

# A Refuge for the Longhorn

*By Judy Kaye O'Dell\**

In the summer of 1910, a trail herd of Texas steers was driven along the western edge of the Wichita National Forest. As Forest Supervisor Frank Rush watched from his horse, he saw that practically all of the animals were modern-bred range cattle. Yet one animal caught his eye—a long-legged, rangy, snow white steer with wide-spreading horns. When Rush recognized this steer as a real throwback to the fast disappearing Longhorns of earlier days, he quickly purchased the animal from the trail boss for eleven dollars. "Old Whitey," as he became known, was placed with the milch cows at the ranger station headquarters where he became very tame and was constantly photographed.

The Longhorns of the Old West were in 1910 a true anachronism—a relic of the past with no usefulness in the present. Improved stock, reduced range, and lack of popularity all combined to bring the breed to near-extinction. The hardy breed that had made possible the cattle industry of the Great Plains was rapidly becoming the victim of man's indifference to history and his interference with natural selection.

The ancestors of the Texas Longhorn were brought to the American Continent by the Spanish in the 1500s. These were aggressive, keen-horned Andalusian cattle which were bred for fighting. In the mild

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*The entry gate to the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve, a last refuge for rapidly disappearing wildlife from the Southern Plains (Courtesy Museum of the Great Plains).*

climate of the Southwest's fine, unlimited range, they multiplied and adapted themselves to the country through natural selection. As settlements grew along the Texas coastal plains, the mixture of Spanish fighting cattle, Mexican common cattle, and Texas settlers' domestic native American cattle resulted in the hybrid Texas Longhorn—developing broad, heavy horns and varied color possibilities.

When beef prices rose in the East after the Civil War, extensive trailing of millions of Longhorns from Texas began, either to Kansas for eastern markets or onto northern ranges where the cattle matured more quickly. By the mid-1880s these northern ranges had been greatly overstocked, lands had been fenced, and railroads had been built into Texas, decreasing the need for the "walking Longhorns." Fewer and better cattle became the rule, as demands for beefy, quick-maturing cattle led to the breeding of Longhorn cows

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with imported Shorthorn, Hereford, and tick-resistant Brahma bulls. Scrubby brush Longhorn bulls were quickly cleared from the ranges.

By 1900 the once dominant Longhorn breed had been bred virtually out of existence. The qualities that had been right for the Beef Bonanza of the 1880s—great numbers, hardiness, minimum requirements, and protective instincts—doomed the Longhorn in later years of fenced ranges and controlled management by man. If nothing were done, the typical, old-time Longhorn known to pioneer ranchers would soon be extinct.

Many rangers and livestock management officers of the United States Forest Service were cattlemen who did not want to see the historic Longhorn breed pass away completely. One forest ranger, William Earl Drummond, who had worked with Longhorn remnants in the 1890s, was one of the first men to propose that a herd be developed on the ideal setting of the grassy ranges, wooded streams, and wide valleys of the Wichita National Forest.

The Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge had been set aside as a forest reserve when the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Indian Reservation of southwestern Oklahoma was opened to settlement in 1901. It was further designated a National Game Preserve in 1905,

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*In 1905 the U.S. Congress established the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve (left). Frank Rush (right), hired as a ranger in 1907, purchased the first Longhorn for the preserve (Courtesy Museum of the Great Plains).*

and restoration of game animals destroyed by man was begun with bison, elk, and other animals. In 1907 the reserve was renamed the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve under the direction of the U.S. Forest Service.

As the 1910s passed, the list of surviving Longhorns continued to dwindle, despite the efforts of the Forest Service to get the needed funds to start a Longhorn herd. World War I came, and the war's reconstruction period cut chances for funds through the first half of the 1920s. When repeatedly petitioned, Congress answered that the Longhorns were an outdated breed that had neither historical importance nor economic value. Still the men persisted, knowing that time was running out for the Longhorn.

An answer finally came through United States Senator John B. Kendrick of Wyoming, a former cattleman who enthusiastically supported the plan to purchase Longhorns for a nucleus herd. Senator Kendrick backed the idea in Congress, and the general appropriations bill for 1927 set aside funds "for the purchase and maintenance



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*The majestic Longhorn, with distinctive markings, wide horn spread, and stocky conformation, had approached the brink of extinction by the 1920s (Courtesy Museum of the Great Plains).*

of a herd of Longhorned or Spanish breed of cattle . . . to the end that the present comparatively few living examples of this historic breed of cattle may be preserved from complete extinction.”<sup>1</sup> On July 1, 1927, \$3,000 was made available to the Forest Service for this purpose.

Although the plan of the Forest Service was popularly received, many old-time cattlemen believed there were no worthwhile specimens of Longhorns left. Some Longhorn cows might still be found, since Shorthorn bulls crossed with these cows had produced fairly good beef. Scrub bulls, however, had been banished from the range for years, and without good Longhorn bulls, the plan would fail.

Not only were the Longhorns scarce, but there was also disagreement on what constituted a “true” Longhorn. Opinions differed even though the Texas Longhorn was a distinct breed. It was necessary, therefore, to develop guidelines in order to select the animals. These

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guidelines also would be used to cull future undesirable animals from the herd. These guidelines were developed from interviews with ranchers and trail drivers, historical accounts, and other sources.

Based on their findings, a typical Longhorn was large-boned and rangy, with a large head, long face, and stocky neck. The shoulders were somewhat arched, blending into the hollow of the neck. Longhorns had long forelegs, although these often appeared short due to massive forequarters. Bulls possessed a muscular hump forward of the withers—a “bull neck” that was lacking in steers and cows. Black muzzles, eye rings, and tail switches all were common in bulls, along with heavy dewlaps, coarse hair, and touchy dispositions. Steers were usually larger than bulls.

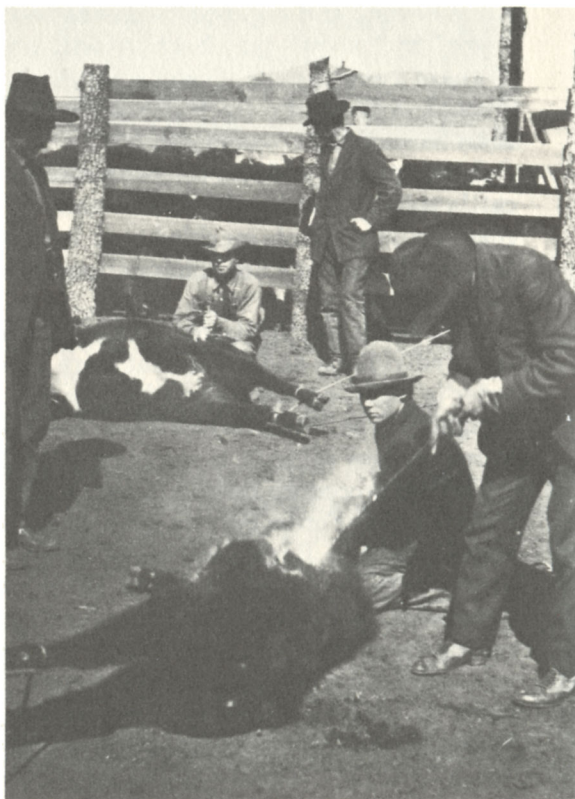
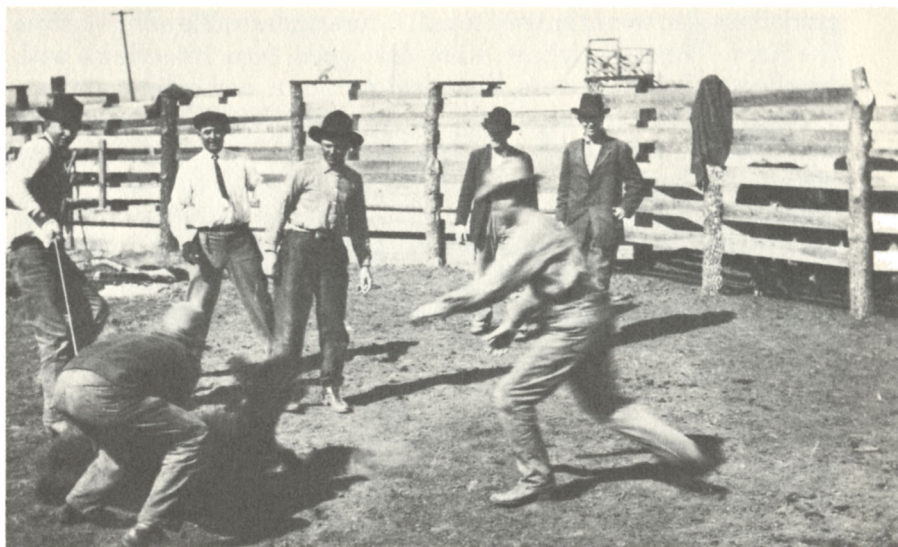
The horns of Longhorn bulls were stocky and shorter in length than horns of both cows and steers. Good horns grew horizontally on the head and continued to grow as long as the animal was healthy. Black horn tips were common. Steers carried the breed’s trademark of the wide-spreading horns. A horn spread of five feet was highly favored, while seven- and eight-foot spreads were extremely rare. “Corkscrew” or “oxbow” type horn growth was characteristic of steers. Horns of a cow usually twisted and spiralled upwards, growing more erect than those of a steer. A cow’s horns were smaller in diameter than horns of both steers and bulls.

A great variety of coat colors existed in the Longhorn, and no two cattle were ever colored quite the same. Common patterns included roan, brindle, paint, speckled, and lineback. Longhorns were often tricolored, having color combinations of cream, dun, brown, black, red, or white.

With these specifications in hand, bid requests were sent to fourteen individuals and firms that were thought to be able to fill the order of eighteen cows, three bulls, and three steers of the original Longhorn type. When no bids were received, the Forest Service began to realize how difficult it would be to find the desired animals.

The bid procedure having failed, William C. Barnes and John H. Hatton of the Forest Service were assigned the task of locating old-time Longhorns. Barnes was one of the few men alive who had worked closely with the Longhorn breed. During his long experience in the Southwest, he had seen service at Fort Apache in Arizona Territory during the early 1880s, ranched extensively near Holbrook later, and was a member of both the New Mexico and Arizona territorial legislatures. In 1907 he had begun a twenty-one year career with the U.S. Forest Service, promoting range conservation among cattlemen.

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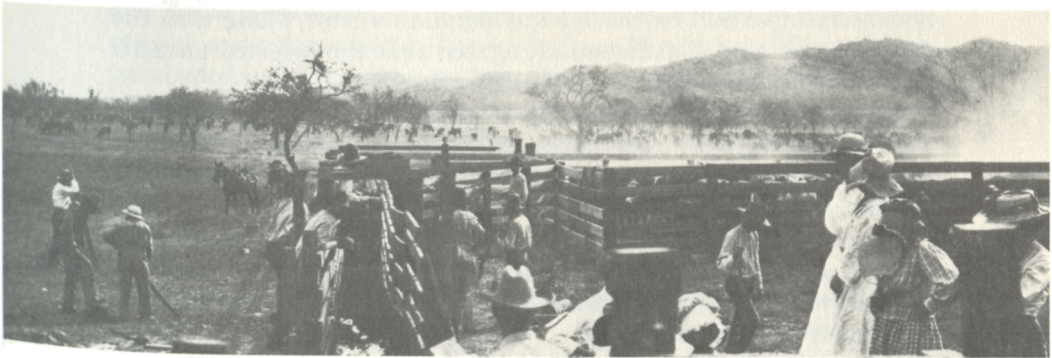


*In 1927, with a small herd of 26 Longhorns assembled, ranchhands and rangers branded and registered each animal (Courtesy Museum of the Great Plains).*



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*With the Longhorns branded, they were dipped and released (Courtesy Museum of the Great Plains).*





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Most old-time ranchers felt that the "Prickly Pear Country" of Southwest Texas, along the lower Rio Grande, would be the best possible area in which pure Longhorns might still be found. For some three weeks Barnes and Hatton combed the triangular area between San Antonio and Brownsville, bounded by the Rio Grande and the Gulf of Mexico. They examined thousands of cattle, following up every lead in their search for true Longhorn traits. In the vicinity of Laredo, several excellent Longhorn steers were located, but their owners prized them too highly to think of selling them.

With the help of old-time cattlemen who knew the country, ten cows and one bull, each found at a different location, were eventually selected and concentrated at Fort Worth, Texas, for shipment north to Cache, Oklahoma. An excellent bull calf was included in this group.

Another three weeks' search was made along the coastal plain region from Corpus Christi to Beaumont. This area had been recommended to the men because the steers for the motion picture *North of 36* had been gathered there. Ten additional good specimen cows were gleaned from the herd of rancher Seth Brown. Barnes and Hatton obtained two good bulls from Frank Dew, and "with a lot of persuasive argument, we also induced him to part with two excellent steers, with the promise of returning to him the heads and horns when they had served their purpose."<sup>2</sup>

A third fine steer with wide-spreading horns was picked up in the Fort Worth stockyards. The steers, which through emasculation developed the breed's famous long, curved horns, would serve as an exhibition herd.

In all, Barnes and Hatton examined some 30,000 cattle and covered almost 5,000 miles on horseback, rail, auto, and stage through prickly pear country and dense mesquite thickets; over 90 percent of the cattle examined carried Brahma blood. The men painstakingly selected the three bulls and twenty cows, including offspring of two heifers and two bull calves, for the foundation herd, along with the three show steers. Cattlemen all agreed that the selected animals were fine specimens of the old Longhorns.

Not only did the selected cattle possess historical conformation, but their coat colors were also representative of old-time colors and patterns. The three bulls had excellent coloration: a black, a brindle, and a "line-back"—red sides with a white stripe down the backbone. The cows' colors also were varied. Four cows were pale red shading to yellow, seven were dark red, and two were strawberry roans. A red-and-white pied, a brindle, a black, two buckskins, and two yellows made up the remainder.

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The three show steers were all young, three, four and seven years of age, and their horns would continue to spread with age. Future steers would emerge from the original herd to rival these as show steers. Nearly all of the bulls and cows were more than twelve years of age. Fortunately, Longhorns were a long-lived and virile breed, so those selected cattle would be good calf producers for several more years.

Before they left Fort Worth, the cattle had to be chemically dipped to free them of the tick that carried the deadly Texas fever. As the steers' horns proved too wide for the dipping tank, they had to be tied to a post by their horns and carefully sprayed with the liquid, "a proceeding against which they all most vigorously protested."<sup>3</sup> After being held seven days to allow any tick eggs to hatch, the cattle were dipped a second time. They then had to be tested and found free of tuberculosis, as was required for all breeding animals shipped into Oklahoma. After this testing, the Longhorns were branded on the left hip with the letters "U S."

In August of 1927 the thirty Longhorns—three steers, three bulls, twenty cows, and four calves—arrived at the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve near Cache, Oklahoma.<sup>4</sup> These animals were placed under the dedicated care of Forest Ranger William Drummond. In the future, Drummond would be responsible for developing the herd's Longhorn characteristics through selecting the animals for breeding and culling the herd.

Of the twenty-seven breeding animals, excluding the three steers, that arrived in August, 1927, one cow died shortly after unloading, having been trampled in shipment. One of the bulls died soon thereafter. Another bull was not used for breeding and was sold in 1931. Three of the original calves contained Brahma blood and were not used. The original foundation herd was therefore made up of one bull, nineteen cows, and one bull calf.

Over the years a few carefully selected bulls and cows from Mexico and Texas were added to the herd foundation in order to improve its quality and color scheme. Two bulls from Monterrey, Mexico, were purchased in 1931, along with another two bulls in 1936. In later years, new and proven blood lines were introduced from the private herds of I. G. Yates, J. G. Phillips, Darol Dickinson, and other Texas breeders. The last survivor of the original foundation herd, a cow, died in 1939. She was between twenty-two and twenty-five years of age.

Since those early years of the experimental herd, the Wichita Longhorns have essentially served as a "show group" for visitors.

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*Longhorns grazing on the pastures of the Wildlife Refuge, a dream realized after 1927 and the establishment of the pureblood herd (Courtesy Museum of the Great Plains).*

"Our purpose at the refuge," noted a former refuge manager, "is to maintain a specimen herd of these old-time Texas cattle—sort of a cross section of an early-day herd, ranging from calves to old patriarch steers." Aged steers were retained because "it takes ten or a dozen years for horns on a steer to reach maximum growth . . . thus only the older animals have the best horns."<sup>5</sup> Pasture limitations resulted in a model herd of approximately 300, one-half steers and the remainder breeding stock and calves.

Longhorns and bison were originally kept in a well fenced 8,000 acre "buffalo pasture." Outside acreage was grazed by domestic cattle. In 1937 all cattle permits were cancelled, and the entire refuge was fenced by 1938. This allowed the bison and Longhorns to increase to their present numbers. The animals were transferred to a 30,000 acre pasture in the northern part of the refuge, and some were released into the southern part which is open to the public.

Today, the Wichita herd is thriving. On the Southwestern ranges of the 1880s, a 650 to 800 pound cow and a 1000 to 1200 pound fat steer

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would have been considered average weights, as was specified in the original Forest Service guidelines. On the lush grasses of the refuge, however, cattle grew heavier and larger—800 to 2000 pounds—and tended to lose their lean, bony appearance. One 8½ year old refuge steer weighed in at a record 2,050 pounds.

A former refuge manager expressed his admiration for these venerable steers:

Even those of us who live on the refuge are fascinated by the Longhorns. The big steers have majesty, dignity, independence and fearlessness. Some of our big 1900 pound beauties with hornspreads nearing six feet, and just about old enough to vote, loom like boxcars beside a pickup truck on the prairie.<sup>6</sup>

Many old-time cattlemen never really willingly replaced their hardy, independent Longhorns with expensive European breeds that required constant care and attention. To them, the Longhorn crosses of the 1880s and 1890s resulted in excellent beef cattle. In the process, however, the Longhorn foundation stock was virtually destroyed by cross breeding. The U.S. Forest Service kept a remnant of the Longhorn breed alive, and through the years continued to develop Wichita cattle of the historic type.

Only those cattlemen who were never familiar with the Longhorn's natural qualities are surprised at its comeback today. The breed will continue to be the foundation of the cattle industry, as traditional Longhorn characteristics are bred back into commercial cattle production.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "The Texas Longhorn," Conservation Note 18 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, n.d.), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> The main source for the narrative of the search for the original herd comes from John H. Hatton, "The Search for the Longhorns," *The Producer* 9 (November, 1927), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Will C. Barnes, "On the Trail of the Vanishing Longhorn," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 15, 1927, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> According to Refuge Manager Robert A. Karges, the exact date of arrival is unknown; contemporaneous newspapers differed on expected arrival dates.

<sup>5</sup> "Home on the Range for the Longhorns," *American Forests* 55 (September, 1949), p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*