NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

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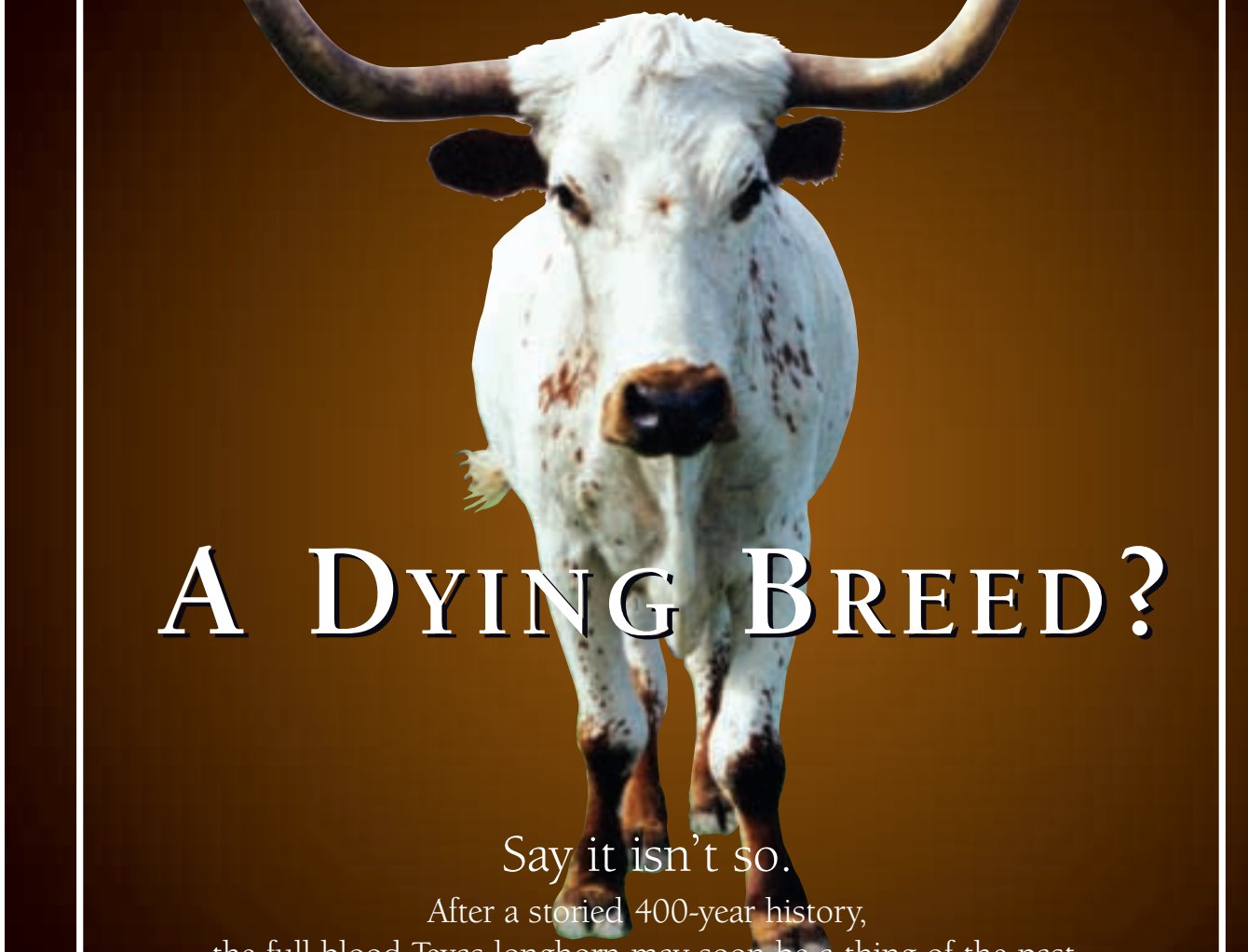

A DYING BREED?

Say it isn't so.

After a storied 400-year history,
the full-blood Texas longhorn may soon be a thing of the past.
But not if a couple of old-school ranchers can help it

TEXAS EXES
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VOLUME 91 NUMBER 2 ★ NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

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On the cover, ranchers Don and Debbie Davis bought this steer, "Blanco Yates," from Fayette Yates, another rancher fighting to save the full-blood longhorn from extinction.

A Dying Breed?

by Cora Oltersdorf

The longhorn means more to Texans than anyone else. It's hardy, strong, beautiful, and it makes for a pretty nice mascot. It's slowly being bred out of existence, but not if a few ranchers can help it

Envision a time when Texas was truly wild country, no urban sprawl encroaching on the land. No barbed wire fences, or roads of any kind. From this place sprung the full-blood Texas longhorn, descended from Spanish cattle. These Andalusian cattle came over with the first Spanish settlers, who didn't know which would survive and which wouldn't. Mother nature picked the ones who would and they interbred to form the full-blood Texas longhorn.

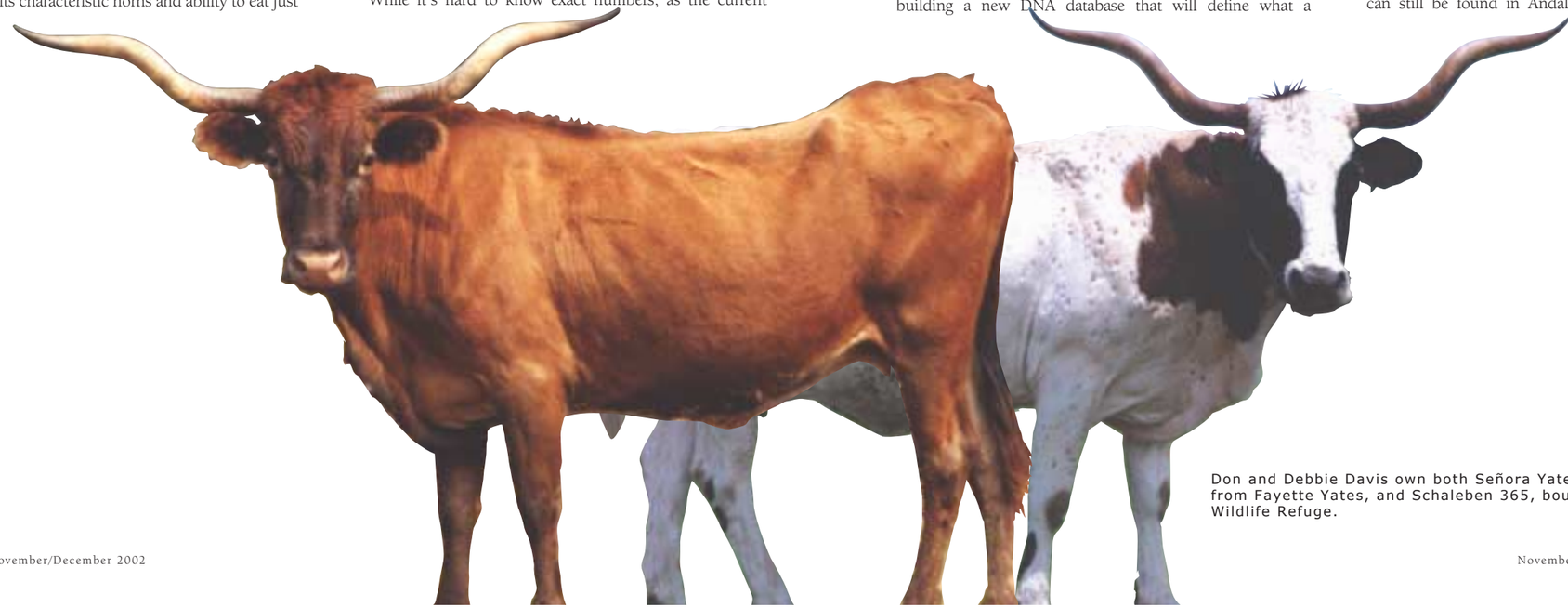
The full-blood longhorn possesses many traits that aid its survival, such as its characteristic horns and ability to eat just about anything and thrive. But now their survival is at risk due to crossbreeding with other species of cattle to create a "modern" longhorn, a longhorn that old-school Texas ranchers view with disdain. Ranchers such as Fayette Yates, who has the oldest family line of longhorns in existence, Maudeen Marks, Lawrence Wallace, along with a younger crop, like Don, MA '87, Life Member, and Debbie Davis, BFA '83, have banded together and are doing all they can to raise awareness of this dwindling breed.

While it's hard to know exact numbers, as the current longhorn registries are voluntary and often out of date, these experienced ranchers see the full-blood longhorn numbers diminishing with each new generation of "show" longhorns, bred with just about anything to get longer horns, beefier bodies, and dappled coats. The Spanish cattle tended to be solid in color, but now the paints (what Yates calls *calor,* after the Spanish word for color) are popular, with speckles. Says Yates, "Ranchers have bred down a lot of good cattle, then *and* now, just getting the color. Anything that had *calor* to it, they looked at it kind of like the second coming of Christ, something nearly that good."

Compounding the problem is that only one registry, the Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry (www.ctlr.org), of which Don Davis is president, requires both visual inspection and blood-typing to confirm no evidence of impurity within the animal. (According to Debbie Davis, "Present blood typing science can only confirm the presence of outside genetics, and not confirm purity. We are working on building a new DNA database that will define what a Longhorn is genetically. Future DNA tests will be able to determine purity.")

Each breed of cattle has specific phenotypes, like any living creature. While ranchers, such as Ira "Cap" Yates and Emil Marks (fathers of Fayette and Maudeen), in the early part of the 1900s were sure that the Texas longhorn was a separate breed, there was no scientific proof. This proof finally came along in the 1970s with blood tests for phenogroups (antigens on the surface of blood cells, which are determined genetically). "The geneticists found blood group markers that were unique to the Texas longhorn that did not occur in any other breed," says Marks. "It was a breed that man had nothing to do with creating. They evolved."

Longhorns descended from cattle that explorers brought over in the 1500s from southwestern Spain. Through genetic tests, scientists have discovered that most of the Texas longhorns are related most closely to the retino cattle, which are solid-colored, ranging from brown to red. These cattle can still be found in Andalusia today. They first entered



Don and Debbie Davis own both Señora Yates 102/4, on the left, purchased from Fayette Yates, and Schaleben 365, bought from the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge.

Below: Working cattle on John L. and Keri Guldemann's Jinglebob Ltd. Ranch in Animas, N.M. Facing Page: Clockwise from upper left: Lawrence Wallace, Maudeen Marks, Don Davis, Debbie Davis, and (center) Fayette Yates. Rancher photos by Cora Oltersdorf

Mexico, where they found a climate and food similar to their native land, and they thrived. The longhorns spread throughout the New World, some eventually wandering off into the wilderness, where they became truly feral. (They were once hunted as a game animal.) Left on their own, they became an even hardier species and thrived in all environments, from swamplands in Louisiana to deserts in California and all temperatures, from harsh winters in the Northwestern Plains to blazing summers.

Their smaller size (bulls are 1,200-1,400 pounds, cows 800-900 pounds) came as a result of their food supplies, and the twist of their horns helped with defending against predators. "Those cows whose horns went straight out had a harder time protecting their flank, which is where a wolf or coyote will attack first. Those that had some twist to them could get back there and protect that area," says Don Davis. They have a natural instinct to protect the weak and sick cattle during attacks, which they got from their Andalusian ancestors, along with a system of having several cows watch the calves while the rest of the herd grazes.

Their fertility is renowned. They can breed after one year of age and keep calving each year for more than 20. The ranchers have a joke that a longhorn cow will calve every 9 months, 3 minutes. (The gestation period of a longhorn is 9 months.) They don't need assistance with calving because of their narrow heads and small bodies.

"They're breeding these so-called 'modern longhorns,' and they're having a hell of time calving, with lots of them losing calves," says Fayette Yates. "I'm 79 years old, been around longhorns all my life, and I've never pulled a longhorn calf yet."

"Never," adds Maudeen Marks firmly.

The ranchers love talking about longhorns. Their eyes glow, their voices fill with respect and warmth. And, according to them, longhorns have human qualities, such as mourning when one of their own dies. "My dad traded a bull with [rancher Lawrence Wallace's cousin] Graves Peeler, and the bull got there and tore himself up and had to be shot," says Marks. "Nothing else we could do, and 32 bulls came and stood around that one bull and moaned and lowed and pawed. They absolutely will do this."

Marks was born in Barker, Texas, in 1918 and was raised on a ranch. "My father was a very forward-thinking man, and all girls knew how to work cattle, and the boys knew how to cook," she laughs. She grew up with longhorn cattle, grazing them on the big prairies west of Houston, and although she went to college and worked for Houston Lighting & Power and the Houston Livestock Show (her father, Emil, was its first director), she kept gravitating back to the ranch, and she currently ranches outside of Bandera.

When a predator comes into a pasture, the cows will gather and defend their calves. "What wolf, what dog, what menace would stand there when they had a sea of horns coming towards them?" asks Marks with passion.

"I've seen one cow kill coyotes and dogs, just hook 'em," confirms Yates.

According to Lawrence Wallace, who has a PhD in nutrition from New Mexico State and ranches out in Val Verde County, ranchers can work full-blood longhorns according to how the surrounding wildlife are acting, along with the phase of the moon. Folklore, you say? Not according to him. "If you have a full moon, you may as well leave those cattle alone because they graze all night, and they don't want to be moved the next day. The darker the moon, you can work your cattle the next day without any problems. Any other cattle don't do that."

Longhorns are hardy. A particularly fierce seven-year drought in Texas in the 1950s forced many ranchers out of business. Wallace spent his senior year of high school in Tilden, Texas, living with his cousin, Graves Peeler, a legend among longhorn ranchers. By the end of the drought, Peeler had paid off his ranch of 5,800 acres, had $16,000 in the bank, and had his grocery bills paid, "And he said, 'We'd have had to sell out like everyone else if we'd stayed with those crossbred cattle,' " says Wallace. "That made me a believer in the longhorn cattle."

The full-blood longhorn hasn't just saved individual ranchers. "They saved Texas," says Debbie Davis. After the Civil War, people up north craved beef, and once a trail drive was established in the 1860s, longhorns started going north. Their hardiness and longer legs made them the best breed to survive the long trail drives. Says Yates, "We sent them to the Yankees back east and also took them to California and brought back gold, drove them across the desert. They're the only cattle that could do that. Nowadays, you couldn't drive

Don and Debbie Davis bought Anthem, a steer, from David Karger, who named him in memory of a cowboy poet-singer Buck Ramsey. The photograph, by Alice Stevens, was taken on David Karger's leased ranch south of Alpine. Cathedral Mountain is in the background.

these [modern] cattle two days, and they would die." The money they brought into Texas delivered the state from a post-war depression into a boom.

However, by the end of the 19th century, the full-blood Texas longhorn began its decline. Most of the cattle drive trails had been fenced off, and railroads had taken over. The longer horns of the cattle meant fewer could ride in a car at a time. Around the same time, a new influx of British breeds gained favor. They matured in size more quickly so were more cost effective, and they were aesthetically appealing, fat and round, unlike the rangy longhorn. So ranchers began to crossbreed with the English cattle to "improve" the longhorn. This independent breed slowly receded, replaced by ones that required a lot more care from ranchers, better feed, and protection from predators. "I've heard old-timers say that about the time that they got rid of most of the longhorns, bred them out, that they had to get rid of the lobo wolves," says Yates. "They didn't have to when they had the longhorn cattle because they fought them off. These crossbred cattle would just bawl and watch them kill their calves."

Also contributing to their historical decline was their natural resistance to tick fever, a common cattle disease. Since it didn't kill them, they carried the ticks to other, more vulnerable cattle. No ranchers outside of the state wanted anything to do with the Texas cattle. Along with this came the tick eradication efforts of 1922. Texas law required that all ranchers dip their cattle every two weeks. Any longhorns that were too difficult to work and couldn't be caught were simply shot.

Some ranchers began to sit up and take notice that the longhorns were disappearing and being bred to the edge of extinction. This breed finally needed man to survive. In 1927, the federal government appropriated $3,000 for a federally protected herd of full-blood Texas longhorns on the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. (The current Bevo, "Sunrise Express," whose ancestors came from the WR herd, is Sunrise Ranch branded, raised by John T. & Betty Baker of Liberty Hill.) To assure purity of the herd, the refuge got many of their cattle from Yates' father, Cap, breeding. He owned the purest and largest herd of Texas longhorns. In 1941, Texas established its own state herd. Sid Richardson gathered the funding, while J. Frank Dobie and Lawrence Wallace's cousin Graves Peeler went out and gathered the longhorns.

NOT OUT OF THE WOODS

That should have been the end of the decline of the longhorn, but a combination of the modern beef industry and crossbreeding continues to decimate the full-blood Texas longhorn population. Texas longhorns will reach sexual maturity in less time than other breeds, but they take several years longer to reach full physical size, a disadvantage in the beef industry.

Calves are placed in feedlots after about six months to gain weight as quickly as possible. Ranchers want a breed that will gain weight quickly to sell while the feedlot operator also favors a breed that eats a lot of feed, gains weight quickly, and gets out. Don Davis says, "The more cattle the operator runs through his feedyard each year, the more feed he sells. And the longhorn doesn't really fit into this industrialized version of the cow business."

Longhorn cattle are better converters. Pound for pound, they can eat less feed and still produce the same amount of beef as some of the other breeds, making the longhorns less desirable to that feedlot operator. But they still take longer to reach full weight, called "feeding out."

"European breeds gain weight faster, and the modern beef industry wants to turn the dollar," says Debbie Davis. "If you can get a steer finished at 15 months instead of two-and-a-half years, then they'd rather raise the one that finishes at 15 months."

"The beef is tasteless," says Yates.

"That's because it's only 12 months old when it's dead, as opposed to 24, 28 months old," says Don Davis.

"Some of them are still kicking on the way to the store," adds Yates, chuckling and shaking his head.

As for crossbreeding, ranchers who believe in the "modern" longhorn think that the longhorn is a result of crossbreeding, so continuing the practice shouldn't be of concern. Members of the Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry, like Marks, Yates, and the Davises, believe the breed that descended directly from their Spanish ancestors should be preserved.

Marks says her father's objective was to perpetuate the Texas longhorn cattle in their original state because "someday we might need what they have to offer, their characteristics, their durability." She didn't always understand what her father saw in them, "But once you get to fooling with them, you will understand."

Their ability to survive in harsh country, which is what a lot of South Texas and West Texas is, may be of future benefit to all ranchers. "A basic trend in agriculture in the United States is that ranchers, farmers, and producers are becoming pushed further and further out into the marginal country," says Don Davis. The further out you go, the more desirable the Longhorn traits become, like hardiness, ease of calving, disease resistance, eating brush, and the ability to walk long distances between watering. "People are going to wish they had these cattle."

They're not against crossbreeding, by any means. Crossing a longhorn cow with other breeds produces "outstanding beef. And your mama cows still retain all the attributes of the Longhorn cattle," says Davis.

Crossbreeding is a necessary part of ranching. The first generation of crossbreeds, called "F1," takes the best of both parents, so it is the most prolific and healthy, according to the ranchers. This tendency to be robust is called heterosis, or hybrid vigor. However, you can get better and more consistent results if you start with two purebred animals. If a cross is successful, then it can be reproduced again and again.

But crossbreeding can produce ultimately negative results. Agricultural scientists who were crossbreeding Texas longhorns with English and continental breeds to get that quick weight gain discovered they got more than they bargained for. "They've found out that they've upped the cholesterol, upped the saturated fat, and there's less unsaturated fat," says Wallace.

But the Texas longhorn has always been a low-fat animal, and they gain fat in an opportune place: around their kidneys. This has two advantages: "When you jerk out the entrails and hang it up on the rail to gut it, you don't have all that fat on the outside," says Wallace. Not only is there less fat to eat, there's no need to trim fat anywhere else and lose meat.

And the meat's taste? "Every person who's ever set out to market longhorn beef has created a tremendous demand for it," asserts Davis, who speaks from experience. He has been working to set up the Cattleman's Texas Longhorn Beef Cooperative for the last six years. In restaurant trials, "We had customers walking out of the restaurant saying it was the best steak they ever had," he says.

The CTLR is working to educate the public, as well as other ranchers, about the declining full-blood Texas longhorn and the importance of blood-typing. It has registered 3,000 longhorns since 1991 that have passed its visual inspection and blood-typing. The CTLR has visually inspected and blood-typed public longhorn herds, such as the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, which removed its impure longhorns, and the Texas Parks & Wildlife's Big Bend Ranch State Park herd. And Don Davis is raising funds for a documentary about several ranchers.

Ramona Kelly, BS '77, a documentary writer and producer, who also works in the Department of Continuing and Extended Education, and Don Davis got in contact with each other through a mutual friend to discuss making a film about the vanishing longhorn and the vanishing longhorn rancher. Davis is raising funds while Kelly, along with filmmakers Mat Hames and Wilson Waggoner, BS '95, founders of Alpheus Media, have interviewed several ranchers, including the ones in this story. UT's Center for American History is serving as the project's nonprofit sponsor for contributions for the first phase only — the interviews — and in return, it will receive all of the documentary's raw footage to archive for historical research and education. They will complete the other phases of the project as Don Davis raises the funds.

The three are just as passionate about the longhorns and the ranchers as the ranchers themselves. Waggoner has a tremendous respect for the people, "I've always had that idea of the rugged individualist, the farmer, the rancher, as being something to look up to." But the story reaches to him more deeply because of his Texas heritage (his family has been in Texas since the early 1800s). For Hames, a fourth-generation Texan, the burning questions he wants to answer are why these independent cattle ranchers are disappearing in Texas, and why is it important that the full-blood Texas longhorns be preserved.

Kelly feels privileged to bring a part of Texas history and American culture to life, because the stories are vanishing as the ranchers disappear. "It's really an amazing experience to sit in the presence of these people and get to their heart, where their stories are."

They're passionate, but it's hard to change the tide with so few people. And another problem is that ranchers get attached to their cattle, so they don't want to blood-type and know that they have to get rid of them.

Wait. Stoic, old-school ranchers get attached to their cattle? "If they have a name, you're attached to them," says Don, laughing. "Lawrence may number most of them, but he still has a few that have names." Wallace smiles and says, "Oh, yeah."

Beyond its tastiness and health benefits, the Texas longhorn has less-tangible assets.

"I'm sixth-generation Texan, and they're my heritage," says Gil Dean, Yates' nephew.

"They are the American icon breed. That's significant. What a wonderful mascot that UT chose, because that was the symbol of this state, that was what kept this state alive after the Civil War, restored the economy," says Debbie Davis.

But without these ranchers' efforts, that icon will disappear forever.

"If you're going to have a breed of anything, you should try to have the best so you'll be proud of it," adds Yates. "There's too many phonies in the world now besides cattle, know what I mean?"

—To learn more about the documentary or the CTLR, contact Don Davis, 830/562-3651, and visit www.ctlr.org.

What makes a pure-bred Texas longhorn?

"I DON'T GIVE A DAMN WHAT ANYBODY SAYS, there's less now than there have ever been — the real, old-time Texas Spanish-blood Longhorns," says Fayette Yates.

"When the Fayette Yatese, Maudeen Markses, the Lawrence Wallaces of this world start saying that, someone ought to listen," says Don Davis, rancher and president of the Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry. It's hard to know how many full-blood Texas longhorns there are. But one thing is certain, they are diminishing with each new generation as the industry trend to change and "improve" the longhorns continues, with bigger horns, bigger bodies, and more varied colors to meet the latest trends in the show arena.

What, exactly, is so great about these full-blood Texas longhorns? Davis answers:

The naturally evolved genetic traits of Texas longhorns most commonly attributed to the breed, and which separate them from other breeds of cattle are: resistance to disease and parasites, longevity, calving ease, fertility, hardiness, early sexual maturity.

Many of the desirable characteristics attributed to full-blood longhorns relate to their functional efficiency, those traits developed by nature relating to reproductive efficiency. No other breed can surpass the Texas longhorn in reproductive efficiency. (Make your own jokes.) It is the single most important trait of the Texas longhorn and differentiates it from the nation's mainstream cattle, whose reproduction rates are actually declining. A Texas longhorn heifer (a female that has never calved, a cow is a female who has calved, a bull is a fully functioning male, and a steer is a male that has been castrated) should conceive at about 15 months of age, have her first calf by age two and continue calving yearly through age 16 and beyond.

Many of these traits are expressed in their physical characteristics.

Body

A longhorn's body should be of good length with moderate depth and thickness, angular shaped for heat adaptation, ribs that are moderately sprung (full and rounded body barrel), with a slender head and shoulders for calving ease. Bulls will be thicker and much more heavily muscled than cows, particularly in the neck and shoulders and will exhibit a crest on the neck. Texas Longhorns are considered a medi-um-bodied breed. They will grow to the range they are on. Cattle in the mineral rich, tall grass prairie will tend to be much larger than those found in the desert Southwest. A typical cow from the Fort Robinson, Neb., herd can be 1,100 to 1,200 pounds. Cows from the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Cache, Okla., average around 950 to 1000 pounds. South Texas and West Texas longhorns may be from 750 to900 pounds. Therefore, size is closely related to forage availability and strength (protein and mineral content).

"Longhorns are said to thrive in country where no other breed can live; subsist on weeds, cactus, and brush; range days away from water; and stay fit and fertile, whether it's living in the scorching, parasite-infested tropics or in the arid, subzero winters of Montana." (from Jeff Mannix's book, *Living Legend of the American West*, and the Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry brochure)

Color

Unlike Amigo, historically many of the wild Spanish cattle tended to be of solid or nearly solid hair color with much color variation. Colors said to be the most common among these wild Texas cattle were red, black, brown, dun (tan), or roan (reddish-brown).

Horns

You're looking at the longest horns on record: 9 feet ?? inches from tip to tip. A bull's horns should grow laterally from the poll with a slight forward and upward sweep. This is a dominance trait related to fighting with other bulls. The most dominant bulls bred with more of the cows and passed their genes on to the next generation. A cow's horns should be slender at the base, growing laterally from the poll with a turn upward, ending in a lateral twist out. A cow's horn length and shape are related to protecting its flank from predators and protecting its calf (which was usually hiding under its mother).

Head

A typical longhorn head should be narrow with pronounced length, and a straight profile from poll, the area between the horns, to muzzle. This characteristic is directly related to calving ease. The head should show masculinity or femininity according to sex. Cows should have a trim feminine neck, with smooth rounded shoulders, and an angular shaped body.

Ears

Small to medium, short, round ears, fitted horizontally under the horns. The long hair found in a longhorn's ears helps fend off parasites, along with its long tail with full switch [extra hair].

Little extra skin

They possess "clean" underlines without a lot of loose skin to get caught in thorny brush.

Legs

Texas longhorns may be long-legged compared to some other breeds, and they certainly are not short legged. Legs of adequate length or long legs give the Texas Longhorn its ability to travel long distances, up the trial in the trail-driving days or to water in the desert Southwest.