

Local • Humane • Healthy • Sustainable

Debbie and Don Davis ranch in the Texas Hill Country. We began our holistic education with little baggage from conventional agricultural practices. The following history outlines our progression in the cattle business.

How It Started



We began dabbling in ranching in 1992 when UT alumni Don surprised UT alumni Debbie with two longhorn heifers for her 30th birthday. From what began as a hobby on family-owned land near Austin, evolved over the years into a seedstock and Grassfed beef operation. We are passionate about preserving historically correct, genetically pure Texas Longhorn cattle. We became active with the [Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry](#), were founders of

the [Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Conservancy](#) and in effort to preserve the longhorn were instrumental in establishing a longhorn beef co-operative to develop a market for the breed.

The Driving Force

A growing movement away from confined feeding of meat animals toward a more natural and humane pasture environment was taking shape at the time we were learning the ranching business. "Humane" had ventured beyond the dog and cat world into third-party farm certification for consumer confidence. Enlightened periodicals such as [Stockman GrassFarmer](#) and [Acres USA](#) were taking a prominent place in the progressive farming community along with the Organic movement first inspired by Rachel Carson in 1962. We found ourselves caught up in the middle of it all, and it felt right. We were fortunate to attend the annual conference of Holistic Resource Management (HRM), in San Marcos, Texas in 1998. The new ideas about range management and value-based decision making "wowed" us in such a positive way we took a leap of faith in 1999 to leave the security of our city jobs and bought a ranch in the Hill Country near Tarpley, Texas. We were drawn to the area for its natural beauty, abundant wildlife, nutritious native forages, biodiversity, and potential for hunting and eco-tourism income as well as livestock production. We completed the Introduction to Holistic Management course in 1999 just as we began managing the new property that had previously been overgrazed and under-managed. Our holistic goal is to live in a rural environment with clean, healthy food and water, and by utilizing value-based decision making, achieve a comfortable living doing something we love. We understand only through environmental education of land managers will future generations be able to enjoy the original bounty afforded mankind by nature. Our desire is to restore the quality of the ranch for use as a

teaching tool to aspiring young farmers and established ranchers looking for a better way. Thus began our journey.

"Do no dishonour to the earth lest you dishonour the spirit of man." __*Henry Beston*

Lands-On Implementation

With financial help from an EQIP contract in 2001 a centrally located water well was drilled and the subsequent water lot enabled division of what had been two large pastures into five pastures of relatively equal size. Rotating a single herd according to planned grazing principles through our now eight pastures facilitated marked improvement in soil health and forage quantity and quality. Armed with five years of grazing records and a skill set of conservation management practices, in 2004 we were awarded the first [Conservation Security Program](#) Partner contract (CSP) in the State of Texas. We formed the Grassfed Longhorn Alliance, LLC in 2003. The business model was to purchase longhorn cattle from allied longhorn breeders educated in our production methods, and control grass finishing to our quality standards. A year-round supply of fresh Grassfed longhorn beef was sold to Austin area restaurants, health food grocers, at a Saturday morning farmers market and via an Internet order site. After three years, we found ourselves stressed from overwork trying to manage more acreage in leased land than was physically possible for two people. We spent more time on the road and in town marketing our product than we did at home enjoying our ranch and cattle. Much of our resources were spent distributing certain portion cuts to various wholesale customers resulting in the need to retail market the remaining unsold portions, which dominated much of our week. We struggled with how best to sell the whole carcass since cattle are not comprised only of premium steaks. Financial planning in combination with a little soul searching demonstrated the best solution to lead us toward our holistic goal was to downsize the longhorn beef operation to marketing only whole carcasses from animals born, raised and finished on our ranch.

“The deeper meaning of food is about growing a world worth living in. To me, as significant as giving away money to charity is to affirm products mindful of the wellbeing of workers, communities, wildlife, farm animals and the soil. Charity only deals with the symptoms of injustice, but paying a fair price for right relationships tackles the root causes.” __*Alastair McIntosh – BBC Radio Scotland – 10 February 2010*

The Next Step

Our next big leap was taken when we discontinued our weekly supply of fresh beef to our wholesale market. With experience pleasing the end user learned from three years of manning a farmers' market booth, Debbie assumed the duties of overseeing and selling the cattle and longhorn beef and her latest enterprise, wild-caught pastured pork. She also maintained a sizable garden from which surplus was sold at a local farmers' market in Medina, Texas.

Our business evolved into the [Grassfed Livestock Alliance](#), LLC (GLA), that Don operates. The new business plan is to group market only whole carcasses grass-finished by their owners. The goal is to bring healthy, humanely raised, Grassfed meats into the mainstream while providing a sustainable, profitable market to family farms. Don applies the

business knowledge he gained from marketing his own product with collaborative operations skills learned from establishing the longhorn beef cooperative in the 1990's, in promoting GLA Grassfed meats produced by several like-minded ranchers. Consistency is monitored through third-party farm audits to assure compliance with [AGA/GAP](#) standards that ensure a quality product. This is our opportunity to promote and reward regenerative ranch management practices and realize our desire to spread the holistic message. [Holistic Management International Open Gate](#) GLA provides a fair market for family owned and operated farms that put their care, labor, and reputation into the quality of the meat they produce. These responsible ranchers have built solid reputations by basing their actions on ethical principles and serve as roll models for future meat producers. Members supply Whole Foods Markets in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Arkansas with premium quality, humanely raised Grassfed beef and lamb, which is healthy for the consumer and the environment. Through cooperative effort and group marketing, duplication is reduced, which allows producers to spend more time with their families and farms. GLA standards are animal centered and pasture based. Eligible animals are born and raised their entire life on open grass pastures without the use of antibiotics, growth hormones, animal by-products or ionophores and are never confined to a feedlot. Animals are traceable from birth to harvest and must meet the [American Grassfed Association's Grassfed Standards](#). Members are required to adhere to a holistic approach to their farm/ranch management designed to sustainably enhance environmental quality of the land, water and air.

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them." _Laurence Binyon

Looking Forward

We continue to strive to restore native prairie grasses to our range that when we arrived, was heavily dominated with lower-successional short grass species and King Ranch bluestem. Tools we use include planned grazing to manage for the species we desire, and mechanical brush control in combination with an accumulated 90 to 120-days grazing recovery time per pasture. With the 2003 addition of [Bandera Grassland™](#), our longhorn beef business, we began exploring how we might intensively manage improved pasture for maximum forage production. We began a compost tea application program in 2005 and installed a small irrigation system in our finishing pasture. We researched improved forages that produce high quantity and require a short recovery time. We were ready to go to great expense in time and money to collect data on the efficacy of various organic soil amendments to identify which ones are required to push our finishing pasture beyond its natural potential so we could harvest more than 20,000 pounds of beef per year. This plan was dependent on the permeability of our soils and regular rainfall maintaining groundwater levels. The native prairie pastures visited during the 2006 HRM Annual Meeting coupled with enduring three years of devastating drought, influenced our decisions when rethinking our pasture plan. We questioned "if we were drawn to this country for what it is, why would we want to change it into something it is not?" Continued monitoring of range conditions help us to adjust our cattle numbers and grazing times to manage for drought conditions, making it possible to maintain pasture health

while producing a small supply of Grassfed beef. Our desire is to divide our eight pastures again to better take advantage of animal impact from our reduced herd numbers on smaller paddocks. We have added required sources of water for livestock and wildlife using dollars rewarded through our [CSP](#) contract and are ready to make the next investment toward enhancing all ecosystem processes to nurture diversified biological associations.

"And it shall come to pass--That I will give you the rain for your land in its due season, the early rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy grain, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full."
_Deuteronomy 11:14-15

In Their Own Words

"Neither of us were raised on a ranch, although both families have agriculture backgrounds. We were city kids removed by one or more generations, that enjoyed weekends on our families' farms. We grew up during the idealistic 1960's and 1970's influenced by the movement to return to the land. We found our own little piece of paradise where we are unencumbered by convention. We are proud to carry on the tradition of Don's Trail Driver great-grandfather and uncles through our choice of livestock best adapted to our environment—the Texas Longhorn. These adaptable cattle have taught us to be better stewards of our land and advocates for regenerative agriculture, a holistic involvement that rewards first the soil, then the native plants and animals, and ultimately the production of wholesome, uncompromised food. We incorporate a value-based decision-making process to manage our ranch as a whole system; considering impact on water and mineral cycles, nurturing the health of soil microflora, enhancing wildlife habitat, and humanely raising livestock that benefit our community. We believe with holistic management we will make our contribution to the land, the cattle and future generations."

Lessons Learned

One of the most valuable lessons learned along our adventure, is "just jump in and do it." In the early 90's Debbie went back to school and took a couple of years of animal science courses at Southwest Texas State University. "I came away with useful knowledge about farm animal disease prevention but gained three-fold the practical knowledge in only six months of handling the animals." We muddled through eight years of marketing feasibility and carcass studies along with feed conversion trials and restaurant consumer trials in preparation for the longhorn beef cooperative. When we dove into our private direct marketing business we began the climb up the Bell curve of experiential learning that within six months' time placed us light-years ahead of all the knowledge gained from University studies for the longhorn beef cooperative. When first seeking knowledge about range management, we consulted our County Extension Agent and Soil Conservation Service for advice about what grasses to plant, fertilizers to use and chemicals to spray. We attended Ag Extension field days, TSCRA School for Successful Ranching and an A&M Beef Cattle Short Course. Until we read *Holistic Management* by Alan Savory and acted on lessons learned from the Introduction to Holistic Management course, we were simply floundering between failed range management experiments with little spiritual fulfillment. We were spending more dollars on livestock feed than we brought in from cattle sales. We did not have a clear direction before our paradigm

shift to decision-making based on testing for desired outcome. We learned to visualize the quality of life we desired and work backward to discover what forms of production would make it possible. We learned to manage for drought and still make a profit by determining what actions were meaningful and enriched our purpose verses trends of little long-term consequence. There is no better teacher than experience, and nothing more satisfying than seeing positive results from following one's heart.

"The whole is more than the sum of its parts" _Aristotle

Sustainability; in a broad sense is the ability to maintain a certain state; the ability of a business or an ecosystem to maintain ecological processes, functions, biodiversity and productivity into the future. Sustainability is an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will over the long term:

- Satisfy human food and fiber needs
- Enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base
- Make the most efficient use of non-renewables
- Sustain the economic viability of the farm and
- Enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole

For humans to live sustainably, the Earth's resources must be used at a rate at which they can be replenished. Sustainable agriculture integrates three main goals: environmental stewardship, farm profitability and prosperous farming communities. Regenerative agriculture refers to the ability of a farm to produce food indefinitely while building soil, without causing severe or irreversible damage to ecosystem health. Although and air sunlight are available everywhere on Earth, crops also depend on soil nutrients and the availability of water. When farmers grow and harvest crops, they remove some of these nutrients from the soil. Without replenishment, land suffers from nutrient depletion and becomes either unusable or suffers from reduced yields. Regenerative agriculture depends on replenishing the soil while minimizing the use of non-renewable resources, including recycling crop and livestock waste and growing legume forages that form symbioses with nitrogen-fixing bacteria called rhizobia. __Wikipedia

"Scientists have calculated all we have to do to offset carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is to increase the organic content of our farmland just one-tenth of one percent each year." __ *Malcolm Beck*

We watched the organic matter in our soil increase from 1.85% in 2003 to 4.9% in 2016. This is an accomplishment for which we are very proud and incentive to protect our range from over-grazing.

1.85%	2003
2.50%	2006
3.70%	2009
4.60%	2012
4.90%	2016

Regenerative; Regenerative Agriculture is a system of farming principles and practices that increases biodiversity, enriches soils, improves watersheds, and enhances ecosystem services. Regenerative Agriculture aims to capture carbon in soil and aboveground biomass, reversing current global trends of atmospheric accumulation. At the same time, it offers increased yields, resilience to climate instability, and higher health and vitality for farming and ranching communities. The system draws from decades of scientific and applied research by the global communities of organic farming, agroecology, Holistic Management, and agroforestry. __Terra Genesis International

Local

Sustainability is achieved by consuming locally produced foods; when harvested ripe contain higher brix than produce picked green and shipped hundreds, even thousands of miles leaving behind a large Carbon footprint. Consuming local strengthens the local economy by keeping food dollars close to home and preserves open spaces by enabling families to stay on farms, protecting them from fragmentation and development. Local food is accountable, traceable, and instills consumer confidence.

Healthy

Healthy can be defined as production standards that consider physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of life as closely interconnected and equally important. Grassfed meats, and dairy contain high levels of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a powerful antioxidant and are higher in Omega 3 fatty acids (necessary for heart and brain function), than food products from grain-fed animals. Grassfed products also contain higher levels of beta-carotene, Vitamin E, and Vitamin C and are lower in fat and cholesterol. They are at much lower risk of contamination of E. coli 0157:H7 that thrives in the acid environment of grain-fed ruminants. Less fossil fuel is used in production of feed and natural mineral cycle processes create a healthy soil environment that in turn stimulates an effective water cycle. -

- Healthy soils—rotational grazing and no-till agriculture increases organic matter; no need for chemicals or inorganic fertilizers; plant diversity, quality and quantity protect the soil from erosion and shade the soil protecting microbes from overheating so they can maintain tilth that enables permeability.
- Healthy water—management that prevents run-off and leaves no residue, no concentration of waste; natural biological processes including microbes and dung beetles break down manures and return nutrients to the soil where they are available for plants; healthy grasslands enable groundwater recharge.
- Healthy air—no Methane or airborne microbial flora (fecal dust clouds) hovering over confined feedlots; no need for pesticides or herbicides; diverse plant communities create Oxygen and absorb excess Carbon from the atmosphere.

- Healthy animals--living as Nature intended; contented animals living in healthy environments rarely become ill and do not require prophylactic use of antibiotics or ionophores to prevent disease; high quality forages convert to high quality meat; meat from Grassfed animals is superior in nutrient density to meat from grain fed animals.

Humane

Humane animal handling can be defined as compassion for animals' physical and emotional wellbeing. Low stress handling eliminates suffering through gentle, empathetic management including providing ample forage, mineral supplementation, clean water, and pasture to roam and express species' natural behavior. Humane adheres to a responsible farm health plan that holistically incorporates the wellbeing of livestock, wildlife, plant community biodiversity, soil health, water cycle efficiency and human quality of life. A humane farmer is grateful for the animals that make his livelihood and treats them with respect and kindness.

"We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of earth." __Henry Beston 1888-1968

