

The *we* Family: Considered by Many the Breed 'Standard'



More than 300 years ago a cattle started appearing in the wilds of the southwest part of North America. Probably the remnants of old herds raised on Spanish missions in the New World. Herds left behind when missions were deserted. But these were now cattle that had to learn to survive on their own. Forage for food, avoid natural predators, give birth without assistance and wean and protect their young. No fences to keep them in a pasture, only vast miles of flat prairie, brushlands and swamps to roam. These were the first Texas Longhorns.

The breed developed from these early cattle of the wild and claimed as a genetic legacy those traits that many today are calling a "genetic gold mine" for the beef industry. Longhorns were domesticated in the early 19th century, but nearly lost entirely in the early 20th century by breeders not recognizing their valuable traits. The Longhorns were seen as lean, lanky and hard to fatten, not worth the pasture space. It was not until the federal government recognized the possibility of the Longhorn's extinction that an effort was made to save the breed. But the legislation appropriating money for the saving of the Longhorn was created to preserve an animal from extinction not to save a valuable genetic pool.

In 1920 U.S. Forest Service employees John H. Hatton and Will C. Barns began a several thousand mile journey to find cattle that fit the description of a Longhorn. After a search of seven years 19 cows and one bull determined to be purebred Longhorns were placed

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Cache, Okla., as seen from the top of Mount Scott.

on the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge in Cache, Oklahoma.

That is the tradition behind one of the fastest growing and most popular Longhorn bloodlines, the "WR," so named because of the WR brand the cattle wear. "There is little doubt about it," says Riemer Calhoun, a WR breeder from Mansfield, Louisiana. A mystique surrounds the cattle. "It (the refuge) just wets your appetite to buy them (WR Longhorns)," Calhoun says.

The appetite of both experienced cowmen and beginning breeders is sharpened by the fact that the "WR family" is believed to be a pure bred Longhorn line. The enthusiasm for government raised Longhorns, especially those raised on the Wichita Mountains refuge, among buyers at the WR Sale is evidenced by the prices the animals bring. This year the average selling price of the 300-pound heifers at the WR Sale was about \$1,800. Similar animals have been averaging about \$500 at other Longhorn auctions this year.

"I find that the new breeders seem more comfortable with the WR cattle than with any other because they just

"And these records are good, with the exception of one or two clerical errors," says former refuge biologist Gene Bartnicki. "I think that's why the WR are so popular with a lot of people, it's because of their pedigrees."

Many breeders feel comfortable with the WR family because they come from an environment similar to that of the Longhorn's ancestors. On the 61,500 acre government refuge a herd of 300 Longhorns roams free, foraging for food and calving without assistance from man. "Probably the WR are closer to nature than any of the other so-called families," observes Bartnicki. "The wildlife refuge up there has the policy to tend the animals in the balance of nature." Prior to his coming to the refuge in 1969 the Longhorns were given only white salt blocks, Bartnicki says, but later a few trace minerals were added to help supplement the animal's diet. "The WR is probably the most typical as to what the original Texas Longhorns looked like way back when," Bartnicki believes.

An expert looking at WR Longhorns can distinguish them from other lines

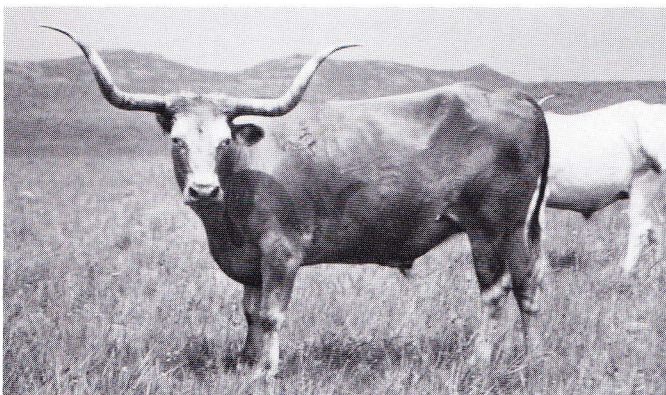
tend to have shorter legs than the other families.

Especially unique is the horn shape of the WR family. Typical WR horn shape is an upward twist in the horn with a continued outward growth. The horns seem to at times almost spiral outward. "Horn patterns might be one of the easier identifiable traits of the family," Anthony says. A good example of WR horns on a cow is Measles, owned jointly by Red McCombs and H.C. Carter, both of Texas. Measles was purchased from the refuge as a calf by Darol Dickinson in 1978, and today she boasts a horn span of 55 3/8 inches.

Most historians and breeders view the WR family as originating from the Longhorns of old Mexico. "I think that these WR cattle are probably as typical of the most typical family of Longhorns compared to what the original Longhorns were," Calhoun says. The average cow of the last century weighed about 850 pounds, Calhoun estimates, adding that the weight is about the same for WR Longhorn cows today. Their horns also look like pictures of the old Longhorns, he says. "I just believe they're the more natural, more real, authentic Longhorn cattle," Calhoun says. "But don't get me wrong, I love the Longhorns from all the families." But it is only WR branded Longhorns that Calhoun is adding to his herd.

Calhoun and his wife Marcia were big buyers at this year's WR Sale, taking home eight heifers and bringing their herd total to 32 branded WR Longhorns. "I'm going to wind up with just WR branded cattle in my pasture. In other words I'm going to have the same thing the Wildlife Refuge does." Calhoun has been buying only WR branded cattle for the past six years.

After each WR Sale, Dallas-based corporate financial consultant Robert Harrell prepares the "WR Index" that gives investors in WR Longhorns financial information about the sale and future prospects for investment. As a breeder using WR Longhorns in his program, Harrell has an interest in the breed and its success. Harrell has recently completed his analysis of the 1986 sale and despite a fall in sale prices, he remains optimistic about the future. The average price per lot this year was \$1,144, down 25% from (continued on page 36.)



This steer, wearing the refuge brand, is typical of WR Longhorns in head, horn and body conformation.

know beyond a shadow of a doubt if there is any pure strain of a Longhorn family it can certainly be proved in the WR cattle because of the detailed records they kept," Calhoun says.

The records have been kept on the herd at the refuge since 1927, but it was not until 1931 that the records began to be kept in a filing system. The records preserved such data as the sire and dam of each animal, its season of birth, what animals were sold and kept and even the color of each animal.

by their personal characteristics. Animals born into the refuge family tend to have a head that is smaller than that of the Peeler or Yates families, says WR breeder Bill Anthony. They also have a "different" look around the eyes, he adds. The frame of the WR Longhorn is larger than that of a Butler Longhorn but smaller than a Yates or a Peeler and somewhat less masculine. The hair of the WR is courser, thicker, and tends to have better coloring. The WR also

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W (continued from page 33.) last year's average of \$1,520. Since the 1983 sale the average price per lot has fallen about 70%.

Harrell predicts that this year's low is the bottom of decline in prices and now is the best time to invest in Longhorns. "That was the one thing that was encouraging about the sale, despite the fact that the average was down," he says.

Three other times in history the market has dropped like this: in 1934-36, 1954 and 1969. Today the same pattern exists, Harrell says, indicating an expected rise in prices. Cattle prices tend to follow gold and crude oil prices, maintains Harrell, adding that gradual increases in both gold and oil prices are signaling increases in cattle prices.

Harrell is trying to make the Longhorns work for him on his ranch as well as in his financial theories. His plan is to develop the optimum Long-



This refuge cow is a good example of the up and outward shape of WR Longhorn horns.

horn by combining the strengths of the WR cattle with the Butler and Yates families. His attraction to the WR comes from the family's long history of being fertile, rugged cattle. "They (refuge workers) cull rapidly if a cow misses calving during a season," Harrell says. With performance like that people know they are getting a quality product, he adds. "The

primary reasons people buy WR Longhorns is that they really represent the standard of the breed."

Supporting the claim as the breed standard is the WR family's heritage of a longtime, stable history on the refuge, backing by well-kept records, judicious culling and the demand and price they bring at auctions. "There is an assurance of quality that comes with a branded product," Harrell says.

Ask an experienced breeder of WR Longhorns if there is a mystique surrounding this family and you will probably get an answer like Calhoun's. "It's almost bigger than life if you want to put it that way," he says. But life for the cattle on the Wildlife Refuge is much the same today as it was for their ancestors more than 300 years ago. They still spend each day foraging for food on open prairie and range land, preserving for tomorrow a heritage that has lived inside of them for centuries.

