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## **Ranchers hoping to preserve purity of Texas longhorns -**

By BETSY BLANEY AP Agriculture Writer © 2007 The Associated Press-

LUBBOCK, Texas (AP) Hondo rancher Debbie Davis has no beef with those who want to see their Texas longhorns, well, beefier.-

Her passion, though, lies with preserving the traditional longhorn breed that survived on little grass and water as it roamed Texas and other parts of the West during the mid-1800s.-

"A true Texas longhorn is endangered right now," said Davis, president of the Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry which is striving to keep the bloodline of the traditional longhorn as pure as possible.-

The longhorn isn't on any endangered lists, but visit any livestock show and all the competition is between longhorns that have far more heft and girth than the traditional rangy and gaunt animal.-

Davis and other ranchers believe crossbreeding with other cattle species is diminishing the traditional's numbers.-

Others say a longhorn is a longhorn is a longhorn.-

"You're always going to have people giving you an opinion of what a longhorn looks like," said Larry Barker, general manager of the Fort Worth-based Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America, which also registers the animals. "If you asked six people, you'd get six different answers, and all six of them would be correct."-

There's plenty beyond the name that ties the breed to Texas. It's the state's official large mammal and the mascot for the University of Texas. BevoXIV, the current mascot, is a true longhorn and lives on a ranch northwest of Austin, its owner said.-

Davis' registry is working on a DNA database that will define the genetic makeup of a traditional longhorn. Until then, animals are required to have a visual inspection as well as blood-typing to see if there are markers of other breeds.-

Davis and others have registered about 3,500 longhorns since 1990.-

"What they're doing is real important, to retain as close as possible" the true longhorn, said Dr. Phil Sponenberg, a veterinarian and professor of pathology and genetics at Virginia Tech University.-

Mixing traditional longhorns with cattle breeds such as Angus and Hereford for show purposes began about 20 years ago, Barker said. It's created bigger animals, some with longer horns, that are winning livestock show competitions across the state and the country.-

Davis said she believes livestock shows are "responsible for the degradation" of the traditional animal.-

Progenitors of the traditional longhorn go back to Neolithic times and were first domesticated in Europe from Asiatic stock. The cattle were brought to North America from southwestern Spain around 1500. They spread from Mexico and some eventually became feral. They became hardier and thrived wherever they roamed, from swamplands in Louisiana to deserts in California.-

Some ranchers say the longhorn saved Texas. After the Civil War, beef was a hot commodity in the north. Because of their hardiness and longer legs, the longhorns needed less water and food than other species, enabling them to survive long trail drives. Texas climbed out of the post-war depression from the money longhorn sales brought back to the state.-

But the true longhorn began to decline by the end of the 19th century when railroads replaced cattle drives. The animals' horns meant fewer could fit inside a railcar. Also, breeds of English cattle, which matured physically more quickly, began arriving in the U.S. and were crossbred with longhorns.-

Longhorns also had a natural resistance to tick fever, a cattle disease since eradicated in the U.S. but still monitored for incursion from Mexico. Ranchers outside Texas wanted nothing to do with longhorns because they carried ticks to their more vulnerable cattle.-

In 1927, the federal government appropriated \$3,000 to establish a protected herd. Nowadays, about 300 longhorns live in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in southwest Oklahoma.-

Texas also has a state herd, established in 1941 with the help of folklorist J. Frank Dobie. The 175-head herd resides in Fort Griffin State Park in Albany, northeast of Abilene. Periodically, some animals are disbursed to range in other state parks.-

John T. Baker, a central Texas rancher, has been in the longhorn business for more than three decades. He went to Spain in the 1990s and saw six Spanish breeds of horned cattle, which he believes are the progenitor of the Texas longhorn.-

He's not opposed to those who breed for specific longhorn traits, such as longer horns or color.-

"I've watched the breed change dynamically," said Baker. "The good thing about longhorns is you can raise a certain flavor."-

One of Mike Warner's flavors is a red and white bull named Mongo, a beefier 1,700-plus pound longhorn that the Fort Worth attorney used to show but now calls his "pet." Warner spends time sitting on Mongo's back and talking to him each weekend on his ranch.-

In 2001 Mongo, then 2, weighed 1,800 pounds and was crowned Senior Champion Bull at the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America World Show.-

Warner's not interested in stepping into the debate on which type of longhorn is more true. He believes, though, that those outside Texas remember the longhorn as those that "John Wayne hung around with" in Western movies.-

"I love them all," he said. "I think they each serve their own function."-

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On the Net:-

Cattlemen's Texas Longhorn Registry: <http://www.ctrl.org>

Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America: <http://www.tlbaa.org>

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