

LIFESTYLE

All you need to know about legendary longhorns, true Texas icons



René A. Guzman, Staff writer

Feb. 17, 2021 | Updated: Feb. 22, 2021 2:07 p.m.



1 of 5



So-called “goalpost” horns on a Texas longhorn may look pretty, but these days most breeders prefer longhorns with lateral or twisty horns.

codyphotography /Getty Images

Josie Struthoff is positively hooked on Texas longhorns. Loving the iconic breed — and being one of its most passionate breeders — will do that.

“It’s a passion,” said Struthoff, who along with her

husband oversees nearly 400 head of Texas longhorns at Struthoff Ranch, about 25 miles northeast of San Antonio.

“We enjoy seeing the new babies, the crossing of the genetics. Because the longhorns are really different from any other kind of breed of cattle.”

Longhorns certainly stand out when it comes to their horns – they have record-setting horn spans – and their tough-as-Texas spirits. From grueling cattle drives in the late 1800s to their decline in the early 1900s, the mighty longhorn rises above its bovine brethren to remain a living Texas icon.

“The longhorns are more iconic of what represents Texas,” said Struthoff, a former veterinarian clinic manager. “They’re very rugged. They’re durable. They can stand the heat.”

Yet despite those intimidating horns and iron constitutions, Texas longhorns also are some of the gentlest of giants.

“They’ll respond exactly how they’re treated. If you treat them nice and hand feed them, they’ll follow you around

like puppy dogs,” said Will Craddock, who manages the Official State of Texas Longhorn Herd at Fort Griffin State Historic Site in Albany, Texas.

Craddock oversees about a third of the approximately 250 longhorns that make up the state’s official herd. These “historically correct” cattle are bred to match and maintain the pedigree of the original Texas longhorns that first roamed the state in the late 1800s.

Here’s a closer look at the long legacy of the Texas longhorn.

They're called longhorns for a reason. True to their name, Texas longhorns grow, well, long horns, sometimes more than 8 feet long from tip to tip. In October 2019, a 6-year-old longhorn from Rocksprings named Bucklehead unofficially broke the Guinness World Record for the longest horn span on a steer ever with a staggering 11 feet 1.8 inches from tip to tip.

The horns of most historically correct longhorns, however, are much shorter. Bulls (males) average around 2 ½ feet long while cows (females) average horns 3 feet long. Steers (castrated males) grow horns around 5 to 7 feet long.

At the Struthoffs' farm, 6-year-old cow Spicey has the longest horns of the herd with 98 inches from tip to tip. She also was the Grand Champion Female at the 2019 San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo.

The goal isn't the goalpost horns. Horn shapes vary, though Struthoff noted the three most common on Texas longhorns are horns that point up at the ends like goalposts, simple lateral horns and corkscrew horns that have a twist. Like fashion, certain horn types have their day in the sun with breeders.

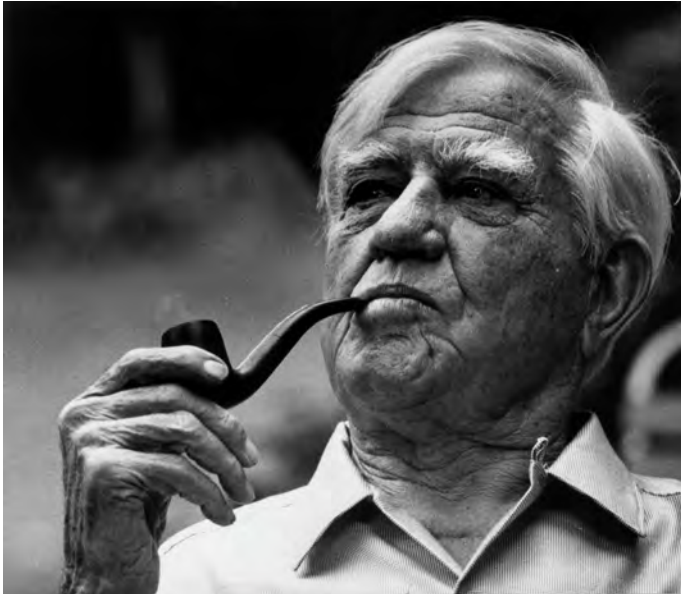
"Goalposts are not really desirable," Struthoff said. "The lateral or the twisty horn is like the black dress of horns."

A Texas treasure from the Spanish. The Texas longhorn is a descendant of the cattle Spanish explorers and settlers first brought to what's now Mexico in the late

17th century. Some of those cattle escaped into Texas, becoming "Texas cattle," as they were referred to then, roaming wild as game animals for roughly 200 years.

After the Civil War, these wild cattle were rounded up, driven to markets and sold.

A Western writer saved the longhorn from decline. Sales of longhorn beef and hides helped Texas get back on its boots after the Civil War. But by the early 1900s, European cattle became more popular and the longhorn lost its luster.



— Author and folklorist J. Frank Dobie (1888-1964) helped save the Texas longhorn from extinction in the early 1920s. Dobie's conservation efforts led to an official longhorn herd for Texas that's maintained to this day.
Ted Rozumalski /Houston Chronicle

As longhorns declined in the 1920s, Western writer and folklorist J. Frank Dobie helped organize a herd to preserve what he considered an iconic fixture of Texas history. The herd was donated to the Texas Parks Board in 1941 as a designated state herd.

In 1948, after several moves around the state, the Texas Parks Board settled on Fort Griffin as the permanent home of the official herd.

Today, the herd is split between the Fort Griffin site and a handful of other state parks.

Now bred mostly for competition. Struthoff noted most longhorn breeders now breed the cattle for conformation, color and other longhorn characteristics that typify the most perfect specimen, sort of like dog shows for cattle. Those longhorns that don't make the cut for such competitions are used for meat, which is 90 percent lean, Struthoff said.

Like most longhorn breeders, the Struthoffs make their money on those that do make the cut by selling their genetics, namely the longhorn itself and the bull semen for breeding. They also sell some of the gentler of their giants to folks who want really big pets with horns.

A longhorn of a different color. Longhorns come in a variety of colors, but most common are dark red, brown and white. They also have spots. And even with all the genetic information at breeders' fingertips, calf color can still be a surprise.

"We kind of consider it like an Easter egg," Struthoff said. "You never know what kind of color you're going to get."

They're big on size and lifespan, too. Adult average Texas longhorns weigh around 900 to 1,200 pounds for cows and 1,200 to 1,500 pounds for bulls and steers. Longhorns can grow up to 6 feet tall at the shoulder and up to 8 to 10 feet long from nose to tail. Most longhorns live 20 to 25 years.

One calf at a time. Longhorn mamas give birth to a single calf roughly once a year for most of their life.

Tough by nature. Thanks to a couple of hundred years running around Texas, longhorns are very resistant to disease, Craddock said. And as herbivores go, Craddock said longhorns are more like goats in that they can eat just about any kind of plant, including cacti — thorns and all — and the toxic silver nightshade.

Struthoff noted longhorns consume about half the feed of most meat cattle. And all of the Struthoff longhorns survived the recent brutal cold snap that hit the state.



It doesn't get more Texas than the Texas longhorn, the iconic cattle of the Lone Star State.

iteachphoto /Getty Images /iStockphoto

They're super sweet until they perceive a predator.

Cradduck stressed that longhorns in general are smart and docile. But if they sense a predator or a threat, cows and bulls alike will surround it and put those horns and hooves to use. That also goes for when a longhorn calf cries out in alarm.

"You better have a tall tree or a pickup or something, because the entire herd will come after you," Cradduck said.

Long has Bevo reigned. The University of Texas at Austin's beloved mascot made his debut at the school's 1916 Thanksgiving Day football victory over rival Texas A&M University. A group of UT alumni led by Stephen Pinckney presented the longhorn at halftime as a mascot to bring their old school good luck. It must have worked, because the 7-7 tie at halftime turned into a 21-7 win against the favored Aggies.

As for how Bevo got his name, UT campus magazine editor Ben Dyer is credited with christening the steer in the December 1916 issue. Dyer's account of the Thanksgiving game included mention of the longhorn, where Dyer declared, "His name is Bevo. Long may he reign!"

According to the Texas Exes website (texasexes.org),

there are several theories as to how Bevo got his name. One is that Dyer got it from Bevo, a popular soft drink at the time. Another is that Dyer tweaked the word “beeves,” the plural form of beef, by adding an “o” at the end. And another theory suggests Dyer got the idea from comic strips by Gus Mager, which featured characters named Braggo and Sherlocko.

Fifteen longhorns have held the title Bevo as a living mascot. The current longhorn, Bevo XV, made his debut in September 2016 at a 100th anniversary celebration of the Bevo legacy.

The Texas longhorn became an official state animal in 1995. Despite the longhorn’s long legacy in Texas, it wasn’t until 1995 that the Texas Legislature designated it an official state mammal.

***NOTE:** This a caption in a photo of the bull SR Clout 466 has been updated to correct his weight, which is 1,800 pounds.*

rguzman@express-news.net / Twitter: @reneguz



Written By
René A. Guzman

René A. Guzman writes about geek and pop culture as well as consumer gadgets and technology. Before joining the Express-News in December 1998, the San Antonio native co-owned a college humor magazine named Bitter, for which he wrote, designed and edited, as well as distributed at various campuses and businesses citywide.
