



SPREAD OAKS

— RANCH —

Go Deeper Into the Heart of Texas



Spread Oaks Ranch's Treasured Longhorn Cattle

Once driven to the brink of extinction, these tenacious icons of the Old West are living history

On the rolling Texas pastureland of Spread Oaks Ranch, three regal Longhorn steers graze contentedly in a restored native prairie field just in front of the lodge compound. With their flashy multihued hides, impressive headgear, and sturdy builds, they seem as intrinsic to the Texas landscape as does earth, sky, and water.

It nearly wasn't so.

Christopher Columbus first brought native Iberian long-horned cattle to the Antilles Islands in 1493. When the settlers who accompanied him struck out for Mexico in the early 1500s in search of gold and other treasures, they brought some along. Iberian cattle—more akin to wildlife than domesticated cattle—were ideally suited to the harsh environments they encountered: able to thrive on available forage, walk long distances, and fend off predators with their hard hooves and lethal horns. Moreover, these hardy, fertile cattle could produce and raise a calf each year, for 20 years or more. The cows' strong mothering instincts and ample udders meant they could successfully feed their young in a harsh land of generally poor forage, and the bulls' tight sheaths helped them avoid injury in the rough thornscrub they inhabited, ensuring they could reproduce.

Iberian cattle landings were primarily at Vera Cruz, and the hardy beasts fanned out across Mexico, typically roaming free over large ranchos and mission lands, with "survival of the fittest" holding sway.

In the early 1700s, the Spanish missionaries

brought some of these long-horned cattle with them into then Mexican-ruled Texas—and to a lesser degree, the other border states—to sustain them on their journeys and as seed stock for settlers at the missions they sought to establish throughout the San Antonio River Valley. One after another, the missions fell to roving Comanche and Apache, and the Spanish missionaries fled, leaving their cattle behind to roam free.

The longhorns randomly bred with frontiersmen's English cattle, culminating in wily, slab-sided, multicolored bovines swinging sets of horns that could measure 7 feet across. Native tribes gave them berth, preferring to hunt the tamer and easier-to-kill buffalo than this savvy and combative quarry.

Even wolves following migrating buffalo herds and preying on domestic cattle remained shy and wary of these fierce, formidable longhorns. As J. Frank Dobie noted in *The Longhorns* (Little Brown, 1941), describing Texas rancher Noah

Smithwick's recollections:

When, about 1850, he located on Brushy Creek, east of the Colorado River, he found himself and his animals among "numerous descendants of the Spanish cattle brought to the Mission San Gabriel away back in the eighteenth century. Some were very handsome brutes, coal-black and clean-limbed, their white horns glistening as if polished." Two of the bulls took up with Smithwick's cattle and became "quite domesticated." About the same time lobo wolves began to depredate. When the milch cows and other gentle stock were attacked, they would try to get to the house. The wild cattle, on the other hand, "would form a ring around their calves and, presenting a line of horns, fight the lobos off."

Although the plentiful open range seemingly provided ample forage for all, the newly arrived long-horned cattle competed for resources in the same environmental niche as did American bison. Sadly, the bison would be decimated by mass slaughter in the 1800s, with their numbers plummeting from an estimated 30 to 60 million across North America to

approximately 325 animals during the course of the 19th century. What was tragic for bison was good for longhorns, however: By 1860, the number of long-horned cattle had surged to 5 to 6 million head in Texas alone.

The future looked bright for these invincible, adaptable beasts.

But the next decade would bring a nearly insurmountable "perfect storm."

Decimation, Devastation, and Defamation

It's a wonder that longhorns ever made it through the 1860s.

First came the Civil War, with increased demand for tallow for candles, soap, lubricants, and cooking and leather for saddles, harness, and boots, which continued well after the war ended. Meat was actually a byproduct of these "hide-and-tallow" processing plants, as, without refrigeration, it had little commercial value.

Next, Lucien B. Smith garnered the first patent for barbed wire in 1867, commencing the long, slow strangulation of the open range. Beef ranchers increasingly preferred to fence their cattle, opting for the faster-growing, higher-fat British breeds

(Continued on next page)



Spread Oaks Ranch's three prized Longhorns, Duke, Ranger, and Moonshine, rest alongside the ranch entrance road, while Katahdin sheep and 44 Farms-bred Black Angus cattle graze in the adjacent pasture.

(Continued from previous page)

that commanded a higher market price, than the arduous, expensive task of managing and driving wild herds through drought, snow, hardscrabble trails, and raging rivers. The longhorns fell out of favor with beef ranchers.

In 1868, William Davis of Detroit, Michigan, was awarded the first patent for a refrigerated boxcar. Now that chilled carcasses could be shipped by rail, Texas cattle no longer needed to be driven to markets in Kansas City and beyond. Along with famed cattle-trail cowboys such as Oliver Loving, Charles Goodnight, and Lizzie Johnson Williams—noted by historians as the first woman to accompany her own cattle up the Chisholm Trail—interest in longhorn cattle drives waned. The very traits that made longhorns so popular with cattlemen—their foraging abilities, stamina over arduous cattle drives, and tenacity in fighting off predators—now had little or no value.

Then came Tick Fever.

Also in 1868, the English journal *Veterinarian* reported that a “very subtle and terribly fatal” disease was felling cattle in Illinois. Midwestern farmers soon realized that their cattle sickened and died after herds of Texas longhorns had passed through on cattle drives. Alarmed states along the cattle trails scrambled to pass quarantine laws to protect their herds from coming in contact with longhorns. By 1885, Kansas—crucial because of its central location and rail links—outlawed Texas longhorns from even entering the state.

Turns out, the culprit was *Babesia*, a pathogen carried by cattle ticks. The longhorns, with their ironclad immune systems, could fight off the pathogen but remained a carrier, thus infecting other cows. Over the remainder of the 19th century, the longhorn became the pariah of the plains and by 1910, they were virtually extinct.

From Near Extinction to Distinction

1927 marks the year these remarkable cattle earned their long-overdue capital “L.” And if you think something like that would take an act of Congress, you’d be right.

Thank Will Croft Barnes: Barnes, who served in the Signal Corps at Fort Apache, Arizona, and had a long career as a successful cattle rancher, joined the infant U.S. Forest Service in 1907 to help promote conservation to cattle ranchers. As he crisscrossed the Southwest, he was stricken by the disappearance of the once-ubiquitous longhorns and determined to save this vanishing breed. In 1927, Barnes,



Duke, the first of the ranch’s three Longhorns, advances through Spread Oaks Ranch’s restored native grasslands.

with the assistance of Texas-born Senator John B. Kendrick, wangled \$3,000 from the U.S. Congress to establish a longhorn herd at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Cache, Oklahoma.

Barnes—by then 69 years old—saddled up with another Forest Service employee, John H. Halton, and together they rode almost 5,000 miles through mesquite thickets, along the Rio Grande’s dry resacas, and across vast grasslands in South Texas and Mexico searching for longhorns. Barnes and Halton also searched through the thousands of cattle held on vast ranches, in round-ups, and in stockyards—ultimately inspecting more than 30,000 head of cattle—to identify 23 animals that they deemed worthy of being classed as true types of historic longhorns. After a “merry time” of dipping these wild cattle to eradicate ticks, the foundation stock was shipped by rail to the refuge to

become the legendary WR Longhorn Herd, jump-starting the Texas Longhorn breed we know today ... with its well-earned capital “L.”

Interest in these historic cattle soared, encouraged by the availability of purebred animals at the WR auctions and through others working to preserve this breed. Ranchers formed the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America in 1964 to establish Texas Longhorn standards and to facilitate communication among owners. TLBAA also hosts sales, shows, and horn-measuring contests, such as the Horn Showcase.

Other registries include the International Texas Longhorn Association and the Cattlemen’s Texas Longhorn Registry. Today, Texas Longhorns can be found coast to coast and in numerous other countries.

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch

Audrey Wylie, who co-owns Spread Oaks Ranch, has a special affinity for the three Longhorn steers, which explains why she named the ranch’s three luxurious ensuite casitas for them: Duke, Ranger, and Moonshine. All three were acquired at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo auction, in different years.

“John Hever, who has HL Longhorns out in Johnson City, has donated a Longhorn steer to the HLSR Parade Committee for many years,” she says. “The proceeds from the steer auction then go to the scholarships that are awarded each year at the Livestock Show, so it’s a great program, all-around.”

And so the first steer led to another ... and yet another. “Longhorns are just such a symbol of Texas ranch hospitality,” says Audrey. “They’re our pasture pets.”

Holiday Reds and Greens

Spread Oaks Ranch's hoophouse, along with greenhouse, assures fresh organic produce throughout the winter



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The new hoophouse between the Main House and the Trooper House is in full production; Lisa Roesse, Spread Oaks Ranch organic gardening specialist, tends young plants; Chef Ric Rosser's daily harvest of ranch-grown greens, including Dinosaur kale, spinach, nasturtium, Swiss chard, baby radishes, baby turnips, mixed baby greens, cilantro, curly parsley, flat-leaf parsley, arugula, baby purple cabbage, Russian red kale, and wasabi mustard greens; a young purple cabbage; mixed baby greens; a greenhouse-grown heirloom tomato.

New Treehouse Popular with Young and Young-at-Heart

Inquisitive souls of all ages will enjoy exploring our new treehouse



The inviting new treehouse complex has multiple access points, a house, and open platform, and a lookout point over the lake for hours of active entertainment.

Sixty-five-year-old Decoy Found at Jennings Lake

Part history and part mystery, a worn decoy adds to the lore of Jennings Lake as premier waterfowl destination

Paul Berger, a Spread Oaks Ranch guide, noticed an ancient decoy stuck in a snag of a tree near Jennings Lake, obviously stranded there by flood.

He then showed the decoy to Rob Sawyer. Sawyer, another Spread Oaks Ranch guide, is not only the ranch historian, but also the author of *A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting: The Decoys, Guides, Clubs, and Places, 1870s to 1970s*; *Texas Market Hunting: Stories of Waterfowl, Game Laws, and Outlaws*; and the upcoming *Texas Waterfowl Hunting Images from the 1900s*.

Sawyer immediately knew what he was looking at, commenting, "The name on the bottom of the decoy is W. Close. Chances are, whoever left it either bought it or found it from 'Little Willie' Close." Below, Sawyer shares an excerpt from *A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting: The Decoys, Guides, Clubs, and Places, 1870s to 1970s*, which tells more about the decoy's fascinating history:

The Close Family. Rockport's Fred Close comes from a long line of well known Aransas Bay watermen and duck hunters. His grandfather was William Sherman 'Big Willie' Close, a man who, by the time he died in 1950, was thought to have caught more fish than anyone else on the Texas Gulf Coast. Fred says Big Willie didn't hunt for sport. "Back in the 30s and 40s down here we were hunting to eat," and he adds "It was very hard during the Depression and even during the War, because German subs made it hard to fish. During the day we couldn't get out of sight of land, and nights were blacked out - no lights anywhere on the coast." Fred ate so many ducks as a young man that "Even today I don't hardly ever eat a duck - that's all we had to eat." [i]

Fred's father William Frederick 'Little Willie' Close was also a waterman, and during the 1930s guided at Port Bay and St. Charles Bay Hunting Club. When Willie started guiding day hunters on his own, his was a business he never had to advertise. He took hunters to St. Joseph by shrimp boat, hunting mostly at Mud Island and Allyn's Bight. Rockport guide James Fox says when Willie traded his wooden decoys for his first plastic Victor ones he didn't like the factory colors, and repainted all 144 himself. As a waterman he was a perfectionist as well, building his own wooden skiffs using dowels instead of nails. [ii]

[i] Allen, William, and Sue Allen Taylor, *Aransas: The Life of a Texas Coastal Community* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1997), 334; Fred Close interview, April 4, 2009, Estes Flats, TX.

[ii] James Fox interview, Oct. 17, 2008, Rockport, TX.



TOP: Paul Berger found this 1954 decoy at Jennings Lake, a historic duck hunting location at Spread Oaks Ranch. MIDDLE: The keel is stamped "(Copyright 1954 J.S. McQuire)." BOTTOM: A digitally enhanced image clearly shows the handwritten "W. CLOSE," and an effort made to scrape it off with the point of a knife.

Secretive Shorebirds Abound at Spread Oaks Ranch

Yellowlegs, avocets, curlews, and black-necked stilts among the fascinating avian species on the ranch



There's something about observing birds to entrance even the most jaded soul: their innocence, their grace, their beauty, and the absolutely flawless designs of their bodies to suit their environments and preferred food sources.

Note the beak shapes of these four species recently admired at Spread Oaks Ranch; The greater yellowlegs, top left, has a sturdy, medium-length beak to spear its muck-dwelling prey, while the avocets, upper right, have long, upturned beaks to

snatch insects skimming the water's surface and swimming small fish. The long-billed curlew, lower right, can drill into the soil with its downward-swooping long beak, while the black-necked stilt, lower left, uses its sharp, medium-length beak to impale crustaceans buried in the mud.

Whether you choose to carry a camera or simply a pair of binoculars, Spread Oaks Ranch birding is bound to lower your blood pressure and increase your appreciation of the wild!

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A greater yellowlegs gleans aquatic invertebrates, small fish, and frogs from a flooded field; three avocets pursue insects and small fish swimming in the shallows; a long-billed curlew probes the moist soil for mollusks and seeds; a black-necked stilt forages for crustaceans in the mud flats.



Spread Oaks Ranch's New Quarters Progressing On Schedule

Eight ensuite bedroom guest quarters to be christened "The Old Three Hundred"

Hosea H. League and John Crier held the original deeds to land that is now contained within Spread Oaks Ranch's 5,500 acres. They were awarded these land grants by Stephen F. Austin, and numbered among his original "Old Three Hundred."

To honor this part of Spread Oaks Ranch's rich history, the

new guest quarters—to be sheathed in the same rough-hewn limestone as the rest of the lodge compound's buildings—will be named "The Old Three Hundred."

To learn more about this fascinating period of Spread Oaks Ranch's history, click on [Spread Oaks Ranch June 2019 Newsletter](#).



HAPPY HOLIDAYS, Y'ALL!

ON THE COVER: Spread Oaks Ranch Longhorns, Katahdin sheep, and 44 Farms-bred Black Angus enjoy the lush winter forage of the Texas MidCoast.

SUBSCRIBE to our newsletter at spreadoaksranch.com—don't miss a single issue!



*"Ninety minutes from Houston,
yet a world away."*

Visit Spread Oaks Ranch online at spreadoaksranch.com.

To arrange your adventure, contact Business Manager Tim Soderquist at tim@spreadoaksranch.com or (281) 814-5442.

For media inquiries or newsletter comments, contact newsletter editor Susan L. Ebert at susan@field2table.com or (512) 431-2013.

RESIDENTIAL DESIGNER: Brandon Breau, brandon@brandonbreau.design;

INTERIOR DESIGNER: Ginger Barber, ginger@gingerbarber.com; LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Heath Thibodeaux, heath@hjtland.com