

The Texas Longhorn

The first long-horned cattle came to North America between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries during the Spanish explorations, expeditions and religious missions. When Anglo-American pioneers traveled west in the early nineteenth century, they brought domesticated English cattle with them. American Indians raided cattle from both the Spanish and Anglo-Americans and gradually developed their own hybrid strains of cattle. With many cattle escaping from the open ranges, Spanish, English and hybrid cattle interbred.

By the 1830's, thousands of wild cattle ranged from the Rio Grande to the Nueces River. Exposed to the elements and relentlessly hunted by American Indians and colonists, cattle adapted or perished. They were forced to survive in the blazing sun and freezing winter, through dust storms and swamps. They could subsist on a diet of weeds and brush and live for days without water. From their Spanish ancestors, they inherited large, sweeping horns with twists at the end that allowed them to ward off coyotes and wolves. Colonists called cattle of the brush "wild cattle," "mustang cattle" or "Spanish cattle." It was not until the end of the Civil War that some range men would refer to "Texas cattle" or "Texas Longhorns."

Early Texas cowboys rustled cattle from Mexican ranches and captured feral cattle from the brush country. They stocked Texas ranges with these animals or trailed them through the Louisiana swamps to markets in New Orleans. Although the animals varied in their degree of wildness, skilled raiders could drive them in herds. After two or three long days of running, then trotting, then walking, they could be managed almost like domestic cattle.

Following the Civil War in 1865, Texans came home to a shattered economy – and an estimated five million Longhorns. Cattle in other states had been decimated by wartime demand. The stage was set for the era of the great cattle drives. Journeys through mountains and deserts could be treacherous and exhausting, but the indomitable Texas Longhorns were the ideal cattle for the trails. Drovers had no time to care for the cattle, and the Longhorns did not require it. The Texas cattle business became an empire, stocking ranges across the country. The Longhorn had become the economic salvation of Texas.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the marketplace began to favor faster-maturing British breeds. Expansion of the railroad put long-horned cattle at a disadvantage against cattle that could be more easily packed into railroad cars. Perhaps the most important reason for the decline of the Longhorn was the spread of "Texas fever," a disease that killed most of the cattle that came in contact with the much hardier Longhorns. Investors set up such a clamor that the bottom of the Longhorn market fell out. By the time "Texas fever" had passed, the northern market had been satiated and the northern ranges were fenced in.

By the early twentieth century, the Texas Longhorn was nearly extinct. But many people recognized the loss and worked to preserve the Longhorn as an invaluable part of America's heritage. By 1931 six unique strains were being bred by private ranchers, and the federal government funded a search for remaining wild Longhorns from which to breed a herd at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. Today, more than a quarter of a million Longhorns are registered with the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America.

The Texas Longhorn is a symbol of free ranges and wide-open possibilities, of the fierce, independent people who created Texas. As the chosen mascot for the University of Texas at Austin, the Longhorn embodies the strength, fortitude and drive that our students need to forge their own paths into the future.