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PHOTOS available from Biological Survey

Texas Longhorns on Federal Areas Recall Frontier Days

Probably fewer than 250 real Texas longhorn cattle are in existence today, the Bureau of Biological Survey reported to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, yet once nearly the whole plains country from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border was theirs.

The largest herd now is at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, near Cache, Oklahoma, where about 145 of these picturesque animals roam the ranges under the Biological Survey's protection. Eighteen longhorns are on the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve near Valentine, Nebraska; and others are in private ownership.

The cattle at the Wichita refuge descend from 30 longhorns brought to the area in 1927, when it was administered by the Forest Service. One member of that original herd from the coastal plains of Texas still lives--"Old Red", a gaunt cow more than 20 years old.

"Buttercup", the next to the last survivor, died recently of old age. One of her sides was covered with the twisting, curling marks etched into her hide by former Mexican owners a quarter of a century ago. She bore more than eight calves during her 12-year stay at the Wichita refuge.

The saga of the longhorn goes back to 1521, when the first cattle were brought to American shores by Gregorio Villalobos, a governor-general sent to "New Spain". John Hatton, of the U. S. Forest Service and probably the outstanding living authority on longhorns, states that "these Spanish calves were the progenitors of the millions of longhorns that spread from Vera Cruz northerly over the coastal plains of Texas and the plains region of the Far West....They became the pioneers of our western cattle industry.."

After the Civil War these cattle were still numerous. Then livestock breeders, however, began raising heavier, beefier cattle, and by 1920 it became apparent that only prompt action could save the Texas longhorn from extinction.

One of the men who forcefully called attention to the fact that the longhorn was dying out and should be preserved was the late Will C. Barnes, public official, author, and one-time cowman. Probably to him more than to any other one man should credit be given for the preservation of the longhorn. The present Wichita herd is a monument to Will Barnes's efforts to save a remnant of this hardy breed.

Working for the Forest Service, Mr. Barnes and Mr. Hatton, who is still active in the organization, began a long trek in July 1927 in search of longhorns. The trip was financed by an appropriation from Congress, which was made at the behest of the late Senator John B. Kendrick of Wyoming. Not until the quest began did livestock breeders realize how close to extinction the longhorn was. The two foresters traveled more than 5,000 miles and examined more than 30,000 head of Texas cattle before they collected a herd of suitable specimens of the longhorn type.

Little by little, a herd of 20 cows, 3 bulls, 3 steers, and 4 calves was collected and shipped to the Wichita Refuge, in August 1927. From this nucleus

of 30 the herd has increased to 146. Animals showing undesirable characteristics have been weeded out, and now there are 16 bulls, 63 cows, and 67 steers of desirable type. To improve the herd and breed out foreign characters, typical longhorn bulls were purchased after much searching in central Mexico on two occasions.

Longhorns may be described as leggy, hardy, active animals with long keen horns and an aggressive disposition. In color they range from black, brindle, dun, spotted, buckskin, red, roan, and white to various combinations of these colors. Coarse hairs about the forehead and in the ears, and a fish-shaped prominence of the bone along the top of the rump, just back of a line across the hip bones, are special characteristics.

In size, longhorns seemed to vary with the locality. In Florida, 400 to 700 pounds was an average weight; in Old Mexico, they were not much larger; while in Texas the animals weighed from 500 to 1,200 pounds. On the Wichita Refuge, however, the longhorns weigh from 800 to 2,000 pounds, and two of the longhorn steers born on the refuge 11 years ago now tip the scales at 2,045 and 2,035.

Longhorns are well suited to the arid conditions of the southwest. These cattle will graze on rough hills where domestic cattle will not go and will travel greater distances to water than will the modern beef breeds.

Being susceptible to the dread Texas-fever tick, the strain began to disappear when ranchers in the Gulf Coast and lower Rio Grande regions began crossing their longhorns with Hindu, or Brahma, cattle. The Brahma acquired its place in the southwest through its resistance to mosquitoes, flies, and the Texas-fever tick.

Longhorns are not a scrub breed, as many people think. Under favorable conditions, these cattle will develop into large, often fat, animals. Ranger

William E. Drummond, an old-time cowpuncher who has carefully bred the Wichita herd for the last 12 years, claims that longhorns will butcher out as much meat to the 100 pounds of liveweight as domestic cattle.

Slow of growth, a longhorn requires 2 or 3 more years to attain maturity than do more desirable breeds. It keeps growing until 7 or 8 years old. As long as the animal grows, the horns continue growing. On record are horns with spreads of 6, 7, and even 8 feet from tip to tip.

Usually these cattle are surly, mean, and ready to fight on the slightest provocation. "Spots", a black-and-white spotted steer in the original Wichita herd, known as "the meanest animal in Oklahoma", attacked even cowboys on horse.

Some longhorns, however, become gentle and easy to handle. One Oklahoma rancher had a prize red steer--a huge animal with long, curled horns--that he shipped to fairs for exhibition. Each time the animal was returned, it was unloaded 12 miles from the ranch. Without being driven it would walk straight home.

Longhorns show many traits that differ from the beef breeds. When driven they string out and walk exceptionally fast instead of bunching up. Riders had to be in front, as well as behind the herd, to keep the cattle from running. Great herds were often driven as much as 30 miles a day without apparent injury.

Even in stampeding, the longhorns showed peculiar characteristics. Sometimes the animals would begin to mill, circling slowly in a packed bunch. Then they were easily frightened. A shout or loud talk often started a stampede. Longhorns stampeded as quick as a flash, moving as one animal even though bunched in a tight mass. To calm a milling herd, cowboys spoke in soft, low tones and frequently sang to quiet the animals.