

# Hooked On Horns:

*This Berks County Cattleman Thinks Texas Longhorns  
Are The Right Breed In The Long Run*

BY JACK HUBLEY

**FREDERICKSBURG** — Unlike most cattlemen these days, Don Neidigh always liked cattle with horns. When he was eight years old his aunt and uncle bought him a belt buckle with a picture of a Texas Longhorn. He still has that buckle...along with 50 head of the real thing on his 50-acre farm near Fredericksburg, Berks County.

Neidigh came by his first longhorns somewhat by accident when a pair of steers hit the auction block at a horse sale in Dillsburg. After 10 years of raising longhorns, he's sold on the breed; so much so, that last year he teamed up with Bill Mummert of Spring Grove to establish the Northeast Texas Longhorn Association, the first such organization to be formed in the East. According to Mummert, who serves as association president, NTLA has about 30 members from 16 states.

Any fan of old western movies has probably suspected Texas Longhorns played an important role in feeding the nation during the 19th century. Actually, Columbus brought the ancestors of what were to become Texas Longhorns to the West Indies in 1493. In 1521 these horned Andalusian cattle were taken to Mexico, and descendants of the original herd were driven north into Texas in 1690, where they received their new name.

Despite the sparse vegetation and predators as imposing as grizzly bears, the cattle thrived on the open range. Enterprising cattlemen rounded them up and hired young cowboys to drive the tough, rangy animals north to railroads in Kansas.

With the introduction of the faster growing British breeds, however, the longhorn's popularity declined, and the golden age of the

American cowboy ended during the latter part of the 1800s.

In 1927 concerned conservationists convinced Congress to come to the rescue of the vanishing breed. Some of the few remaining pure longhorns were moved to the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, and a second government herd was established at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Nebraska.

Today's longhorns trace their ancestry to one of these government herds, or to one of six other private herds, according to Wanda Pridgen, sales director of Dickinson Ranch in Colorado, a well-known longhorn breeding operation. Named after the individuals who started them, these herds include Butler, Phillips, Graves Peeler, Marks, Yates and Wright.

Preserving the breed was a wise move, according to Pridgen, who points out that longhorns have much to offer the modern cattle industry. "We say they're groomed by nature," she says, noting that longhorns survive well on a Spartan diet and utilize their food efficiently. "They're basically the goats of the cattle industry."

An austere diet doesn't seem to reduce their life expectancy and vigor, either, since their reproductive period is significantly longer than other breeds. "We've had a 30-year-old cow give birth to her twenty-ninth calf," Pridgen says.

The longhorns' dark skin pigmentation makes them resistant to hoof rot and pinkeye, and the breed is well-known for calving ease and mothering ability.

With consumers shopping for leaner cuts these days, Pridgen says longhorns' ability to produce leaner crossbred cattle makes



Don Neidigh's bull Magic Marker is a good example of how colorful longhorns can be. There are seven colors identified on his coat.

them right for the times. But she also maintains that a purebred Texas Longhorn can be a tasty animal. In addition to working at Dickinson, she buys leftover purebred commercial longhorn bulls, feeds them out and butchers them at weights between 950 and 1,050 pounds. She points out that her animals marble well but don't produce large amounts of backfat. The meat grades Good-plus to Choice-minus and tastes excellent, she says.

Pridgen sells about 20 "organically grown" carcasses to health food stores and individuals each year. "It's very lean, tender and full-flavored," says the cattlemaster.

From a production standpoint, longhorns seem to be about as maintenance-free as a beef animal can get, says Don Neidigh. Neidigh's herd is out on pasture year-round, living on alfalfa hay, pasture grass and protein and mineral supplements.

Despite their home-on-the-range existence, the cattle remain remarkably healthy, Neidigh says. "I never had a veterinarian out here for a sick animal," he says. Neidigh points out that calving season hasn't been a problem either, since his cows have little trouble giving birth to the small 50- to 60-pound calves.

Best of all, longhorns pass their virtues on to the next generation and help to produce beef animals in step with industry demands. Neidigh points out that a pen of Texas Longhorn-Salers crossbreds won the carcass division at the prestigious National Western Stock Show in Denver this year.

Neidigh says that semen is available from longhorn bulls, including his own herd sires, Magic Marker and Impressive Copy. Longhorns are known for variability in markings, and the 1,750-pound Magic Marker bull is a prime (or at least Good-plus) example of just how variable a longhorn's hide can be. The bull registration certificate lists seven colors on his pelt. The bull was bred by Wright Texas Longhorn Ranch in Robstown, Texas, while Impressive Copy has WR (Wichita Refuge) and Texas Ranger breeding in his pedigree.

At first glance those long, distinctive horns seem to have no more utilitarian value than a rainbow-colored pelt, but Wanda Pridgen points out that the horns are a reliable indicator of the purity of the breed. While the horns on cows and bull usually measure less than four feet, adult steers may carry headgear spanning six feet or more.

But, despite their awesome appearance, the horns usually don't become a safety hazard, says



Despite the formidable headgear, longhorns are generally gentle. Neidigh and Julie demonstrate just how gentle they can be.

Neidigh, who notes that he has only been "bumped" once by a cow. "I tag all the calves by myself and the cows won't bother me," he says.

Neidigh likes to point out that in this age of bald-headed cattle, horns still aren't without their merits. On pasture the cows are well equipped to protect calves from predators, such as coyotes, which are apparently on the increase in Pennsylvania. And rodeo cowboys aren't likely to switch to cattle without handles for a steer wrestling event.

But those who still aren't sold on beef cattle with pointed headgear will be happy to know that a Texas Longhorn bull produces polled calves on the first cross when mated to a polled cow.

"I think the cattle will make a real good comeback," Neidigh sums up, adding that longhorns offer a package of traits that can help put the beef industry back in the race for consumers' dollars.

Best of all, this package comes complete with handles.

Anyone interested in learning more about Texas Longhorns is invited to attend a longhorn field day on May 30 at Hutchinson's Piney Hill Farm near Bluemont, Virginia. For more information on the field day, the longhorn breed, or to schedule a visit to the Neidigh farm, call Don Neidigh, 717-865-5239.



Polled calves are the end result when longhorn bulls are bred to polled cows. These two calves are out of one of Neidigh's bulls and Angus cows.



This first-calf heifer had no quarrel with Neidigh when he eartagged her offspring, but potential predators such as dogs and coyotes aren't tolerated.

## USDA Terminates Proceedings To Amend Federal Milk Orders

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture terminated proceedings on proposals to amend seven southeastern federal milk marketing orders.

The affected milk marketing orders are Georgia, Tennessee Valley, Louisville-Lexington-Evansville, Alabama-West Florida, New Orleans-Mississippi, Greater Louisiana and Nashville, Tenn.

The proposals would have paid milk handlers from proceeds due producers for marketing services considered to be of marketwide benefit, said Kenneth A. Gilles, assistant secretary for marketing and inspection services.

Gilles said evidence from an extended public hearing indicated the extensive amount of inter-market milk movements in the area would result in producers in the seven markets bearing the burden of balancing milk supplies

for handlers not associated with the local markets. According to Gilles, this would impose an iniquitous financial burden on the producers who supply these seven markets. For this reason, Gilles said, the proposals were denied and the proceeding terminated.

The hearing to consider the proposals was held Sept. 8 to 11, Oct. 27 to Nov. 1, and Nov. 3, 1986, in Atlanta, Ga. The proposed provisions involved the use of funds otherwise payable to producers to cover the costs of handling and transporting milk supplies. These costs are incurred in balancing available milk supplies with the needs of fluid milk handlers. Proponents of the amendments held that they would have spread costs of such services provided by handlers in a particular market uniformly among all producers in that market.