

# Fayette and Rita Yates Three Generations of Raising Texas Longhorns

by James Bloomquist



**A**sking Fayette Yates to tell how he followed the footsteps of his father and grandfather raising Texas Longhorn cattle is kind of like asking one of the Kennedys how he got into politics. You get the feeling that you've asked something you should have understood in the first place; something so natural it needn't be questioned, only accepted.

"Well, my granddaddy had 'em (Longhorns) first. He was born before the Civil War. Went up the Chisholm Trail. And, of course, my daddy had 'em. And I have 'em. "Some would say I've got a lot of 'em, some would say I don't. If you want me to put a number on it, I won't. I can't. You can't even find 'em all back in that brush."

"And what about your ranch?" asks the interviewer.

"What about it?" says Fayette. "Some people say it's little, some say it's big."

"Would you say you're retired, or semi-retired, or what?" begs the interviewer.

"Just tired," says Fayette. "Just tired."

Chuckling, you ponder the problem of defining Fayette Yates. You think: "there was no beginning, there is no end, there always has been, and will be, Yates Texas Longhorns?" But that's not the kind of thing you can put into print — neither are a good many of the words Fayette Yates has to say. His style is rough, but his aim is true and his words sincere. You may have heard that he can be difficult, cantankerous, witty, funny, charming,

critical, and fervent when talking about his Texas Longhorn cattle. Well, if he decides to be all those things, he's got a right to be. He represents the third generation of what many believe is the most influential name in Texas Longhorn history.



Fayette and Rita. The couple was married in 1982.

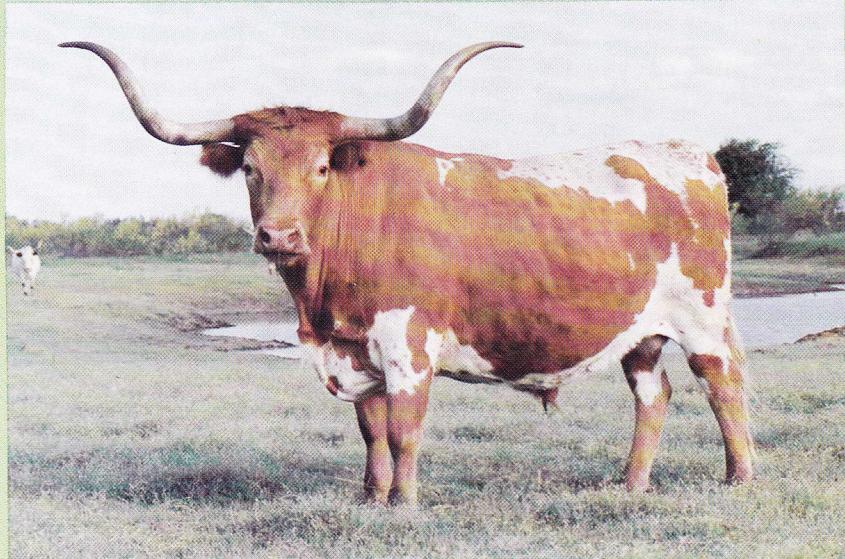
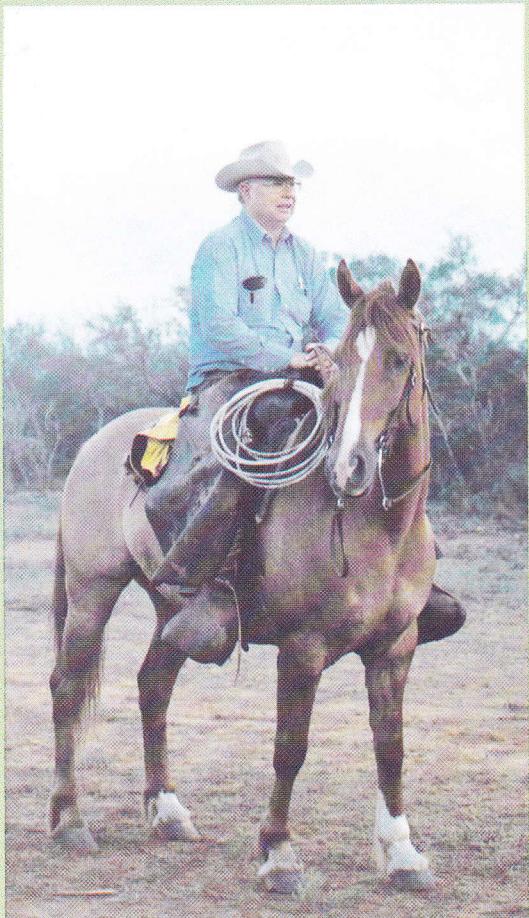
**Over 400 sections:** Fayette Yates' granddaddy who "went up the Chisholm Trail" was Ira Yates, founder of the famous Yates Oil Pool of Pecos County Texas. Ira Yates, Jr., known as "Cap," expanded the family's business interests into ranching, establishing vast ranch

holdings in the Big Bend Country of West Texas as well as in South Texas and New Mexico.

Cap Yates' ranching interests were diverse and the numbers involved were gargantuan. The family had several breeds of cattle, in addition to Texas Longhorns, "and had as many as 16 ranches around Texas and New Mexico," recalls Fayette. "And a couple of 'em, some of those big outfits, had over 400 sections (256,000 acres) in 'em. We had all breeds of cattle and a lot of 'em. We used to move 60,000 head a year out of Mexico."

Many Longhorn breeders feel that Yates Longhorns are among the purest blooded of the families, possessed of unique and definitive traits. With few familial outcrosses and sufficient longevity of generations, the family formed a close and concentrated genetic pool. Additionally, the Yates influence is strong throughout the breed and even has ties to the Marks and Peeler bloodlines. Cap Yates was personal friends with both Emil Marks and Graves Peeler and cattle trading among them was common. The WR herd was strongly influenced by Yates Longhorns also. Five foundation bulls were donated to the Wichita Wildlife Refuge by Cap Yates when the Refuge established its Longhorn herd. Says Fayette, "a lot of those WR cattle are as much as 15/16 Yates."

**A Bloom and A Sticker:** Today, at age 64 and despite his joking, Fayette Yates is semi-retired. He and his wife, Rita, live "in town," in Abilene, Texas, away from the ranches and



*Left: Fayette on a favorite working ranch horse. "They oughta have about half-Spanish blood for toughness."*  
*Above: "Toyah," a Yates Texas Longhorn bull.*

the rancher's life. Fayette and Rita maintain two of the Yates ranches, one in South Texas and another in West Texas, where they keep an undeterminable number ("a handful") of Texas Longhorn cattle "to play with."

From a previous marriage, Fayette has one daughter, Ellen, 22, and also three grown stepchildren, Toddi Davis, Cindy Darby, and Brad Caskey. Rita has two children, Lori Wedeking, 19, and Ricky Wedeking, 23. Fayette met Rita in 1976 and the two were married in 1982. Rita was something of a city girl before she met Fayette, but to talk to her today, one could hardly tell. Both she and Fayette are "animal lovers." Their menagerie includes pea fowl and guinea hens, geese, ducks, horses, and burros. "We raised one burro on a bottle at home until he got so ornery we had to send it to the ranch," laughs Rita. She and Fayette also share a love of antiques and western art.

Another fond pastime of Fayette's is his collection of Texas Longhorn and wild game trophies. "I had several hundred of them once in a big room we had at the ranch in West Texas," says Fayette. "When I moved here, somebody broke in back there and stole several hundred of them." Fayette is now restoring the collection, which includes Longhorn horns and skulls, entire heads, and, most recently, an entire steer.

The two ranches which Fayette still operates are run by anywhere from two hands to 15 each at roundup, Rita describes. "They're very large, thousands of acres," says Rita. "And they're not *near* anything. I mean, as far as you can see, for miles, that's how far they stretch." The South Texas ranch — it has a Pearsall, Texas address — is described by Rita as "usually hot and dry with a wet season lasting generally a couple of months." The South Texas ranch "is always hot and dry but also has a short wet season. It's some of the best ranch land in the United States. I love it there. Everything's got a bloom and a sticker on it."

**Damn Scarce:** He is "semi-retired." The *semi* means he still has more Texas Longhorn cattle than he can count ("I don't know how many there are. Some of 'em get back in the brush and you never even see 'em.") and strong feelings about the breed he has known all his life. It's tough to get him to talk but when he does there's much to hear. "I'm not trying to run around and sell cattle. I don't want to get into all this atmosphere of selling. I'm not trying to compete with anybody. I just raise 'em for my own enjoyment, give a few for gifts, and send a few to market."

Fayette is upset by what he sees as a departure from the "traditional" or "old type" Texas

Longhorn by breeders of recent years. "The real old time, old type Longhorn is getting damn scarce," he says emphatically. Speaking of the cattle his father bred, he rambles out a sketchy checklist of "true old type Longhorns — *Yates* Longhorn" characteristics. "They gotta have a good shaped horn. They've gotta have some shape to them. Some people talk about a 'Texas Twist' in the horn and I don't think they've ever *seen* a Texas Twist. Some of these horns will come out, go down and then come up and people will call it a 'Texas Twist.' Well hell, that's not a *twist*. That's just a little ole curve. You want a *twist* in the horn, a complete rollover. A *twist*."

Fayette feels too much emphasis is placed on coat color. "It's not that important. It's pretty to look at and that's why it's got popular. But these old-timers that went up The Trail, hell I've *talked* to 'em, you know? And these cattle, the old-time ones, were *all* colors. But the biggest majority of 'em were light reds, reds, duns and brindles, and some black-and-whites."

"They oughta have pretty decent bodies on 'em too," continues Fayette. "But not *too* big. Nor should they be too small like some of 'em that don't have as much body as a Jersey. They should be somewhere in between." Conformation, according to Fayette, "is not something I can *tell* you and have you understand. It's just something I *know*. Maybe I could show you and you could learn what I mean but it's just something about these cattle that you *know*. They stand out. When they're right, they stand out and you know it."

Fayette's emphasis on horn and horn shape is a carryover from Cap Yates' philosophies. "Daddy would never even keep a cow that didn't have a twist in her horns and he'd never keep a bull from a cow that didn't have two or three twists in her horns." An individual,



Above left: "Jake," a Yates steer, notice the twist in the horn. Above right, "Pet" a Yates cow also has twist in her horn.

Above: Yates cow "Majosa." Says Fayette, "they're the best cattle. They live longer and they have more calves."

to Fayette, is more important than her pedigree. Regardless of the breed, Fayette says, the dam is the most important side of the chart. "I'd rather see the dam than the sire any day. And when you're picking a sire you pick him by looking at the cow, his dam. See what I mean?"

Fayette has "forgotten about more Longhorn cattle than most people will ever get a chance to see" and his breed testimonials are well qualified. "They're the best cattle," he says. "They live longer, have more calves, and there's not as many sterile as in some of these other breeds." The oldest Longhorn he's seen was a cow, still producing at age 29.

"The old cow that's bred good, that's had calves up in age, I take her calf off her about a week old and put it on a nurse-cow. That way the old cow gets back up on her feed and breeds again. I'd try to breed them back on the first cycle. You get five or six more calves that way."

Fayette breeds his heifers at 15 months of age. "I've had better luck that way than any other way. You get another calf that way. I've heard some people say if you breed them as yearlings, sometime in their lives they'll miss a calf. But if you wait 'til they're two, you've started out missing a calf. And most of those I bred as yearlings had a calf every year."

Fayette is very proud of the many trophy steers he has had over the years. The longest set of horns he's had a steer grow were seven feet, eight inches, on a 12-year-old steer. Elaborate horns are a Yates trademark. "Why, granddaddy had a cow that lacked two inches of having a six-foot spread," he recalls.

Fayette advises, where horns are concerned, there's no rule of thumb. Some cattle don't show a great deal of growth "until they get some age on 'em. Then some cattle's horns'll grow real fast, then quit. I've even had some

steers that at 17 or 18 years of age, will all of a sudden start growing horns three or four inches more."

Both Fayette and Rita show their Longhorn steers. They are familiar faces with their prized animals at Ft. Worth, Denver, Austin, Pueblo, and Phoenix, as well as other shows. They maintain a circle of Longhorn community friends, across the country. Fayette will also take on Longhorn newcomers to "tutor" in his ways of breeding. One such couple, Ed and Virginia Paynter, have been visiting Fayette for "Longhorn lessons." "I'm showing them the right kind of cattle to pick out," he says. "Showing them the differences in types. They caught on in six weeks time." Fayette's general advice to newcomers: "Well, on any cattle or horse operation you're getting into, you've got to love it to do it. If you don't, don't do it."

**A Stampede Or Two:** A recurring theme of Fayette Yates, whether he's discussing horses, cattle, or man, was toughness. He talked about horses, hardy mixed breeds developed for ranch work. "Hell, we used to have a lot of them. One time we had over 3,000 mares." But Fayette's ideal horse, ideal *tough*, working ranch horse is a mixed bag of "Morgan and Arabian, a little Thoroughbred, a little Quarter, and then about half Spanish (mustang) for toughness."

"Then you've got a good horse. They might buck you off a few times but that's okay. They've gotta be able to handle hard work. Way out in West Texas, down in South Texas, in that brush and thorns and cactus and stuff — in Texas there's swamp, and desert and mountains — well it takes a good strong



horse." He launched into a memory of catching wild horses. "We'd rope 'em, or run 'em til they'd tire, or corner 'em near water and catch 'em that way."

So he talked about toughness and though he still tried to make his voice sound gravelly and ornery, it wasn't working. He'd let the bite out of his bark and had put the author at ease with the conversation, leaving only the sheer marvel of his story. His days as a cattleman are something many of us only imagine — real, hard, sun, wind, leather, panorama of land and horses and cattle. He had a half a century or more of experiences. Sleeping out on the range under a saddle blanket, riding for days, leaving on a horse at 3:00 a.m. to return at 11:00 that night. "I wore the seat out of a lot of Levis from ridin,'" he laughed. Why, he'd even been in a stampede or two in his day. "I was born up there on Fort Stockton," he had said, remembering and searching for details to make us see his life more clearly. "I went up and down that Pecos River dozens of times as a schoolboy with my father. And I followed the chuck wagon out into New Mexico, to ranches we had out there." He pauses, recalling so much more, but only says, "well, like I said, I seen lots of cattle."