

Texas Longhorns Reach End Of Trail

Famous Breed Of Range Cattle, Once Numbered In Millions, Nears Extinction — One Herd Remains

By Hal Mitchell

WHEN the Thundering Herd moved out of Colorado City and Abilene over the long, long trail that led into the Pacific Northwest, it was the Longhorn going forth to stock the luxuriant ranges of a virgin land.

When the great trail herds came westward out of Texas to form the nuclei of the New Mexico and Arizona cattle baronies of more recent years, it was the patient, sturdy and resourceful Longhorn that tolled along the weary way.

"Git along, little dogie" was first sung by grimy, sweating cowhands to lagging weakling longhorn youngsters to cheer them on their dusty trek.

It was the longhorn for which the pioneer fought Indians, braved torrents, gambled, bled and died. In short, it was the longhorn that made the ranches of the West.

Now that famous strain of desert cattle, gaunt and lanky, fleet as antelope, with horn-spread frequently as much as eight or ten feet, sometimes twelve, is all but extinct, literally bred from the range, supplanted by the more beefy and just as sturdy Hereford which roams the mountains and arroyos in greater number even than did its more celebrated predecessor, with whose departure went much of the glamour and the romance of the cattle lands.

Insofar as is known, only one small herd remains. It is located in the Wichita National Game Refuge of Oklahoma, where it ranges under the watchful eyes of the Federal Biological Survey, sole reminder of the glories of a more romantic day.

These last of the Longhorns were purchased by the Federal Government in 1927, following a search of the country by the U. S. Forest Service, under congressional appropriation, in a belated attempt to keep the species from becoming entirely extinct. At that time they numbered only thirty head, but late in 1934 when they were transferred to the custody of the Biological Sur-

turned back on the range where they were not again molested until they were rounded up a second time a year ago for shipment to California.

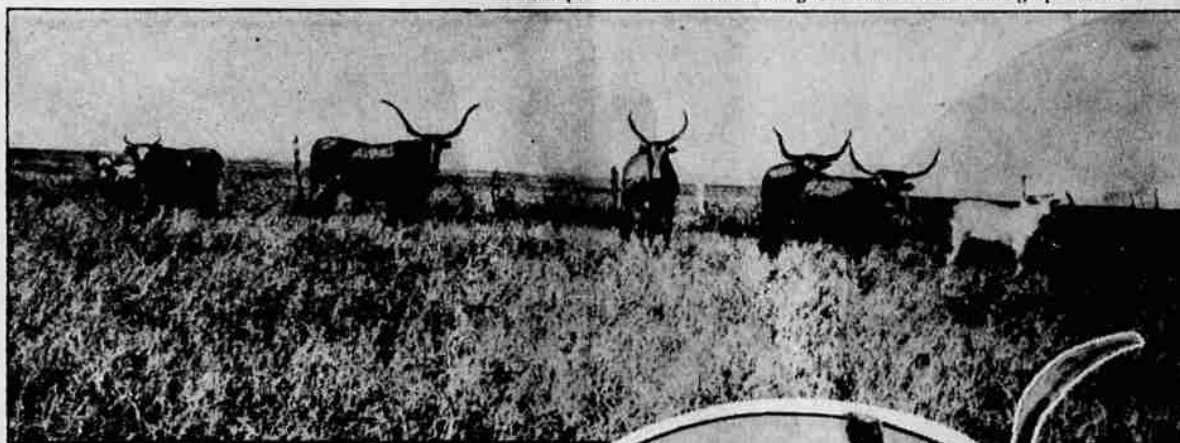
The rapidity with which the longhorn disappeared from the cattle ranges, according to old time cowmen, was almost startling.

Roaming in millions over the broad Texas plains a half to three-quarters of a century ago, before the railroads came, the longhorn was considered of little value except for his hide and



(Photo by W. C. Burns)

The Longhorns were on the verge of extinction when, in 1927, the Federal government purchased the few remaining head and started building up the herd.



This small herd, near Cotulla, Tex., was inspected by government agents, but they were not purchased because the strain of the Herefords was already beginning to predominate.



The chapparal was the home of the Texas Longhorn. He frequently went for days without water.

vey they had increased to a total of ninety-seven animals, which are being carefully nurtured and guarded to stimulate propagation, but at the same time to avoid further mixture with other types.

There are perhaps a few more head to be found scattered among ranches or held in zoos or circuses, but R. W. Hussey, acting chief of the division of wildlife and range management of the Forest Service, says his bureau does not know of any other herds in the United States than that which the government is ranging in the Wichita refuge.

UNTIL about a year ago there was a herd of longhorns on the Martin Walker ranch in the Sulphur Springs Valley south of Cochise, Arizona, but they were finally sold to a California buyer and are now either scattered or extinct.

The Walker cows, numbering some seventy head, considerably mixed with Hereford, were the survivors of a herd which years ago had been shipped from the Gulf coast of Texas to ranches in the vicinity of Vera Cruz, Mexico, and later returned to the United States. There were no bulls, and the strain in consequence was dying out. This herd was rounded up in April of 1932 at the suggestion of Fred Winn, supervisor of the Coronado National Forest, for photographing and study, but the mixture with the Hereford was found to have reached a stage where the government did not find it advisable to add them to the Wichita group. They were



The Longhorn was truly a walking skeleton. His horns had a spread of from eight to twelve feet.

his tallow. Ranches spread out over hundreds of thousands of acres and no man knew the numbers of his herds. Distances were so great and the cattle so numerous that even branding was next to impossible. There was no means of shipment, no packing plants and no population to consume the beef. The animals were simply killed off for their fat and their leather, the

carcasses lying where they happened to fall, food for the vulture and jackal.

THEN the great drives to the northward began. Hundreds of thousands of head moved out over the Chisholm Trail, and a new era came to the cow country. The adventurer, the gambler, the rustler each had his day, and the two-gun freebooters and steely-eyed peace officers took a heavy toll of human life in the glamorous cow-owns along the trail routes.

Thousands upon thousands of longhorns were shoved onto the unstocked ranges of Wyoming and Montana, and other thousands moved to the rail heads at Kansas City. Huge herds were driven westward into New Mexico and Arizona and Colorado and Utah, some even going as far as the grass lands of California.

This wild but kindly-eyed strain of desert cattle, once so numerous and now so nearly extinct, was noted particularly for its hardihood. Judge Shelby McCall of Tucson says he knows of instances where they were driven to market at a rate of as much as thirty-five miles a day over two-day periods and delivered with no perceptible loss of weight and without injury. On their native range they plodded eight to twenty miles to water, then grazed away without sign of fatigue, going from three to four days, sometimes a week, without drinking. During water hole pilgrimages, calves were carefully hidden away in grass clumps or brush patches to patiently await the mother's unerring return. Through seasons of drought and consequent famine, these cattle frequently shrank to skin

and bones but remained on their feet when another animal would perish.

The ancestors of the longhorns first came to the Southwestern ranges with the early Jesuit fathers in about the year 1680, and by 1700 the Indian grass lands of Southern Arizona and New Mexico were fairly well stocked. From that date until about 1850 there is little record of what happened to the cattle in that area, but it is known that in the late 1700's the Apaches began their raids on the mission herds and herders. "They were adept at such work," says Will C. Barnes, pioneer cattleman and historian, "and it was but a few years before they had devastated Southern Arizona, broken up the missions, scattered the livestock and killed off many of the natives who attempted to remain in the country. The Apaches surely ran true to form."

By 1850 the only cattle that remained in the country were the entirely wild bands that had escaped the Indians' attacks and found refuge on the distant ranges. Then the great Texas trail herds began to move in, and by 1880 cattle raising in Arizona and New Mexico had become a flourishing business. But the longhorn, sturdy as it was, had many close calls in its struggle for survival.

"The first real setback was received in 1887," says Barnes. "The rainfall the summer of that year was extremely light. Grass was short everywhere and but for the fact that the range was under stocked with many large areas unoccupied, losses would have been much heavier."

"Several excellent seasons followed, which boosted our spirits. But the season of 1893-94



Mable Strickland, a modern cowgirl. With the passing of the old West and the thundering herds that passed along the Chisholm Trail, so passed the old time cowpunchers. In their place appeared fat Herefords, modern cowgirls and drugstore cowboys.

took an awful toll of the cattle herds. The summer of 1892 was very dry, grass was short and the cattle went into the following winter in mighty poor shape. In the northern part of the territory winter losses were especially heavy. Cattle died all over that section like flies. The spring of 1893 was cold. Thousands of our old Nellies that had lived to see the green grass start that spring bogged down at the streams and water holes. Hog riding and skinning dead cattle was one of our leading industries. My own outfit went into the winter of 1892-93 with about 8,000 head of cattle scattered over the ranges along the Little Colorado river. The summer of 1893 we branded, by my old tally book, more than 3,500 calves. The following winter there were not 3,500 cattle of all kinds on the ranges.

"Nor were our range neighbors any better off. Some were even worse off—cleaned, wiped out. All they had left was a brand and certificate of its record, plus a lot of unpaid bills."

There was another drought in 1904 which took a heavy toll, losses in some sections, according to a report by Governor Kibbey, amounting to 75 per cent and "the average loss for the entire territory fully 35 per cent." Again in the winter of 1907-8 lack of rainfall decimated the herds, and in 1924 another dry summer was followed by severe losses all over the Southwest. But, always, this rugged, hardy range stock managed somehow to pull through.

It was not thirst or range failure or climatic rigor that destroyed the longhorn. It was the Hereford bull of the ranchman.

When the railroads came they brought the means to market beef, of which the gaunt and gangling longhorn had little. Head and horns and bony legs were the principal part of the freight bill. The price of leather dropped to nowhere and tallow no longer was salable. But there was demand for beef, and the rancher set out to find the way to produce it.

HE WENT into the eastern markets and bought Hereford bulls, paying fancy prices for fancy stock, sometimes thousands of dollars per animal. The longhorn bulls went to the execution blocks, and their beefier rivals were substituted. Soon a new strain of cattle began to appear, and through the years the process of evolution continued.

Now, except for an occasional throwback, and in a few remote regions of Northern Mexico, no semblance of the hardy old stock that made the West can be found on its ranges. Cattle are more numerous than ever before, but the longhorn is no longer among them.