

HORNS & HIDES

by Carolyn Hunter



A good example of an excellent cow skull that has been properly processed.

HORNS

Remember the last Western movie you watched? The outlaws rode down main street to the nearest saloon, pushed their way through the swinging doors and sauntered into the bar. Then throwing a silver dollar to the barkeep, they glanced slowly around the room, their piercing eyes making the local townspeople noticeably nervous. And often as not, that camera shot around the room rested for a moment on a Texas Longhorn steer head mounted above the bar.

The Texas Longhorn represented the Old West, and it still does today. With the popularity of Southwestern decor, you can just as easily find a Longhorn skull or head mount in an exclusive restaurant in Boston or a penthouse in New York City as in a bar or cafe in Montana.

The popularity of the Old West is what makes your Texas Longhorn cow give you an added bonus - her hide and horns - even after she has made you money by producing a live, healthy calf every year for well into her teens. Very few other breeds have a salvageable value when they die. Have you ever seen a black baldy or a Polled Hereford head hanging in the Ya'll Come Back saloon? The common practice of dehorning has also diminished the number of skulls available for decorating.

GETTING YOUR SKULL READY FOR MARKET

1. If you take your animal to the slaughter house, have them save the head for you. If the animal has died in the pasture, the varmints may have already saved you the trouble of removing the head. If not, take a knife or axe and separate the backbone from the base of the skull.

2. Remove excess meat from skull. Many ranchers leave the head out where insects, birds and animals will pick the skull clean, sometimes in an ant bed. (Hint: fasten the head securely high up in a tree or to a post so that dogs and coyotes can't drag it off). This natural process is slower than that of boiling the meat off, but is easier and less work for you.

3. If you can't wait for nature to take its course, you must boil the head to get the meat off. Put the skull in a large enough tub so at least one side of the horns is completely submerged in water.

Bring to a boil. An iron bathtub, heated by a wood fire in an underlying trench, is ideal as a receptacle.

4. The skull must boil until the meat is loose and the horns can be removed. On a slow boil this will take hours. Some horns need to boil 6-10 hours to loosen for removal. (Note: boil your skull downwind of your neighbors unless their bull has been jumping the fence into your pasture.)

5. After the horns are removed and all excess meat is scraped away, start another pot with fresh water. The skull should be free of meat and submerged in water. To this, add a couple of handfuls of soda ash. This will help cut grease and start the bleaching process.

6. After boiling in soda ash for 15-20 minutes, remove. Cool the skull down and wash with strong laundry detergent. Rinse.

7. Submerge in a 1/2 water and 1/2 bleach solution. Here you can use a #3 washtub if it is big enough or a children's playpool. This needs to be put in the sun and let set for one to two hours. For skulls that have lain in the pasture, use a vegetable brush to remove dirt, etc. Remember there are many cavities in the head, and they must be thoroughly cleaned, too. Here you will need a bottle brush or other long brush. Check the skull periodically. When white, remove it from the water and then rinse several times.

8. Let dry in the sun for a dazzling white. Then spray with clear Varathane, if desired, to seal the skull from dust.

9. To make the horns glossy, wash clean. Sand if necessary and polish with steel wool. Then apply a household wax, such as Mop and Glo, and polish.

10. Reattach the horns with Bondo or fiberglass. If you plan to ship the skull, do not reattach the horns, but ship them together with the skull. We suggest cutting the inner horn that is attached to the skull off to about 6" in length. This makes the head easier to fit in a shipping box.

11. Put wire at the back of the skull to hang.

DECORATING THE SKULL

Many customers prefer the "natural" look of a bleached skull, but decorated skulls are also popular. Here imagination is the limit. I've seen gaudy ones that had plastic-encased scorpions in the eye sockets with red lights glowing behind them to beautiful skulls covered in turquoise that sell for thousands of

dollars.

The most common decoration is the painting of a scene or design on the skull done before varnishing. Some artists paint the skull with a flat white housepaint for a brighter white. Several mediums can be used to paint the skull. A waterproof India Ink may be used for black and white drawings and oil-based colored pencils enable you to add color. Other artists use acrylics or watercolors. Oil paints may be used, but these take longer to dry. When finished, use whatever sealer your medium requires.

Try adding beads and feathers hanging by leather to your skull for an Indian look.

WHAT ARE SKULLS WORTH?

Prices for skulls range up to \$500 and more. The price you get for your skull depends upon its condition, its size and the length and shape of the horns. A steer skull with 5-6' horns is naturally worth more than that of a two-year-old cow with much shorter horns.

OTHER SALVAGEABLE PARTS

Not only is the skull valuable, but there is also a demand by artists for jawbones, pelvic bones, and horn. Many use them to paint on and others use them for etching and carving knife handles, etc. So if you find a skull in a badly deteriorated condition, it still may be worth something to the right person. (Authors Note: When working with skulls, be sure to wear gloves. Decaying animals carry bacteria which can make you ill.)

HIDES

No matter how many cattle you have, there's usually one or two animals that will always hold a special place in your heart. Maybe it was your very first Texas Longhorn, maybe it was good ol' Bessie that gave you a calf year after year for 20 years with no complaints, or maybe it was that old steer who was always just a little bit smarter than you were. For whatever reason, ranchers sometimes preserve that memory by having their animal mounted or keeping the hide.

The colorful Texas Longhorn makes a beautiful hide when properly tanned. Tom Piwetz of South Texas Fur Dressers at Victoria, Texas, offered the following tips for preserving your hide until it is delivered to an experienced tanner.

SKINNING

After removing the skin from the carcass, IMMEDIATELY move the hide to

an air conditioned room or cooler and lay the hide out flat with the flesh side up, 30-45 minutes, for the hide to cool and completely lose the body heat. It is best to keep the temperature below 40 degrees. Otherwise bacteria from blood and urine will continue to grow, causing hair slippage. (NOTE: Winter coats are considered "prime" coats. Hair will not be of as good a quality in the summer months, says Don Parsons of Don's Taxidermy, Gainesville, Texas.) Take immediately to a taxidermist.

If this is not possible, gently flesh your hide with your knife to remove all excess flesh and fat. Try to clean so nothing but skin is left. Always wear latex gloves while fleshing!

SALT CURING

1. Lay the hide out in a cool, dry place out of the sun in a shaded area with flesh side up.

2. Salt with fine grain table salt or fine mixing salt that is NOT iodized. Do not use rock salt. Your local feed store usually sells stock salt that is of the proper grain size.

3. Rub the salt in well using 60-80 lbs. of salt on an average sized hide. (You can't oversalt a hide.) Fold in half, flesh to flesh, roll up and leave 24 hours. Remember, salt is cheap insurance.

4. After 24 hours, shake old salt out and resalt using 60-80 lbs. again. Roll up.

5. In about four to five days, the salt will draw the fluids out of the hide and kill the bacteria. The salt will crust over. Shake the excess salt off and hang the hide.

6. After almost dry, but still bendable, fold or roll up (salt side in) and take to a tanner/taxidermist.

7. To ship, place the hide in a burlap bag or cardboard box. Do not put in a plastic bag to ship.

MOUNTING

Here you have several choices - head mount, shoulder mount or full mount. A head mount is the head and neck only. The shoulder mount (head, neck and shoulders), is usually preferred and is more presentable. The entire animal is preserved in a full mount.

This job is best left to a reputable professional taxidermist. Try to give him as much advance notice as possible or, ideally, have the taxidermist there when the animal is put down so that work can start immediately and proper measurements can be taken. Reference photographs of the live animal will help considerably.

Otherwise, skin the animal as soon as possible after the kill because it's easier to skin if you skin it early. Try to

minimize use of your knife by pulling the hide rather than slicing.

SHOULDER MOUNTS

For a shoulder mount, skinning, especially of the head, is best done by your taxidermist. Make an incision around the torso 6 inches behind the front legs.

Then make an incision on the top of the back between the shoulder blades to the top of the head. Underneath on each leg, cut straight back to torso cut, leaving all the brisket.

At this point, you can deliver the head and shoulder skin to your taxidermist. Skinning the head is critical. Make a T-cut where the horns go across the skull. Skin, being careful at the eyes, ears and nose. Refrigerate cape and skull. Now, unless you are a rancher who also happens to be a taxidermist, it's definitely time to go to an expert.

A taxidermist uses a model or "manikin" for the mount. A few have models specifically for Texas Longhorn cattle, but most use a generic cattle manikin which can be changed to suit. For instance, he can open or shut the mouth, turn the head left or right, etc. A good taxidermist will try to make your mount as realistic as possible.

With all the steps involved in creating a shoulder mount, you can generally expect to pay \$800 and up to have it done correctly by a professional taxidermist.

FULL MOUNTS

No matter how fond you may have been of ol' Bessie, you may not be fond enough of her to have her standing in your living room in all her glory. (You generally see full mounts in buildings with large areas, such as museums or hotel lobbies.) Also, you may not be so proud of the old gal that you want to spend the \$5,000 for a normal standing mount or the \$7,000 and up for a customized mount.

However, some animals deserve to be immortalized in this fashion, and no animal is more striking than a majestic Texas Longhorn - the symbol of the cattle industry and our western heritage.

One such animal is Big Warren, born in 1970 on the Wichita Wildlife Refuge. This light brown steer really did some traveling in his 23 years. He was bought off the Refuge by Prairie Canyon Ranch in Franktown, Colorado, in 1979. In 1980 he went to Bob and Linda Moore's ranch at Gainesville, Texas. Later he moved to Smith Valley, Nevada, to Edie and Bill Cary's place. Then in 1987 he left there for Jim and Carron Gorton's Shadow Run Ranch in Gardnerville, Nevada. That's where Taylor and Linda Stack from Fallon, Nevada, come in. The

Stacks often bought calves from the Gortons, and Mr. Stack would always admire Big Warren. When the Gortons planned a move to Washington state, they felt that the big WR steer shouldn't make the trip so in order to find him a good home, they gave him to the Stacks. Because of Big Warren's age, size, and history, Mr. Stack felt that the steer, which represented to him the rebuilding period of the Texas Longhorn breed, should be placed somehow, somewhere that he could be admired by all.

In his hay business, Mr. Stack had made many trips from Nevada to California and would always stop at a place close to Reno called "Boomtown," which in the 70's was a very small truck stop and casino complete with seats for 25, a couple of card tables and one bar. Today, there are Boomtowns in Las Vegas, West Bank, Louisiana, and Biloxi, Mississippi. The original one is greatly expanded and has Texas Longhorn steers grazing in the pasture next to their casino along Interstate 80. The cattle always draw a crowd so the owners were agreeable to having a stuffed Longhorn in their lobby.

Taylor contacted Joe Walsh of Great Basin Taxidermy in Reno, Nevada, and the two began to make plans. (Walsh had been recommended as "not only the best taxidermist around, but also crazy enough to try something this large.") So, when Big Warren died in 1993, Walsh went to work on him. He did buy a lifesize manikin, but had to cut it apart and remake it to make it look like a steer. Eventually, the mount was completed and today stands as a reminder to Boomtown visitors of the Texas Longhorn and its place in western history.

Another place to find a full mount Longhorn is in Orlando, Florida. No, not a Disney World, but at a restaurant/bar called Wild Jack's. In keeping with the western theme, the bar top is inlaid with handcarved Texas Longhorn steer heads. Mounted six feet above the bar is a leaping Longhorn with head lowered. This was created by Glen Harding of Denton, Texas, who customized a standing manikin, bending the knees, lowering the head, etc., to give action to the figure.

As you can see, there are several ways to preserve your Texas Longhorn - whether it be for nostalgia or for profit. After all, there is a ready market for our breed's by-products. In fact, you might mention that to that "muley" man down the road. Just remind him that "Horns and Hide" is the extra bonus you get from raising Texas Longhorn cattle. ❖