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Saving the Longhorns

These hardy Texas beasts with "too much legs, horns, and speed" had long since been replaced by stodgier breeds. Now they were facing extinction…

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If you are someone who thought the Texas longhorn was as dead as the passenger pigeon, here is a bit of news. At one time closer to extinction than the buffalo ever was, this historic breed is again doing quite well, thanks to a few dedicated cattlemen who recognized the debt owed by the Southwest to the millions of longhorn beeves that plodded up the Chisholm and Western trails to Kansas and Nebraska railheads in the two decades following the Civil War and brought a large measure of prosperity to the impoverished Lone Star State.

A herd numbering about three hundred of these rangy brutes, whose ancestors were tough enough to walk the thousand miles between the lower Rio Grande and the world's greatest cattle market, Dodge City, and live on the country while doing it, now enjoy comparative luxury on their own exclusive twenty-four-thousand-acre pasture in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge near Cache, Oklahoma. Almost half of these are bulls or steers, the members of the family that produce those famed head ornaments measuring five feet or more from tip to tip, so coveted as wall decorations by proprietors of saloons and restaurants throughout the West. A second, slightly smaller herd, started with progeny of the first, is on exhibition at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine, Nebraska.

The size of these two groups of longhorns maintained by the federal government is held down to the capacity of the available pasturage. About once a year, usually in the autumn, the excess is auctioned off. Buyers are chiefly southwestern cattlemen who like the idea of owning a few specimens of the hardy breed on which their industry was founded more than a century ago. Other bidders are seriously interested in crossbreeding the older strain with more modern beef producers in order to take advantage of the longhorn's best characteristics.

Altogether there are probably some three thousand privately owned longhorns throughout the country, most of them in the Southwest. Another hundred or so are scattered through six Texas state parks, a fitting living memorial to an exciting era long gone.

Much of the credit for saving the longhorns goes to Will Croft Barnes (1858–1936), rancher, conservationist; author, and soldier. Born in San Francisco and raised in the Midwest, Barnes served a hitch in the Signal Corps at Fort Apache during the early 1880's, when Geronimo had

Arizona Territory turned upside down. When his enlistment ended, he became a successful cattle raiser in northeastern Arizona. In 1907 his friend GifFord Pinchot talked him into leaving the Southwest and taking a job with the infant United States Forest Service, where his principal chore was selling conservation to cattlemen.

For many years Barnes had realized that the famed longhorn was faced with extinction. The historic breed, once described as having "too much legs, horns, and speed," had been replaced long before by stodgy, unromantic animals that provided better beef and more of it. Nobody gave a hoot about the longhorn any more—that is, virtually nobody but Barnes. He decided that if the federal government could spend large sums on preserving the buffalo, the longhorn richly deserved the modest three-thousand-dollar appropriation he was requesting for financing the purchase of a small breeding herd. In 1927, with the aid of Texas-born Senator John B. Kendrick of Wyoming, he finally wangled the money from Congress.

But in 1927 there was no certainty that even a handful of longhorns with pure bloodlines still existed. Most of those running wild in the thickets of Texas had been tainted by the Brahman strain. However, at the age of sixty-nine Barnes embarked with another Forest Service employee, John H. Hatton, on an expedition that was to crisscross Texas and even go into Mexico, following up rumors and leads on alleged good specimens. Writing of his adventures in the October 15, 1927, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, Barnes described some of the hardships the two of them endured. He modestly cast his narrative in the third person.

In their search for genuine specimens the men traveled almost 5,000 miles over the grassy plains and through the mesquite thickets of southern Texas. They searched through the dry *resacas* along the Rio Grande and looked through miles of cottonwood basques for what they sought. They rode miles through dense forests of mesquite or thickets of prickly pear, cat's-claw and huisache, where every limb was decorated with fishhook thorns or needle-like spines of cactus. ... They looked through thousands and thousands of cattle in pastures, in round-ups, stockyards, and open fields often 20,000 to 30,000 acres in extent. From them all they selected the twenty-three animals they deemed worthy of being classed as true types of the historic old Longhorn cattle.

Ten cows and a bull were rounded up from the thickets of southwestern Texas. Ten more cows and two bulls were collected in the coastal area between Corpus Christi and Beaumont. After a merry time dipping these wild cattle to eradicate ticks, the consignment was shipped to the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. Three steers also went along for exhibition purposes.

All the breeding stock obtained by Barnes and Hatton was at least twelve years old. The best of the bulls was so ancient that he died soon after being transferred to Oklahoma but not before he had done his job and sired some fine offspring.

The late J. Frank Dobie, author and historian also had a hand in preserving the longhorn breed. In the early 1930's, with the help of rancher Graves Peeler of Jourdanton and the financial aid of Fort Worth oilman Sid Richardson, Dobie assembled a small herd that formed the basis for today's longhorns exhibited in the Texas state parks. Peeler, who is well past fourscore years, today runs his own private herd of longhorns on his ranch in McMullen County, Texas.

Increasing interest in these historic cattle, encouraged by the availability of purebred animals through the auctions at the two government refuges, led in 1964 to the formation of the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association, whose purpose is to establish longhorn standards as well as

to serve as a medium of communication between longhorn owners. The roster of active members numbers approximately a hundred seventy. While most are in the West and South, the list includes breeders as far east as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.
Just what is a Longhorn, anyhow?

Texas Longhorns are big, raw-boned, and rangy, with slabbed sides and a squarish look. They have long legs, with the huge forequarters making the front legs seem shorter. The head is large and long, giving the eyes a wide-spaced appearance. The neck is short and stocky. In color they do not rival a rainbow; they eclipse it, although the hues are more akin to muted earth tones. They range from black to white, solid and dotted, splashed and spotted, with all the colors in between—mulberry, speckled and ring-streaked blue, slate or the highly prized mouse color, duns and browns, yellows and creams, all the spectacular shades of red. No two are exactly alike in color.
The above description, taken from a current publication of the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association, could just as well have been written a century or more ago; it aptly describes the 3,500,000 longhorns living in Texas in a virtually wild state when their former owners returned from service in the Confederate army.
Descendants of Spanish cattle from Mexico that had wandered off from the beef herd of an explorer or were left behind when some Texas mission closed down or a ranching venture failed, the earliest longhorns had thrived on the mild climate and abundant herbage of southern Texas. They had adapted themselves admirably to both the coastal prairies and the higher brush country. During four years of war, with few humans around to interfere, their numbers had increased amazingly by 1865.

Many thousands took the longer walk to stock the ranges of Montana and Wyoming. Others went north to feed Uncle Sam's wards on Indian reservations after the buffalo were killed off. That famous narrative of the old trail-driving days, *The Log of a Cowboy*, by former cowpuncher Andy Adams, describes a mixed herd of three thousand longhorns (breeding cows as well as steers) being driven from Brownsville, Texas, near the mouth of the Rio Grande, to an Indian agency in northwestern Montana, more than two thousand miles away.
Why did the horns of Texas cattle grow so much longer than those of the same Spanish breeds that ranged the California coast? J. Frank Dobie, in his book *The Longhorns,* says it takes nourishment to make horn and "some soils more than others seem to provide a substance especially conducive to horn growth." Dobie points out that what he calls "the common cattle of East Texas seldom had the horn growth, just as they generally lacked the frame and weight, of the same blood of cattle west of the Guadalupe River," which empties into the Gulf of

Longhorns could travel incredible distances without water, rustle food where other breeds would starve, swim rivers, and survive the heat of the desert sun. In short, when the first railroads began inching westward across Kansas in 1867, the longhorn was the ideal animal for the long overland drives that were the first leg of the journey to the packinghouses of the Midwest.

Mexico about seventy-five miles northeast of Corpus Christi. In a Darwinian spirit Dobie also comments:

Under primitive conditions only the fittest could survive; predatory animals and the adversities of climate promoted selective breeding. Left to make their own way, the cattle developed hardihood, fleetness, and independence. They grew horns to fight off wolves, to hook down succulent mistletoe out of trees, to sweep out of the way thorned branches protecting sparse tufts of grass on the parched ground.
Dobie's book also contains a pertinent observation by Charles Goodnight, famed pioneer cattleman of the Texas Panhandle, sometimes referred to as the Burbank of the Plains because of his unusual breeding experiments with both cattle and buffalo. In 1927, while Barnes and Hatton were rounding up the handful of longhorns destined for the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, Goodnight wrote Dobie that "climatic conditions will prevent these cattle from producing horns of the old type. The horns will become shorter and thicker, the bodies of the cattle more compact, and no power on earth will defeat nature." When he was writing *The Longhorns* in 1940, Dobie checked at the Wichita Refuge and included this report in his book:

The herd now numbers over a hundred and sixty head. Steers eight and ten years old weigh from fifteen hundred to two thousand pounds each—magnificent beeves. Some have interesting heads; no spread, however, much exceeding four feet. It cannot be asserted that a spread of six or seven feet—always exceptional—will not someday show up, but so far the Goodnight prophecy has proven fairly accurate.
Since more than thirty years have passed since the above comment first appeared in print, a current check seemed to be in order. Julian A. Howard, manager of the Wichita Refuge for a number of years before his recent retirement from the federal service, supplied the rather surprising updated report given below:

Consider that when the Wichita herd was collected, nearly half a century had elapsed since the peak of the Longhorn period. Even though a few ranchers in Texas had retained Longhorn stock, obviously, in 1927, the Longhorn already was a curiosity with little or no market value. Thus despite the long search and intensive screening to gather the Wichita animals, the herd could not be expected to contain specimens equal to those common fifty years earlier.

In the years since 1927 the constant culling and the matching of cows and bulls as best one can to produce animals closer to the earlier specifications has definitely produced a current herd looking more like the legendary Longhorn than the original Wichita collection. Horn growth is but one of the characteristics, and as Dobie said, six or seven foot horns were always exceptional. On the other hand, Dobie's 1940 observation, "no spread, however, much exceeding four feet," is no longer true.

During the early days of the Wichita herd intensive culling took place to remove those that did not measure up to the specifications of an old time Longhorn.

Although horns of steers at the refuge are not measured annually, as opportunities present themselves measurements are recorded. Five-foot-plus spans are quite common for steers ten years and older. Mounted in the office is the head of an eleven-year-old animal killed in an accident. The “pole” measurement (in a straight line from tip to tip) is five feet two inches, while the “along the curves” measurement is nine feet three inches.
So the horn spread of the Wichita longhorns has been enhanced by selective breeding and good range conditions. The great beasts are regaining their old-time proportions, and it appears that Charles Goodnight’s 1927 prediction may well have been premature.