because for two years in a row now the second-place carcass in the lightweight division at the National Western Stock Show has been a Longhorn-cross. It can't be because of the carcass. The feeders even admit that they have less sickness and the Longhorn calves can be fed out quicker than a lot of the other breeds. I think it's just because the people don't want to accept anything new, and I really can't understand the cattlemen. The way I look at it is, a live calf is better than a dead calf plus the fact you don't have to pull the calves or have a vet out to do a C-section, and in my book that overrides any dock in the price.

"Right now I can't be very optimistic about the cow business. I honestly don't look for it to get very good for several years, if it ever does. Right now most people aren't keeping heifers. In fact, there are a lot of people that will probably completely quit raising cows.

"For years now the cattle industry has been caught in a cost-price squeeze. Our changing economy is forcing new needs and demands on the cattle industry. With the demand for leaner beef and the emphasis on less fat in the diet I think the Texas Longhorn can play an important part in the future of the beef industry and could contribute to getting the beef industry back on its feet.

"We love our Longhorns and a lot of people come to look at them. Cars are always stopping up on the road, especially if "Freeloader" is close to the road. They are extremely intelligent and have a lot of personality. They are one of the most docile and gentle of all range-fed beef cattle, but you have to have a lot of respect for them."



'The cow too tough to die'

Bibliography for Introduction

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