

My Ranching Life



JEAN LAUGHTON PHOTOGRAPHY

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Since 2003, I have been cowboying and photographing ranch work from horseback on the Quarter Circle XL Ranch. After sixteen years of New York City life, I moved to the tiny remote Badlands town of Interior, South Dakota (pop 69) - following the serendipitous path of my photography - with plans to continue my commitment to photograph the West and in search of adventure.

I got the adventure of a lifetime shortly after, when my photography led me to Lyle O'Bryan's Quarter Circle XL Ranch. I was given the opportunity to begin work as a novice ranch hand and learn all aspects of cowboying from an old time cowboy. This is when my life and photography changed drastically - prompting the start my long term photographic series *My Ranching Life*. Transitioning from portraiture against painted backdrops to documentation from horseback - and from spectator to cowboy.

I have always used my photography as a way of attempting time travel. Working on the Quarter Circle XL Ranch is a bit like stepping back in time onto a Western movie backlot. The ranch was once home to Earl Thode – first world champion bronc rider of 1929. It is quite a thrill riding across the same land and the same White River as the cowboys from the past. I feel as if I have stepped ‘inside the photograph’ - riding around and photographing in a diorama of the West.

The ranches south of Belvidere, South Dakota are rich with western heritage - with all cattle work done on horseback. Creating quite the historical and cyclorama sky. I photograph these scenes from horseback, while cowboying, with a Noblex 120 swing lens panoramic camera I carry in my saddlebags. The Noblex gives me a medium format negative suitable for large-scale printing. The panoramic format lends a cinematic quality while also conveying the vastness of the landscape. And black & white printing helps reverse time. My horse's ears intentionally appear in some of the photographs – announcing my presence as part of the crew.

These photographs are a visual diary of just some of the many experiences I have been a part of while cowboying on the Quarter Circle XL Ranch and working alongside the crew of rugged hardworking cowboys on the ten area ranches we ‘neighbor’ with. I hope this insider perspective conveys the beauty and timelessness of present day ranching. With photographs that, at first glance, could have been taken during another time - depicting a profession that has changed little over the past century. The land, as backdrop, has a permanence all its own but the cast of characters are bound to change. I hope to one day give a glimpse back to this time in South Dakota family ranching history. I am proud to be a part of it all.

I continue to ranch and photograph and am ever grateful to Lyle O'Bryan for being my cowboy mentor. It has been quite the adventure so far. - Jean Laughton



Cody and Me Riding the Range

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SEE MORE PHOTOGRAPHS ON MY WEBSITE

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TRAVELING EXHIBITION

THE EXHIBITION CONSISTS OF LARGE SCALE PANORAMIC PHOTOGRAPHS
ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS
FRAMES MADE FROM RECLAIMED WOOD

PRINT SIZES: 15" x 36" 20" x 48" 36" x 72"

THE EXHIBITION INCLUDES

- (1) 40" x 80"
- (3) 26" x 53"
- (1) 33" x 65"
- (9) 19.5 x 39"

*I also have a series of portraits that I could include in the exhibition depending on the exhibition space - as a side bar

Also included - Introductory Text telling my story and some history on the area where I ranch

Display of handmade tooled portfolio made by local artist / cowboy containing my photographs

I can also incorporate some audio with the exhibition

The Exhibition is Packed in (2) Crates

THE EXHIBITION IS AN EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY FOR AN ARTIST TALK & COMMUNITY OUTREACH IN TELLING MY
STORY AND TALKING ABOUT MY LIFE LEARNING TO COWBOY AND RANCH LIFE - IT IS ALSO AN
EXCELLENT TOPIC FOR EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES WITH CHILDREN AND I REALLY ENJOY WORKING WITH THEM.

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June 3 – July 29, 2011 | Artspace Loft Gallery

! ART ASSOCIATION OF JACKSON HOLE
IN THE CENTER FOR THE ARTS • 240 S. GLENWOOD • JACKSON, WY 83001
www.artassociation.org • 307.733.6379

MY STORY



A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY
BY JEAN LAUGHTON

“My Story” by Jean Laughton

I grew up in rural Iowa - near the South Dakota border, on the edge of the West - spending much time on my grandmother's farm near Struble, Iowa.

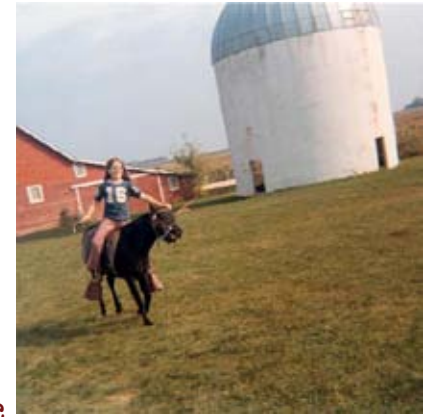
When I began taking photographs, I was in my 30's and living in New York City. I first ventured cross country in a 1967 Impala that I purchased for \$500. I went out in search of glimpses of disappearing Americana - images evoking the past. My photographs started as “drive by” shots of Americana - signage - old buildings - old vehicles - old Vegas - farm sales - livestock... I continued along this vein until 1997 when I had an overwhelming urge and



obsession to **GO WEST**. To go back home and beyond in search of a Western cast of characters. I had my friends paint a fantastic western landscape backdrop and I purchased an old 4x5 rail camera. I loaded up my Bronco and headed West.

My **GO WEST** series started as a true photographic journey for me - making many personal discoveries along the way and taking my life down a different path - bringing me to where I am today. I spent several summers traveling West - making a pit stop in Iowa to see family and then taking off from there to Nebraska , South Dakota, Wyoming & Montana - where I would set up my makeshift outdoor studio at rodeos - photographing participants in their regalia.

As I got further into my GO WEST series I began to make discoveries about connections to past family members and found that I was on a journey of various meanings. I have always been inspired by and an avid fan of silent movies and the “fake reality” created through constructed sets and backdrops - and have translated that into my own work. And when I found an article in books of newspaper clippings my great grandmother Leora had - I was surprised to see that my great grandfather left the farm in Iowa to go to Hollywood to become a Fatty Arbuckle type actor. Is that why I was so attracted to the Arbuckle/Keaton films? Finding coincidence from an unknown past thrilled me and made me feel like I was on quite a journey.



"My Story" by Jean Laughton - Pg 2

I made many other personal discoveries and friendships along this photographic journey . As I was in the midst of my **GO WEST** series I found an old suitcase of photographs of my other Great Grandmother Mayme's (she and her children had been involved with horses and rodeos). In it were many rodeo shots that she had taken and one portrait seemed very similar to mine - She was quite an enthusiastic photographer - and rodeos and horses seemed to be her favorite subjects. I also came across a newspaper clipping she had cut out - it was about a bronc rider named GERALD ROBERTS - World Champion All



Around Cowboy 1942 & 1948 - the article was about his ride at Madison Square Garden in New York City back in the 1940's. And so I decided to look him up and see if he was still around - well he was. I became friends with Gerald and his wife Pat and was lucky to visit them occasionally and stayed in touch until Gerald's unfortunate death in 2004. I felt like I had mingled with the past - back into my great grandmother's days of photographing rodeos. And on one of my visits to see Gerald he told me of riding in Madison Square Garden in NYC.

In the midst of my travels West to continue my **GO WEST** series I decided to pursue the past of Country Music that I love so much and I set out to document as many COUNTRY WESTERN LEGENDS that would allow me to do so. I traveled to county fairs and music venues and homes from NY to Texas to West Virginia and California etc ... and I was also allowed to set up my backdrops behind the scenes at the Grand ol Opry. It was so great meeting everyone - like Rosalie Allen - talking to her about her days at the Brill building NYC as the first woman country western DJ and how Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin would



Little Jimmy Dickens Rosalie Allen

make fun of her in the elevator - making farm animal noises - until, of course later when Dean put out his own Country record. I have so many fond memories of meeting everyone - I continue to add to this series and am thankful to everyone who allowed me to photograph them.



Gerald Roberts

“My Story” by Jean Laughton - Pg 3

Other subjects that I began to photograph were people “in costume” of sorts - from retired Burlesque Dancers. Circus Performers & Reenactors - and other offshoots of rodeo like woman rough stock riders and a prison rodeos - making up my TRUE AMERICAN ORIGINAL series. But I was always drawn to and returned West. I was inspired by meeting and photographing some of the Women Roughstock Riders like 60 + year old bareback rider and



JAN YOUREN

Hall of Famer Jan Youren and her daughter and granddaughters . In looking at them I saw something in me and I wanted to be on the other side of the camera - to really do it and live it - so the allure to return West continued.

In 2001, toward the latter part of my **GO WEST** series, I was part of a group exhibition in New York City with legendary rodeo photographer Louise Serpa. Louise was the first woman granted the privilege to photograph action in the rodeo arena and has been a staple of the Tucson Rodeo for over 40 years and a member of the Cowgirl Hall of Fame. It was an honor to have my work up beside hers and a hoot to find out that she had photographed a distant relative of mine rodeoing back in the 1960's

Another coincidence of life and intersection with the past. Again, I felt that I was on the true path for my life - it was like traveling back in time.

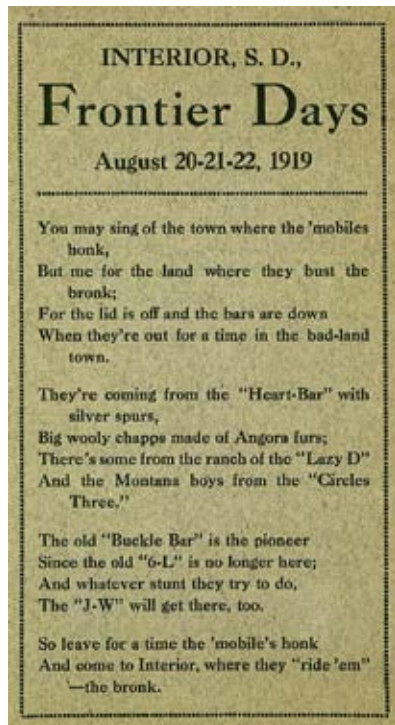
After returning West for several summers, pursuing my personal photography projects, I found it harder and harder to return East. So one summer I purchased a house in Interior, South Dakota - near the Badlands National Park. I had done an artist in residency in 1999 at the park and the area was always a pit stop for me as I traveled West. I guess I was in search of reality now and in search of more of the past. You wouldn't know it by looking at it, but the town of Interior is rich with history. In the teens and 1920's Interior had one of the world's largest rodeos with such legendary performers as Leonard Stroud, Kittie Canutt, Mayme Stroud, Earl Thode and many more.



Louise Serpa



“My Story” by Jean Laughton - Pg 4



You can see the ghost of the outline of the former railroad track that ran through the Badlands, back when Interior was a bustling ranching hub. There is something about walking on the same ground where all those famous rodeo performers once rode and where land was homesteaded. Besides the history, there is the extraordinary beauty of the Badlands, which I am continually attracted to and inspired by. I made my move here to pursue my personal photography projects full time and to continue my commitment to document the land and people of the region.

In the midst of my move to the Badlands, I had the opportunity to meet and photograph Lyle O'Bryan - long time rancher and true cowboy. The photograph is from Lyle's days of working on the Double X ranch south of Belvidere, S. Dakota - when it was run by Baxter Berry - son of S. Dakota governor Tom Berry. From left to right Burrell Phipps, Baxter Berry, Charlie Larson, Ray Hunter, Lyle O'Bryan and Art Thode.



I was given the opportunity to purchase cattle and get into the cattle business - running my cattle & starting work as a novice on Lyle's ranch down on the White River south of Belvidere, South Dakota. Learning all aspects of cowboying while photographing **MY RANCHING LIFE** series from horseback.

It just so happens that Lyle's ranch is the old Thode Ranch. The Thode family ranched there starting back in the 1800's into the mid 20th century. It is where Earl Thode grew up. Earl was the first documented ALL AROUND WORLD CHAMPION COWBOY winning the title in 1929. Again, I felt a true connection to the past and a purpose to my photographic journey.

“My Story” by Jean Laughton - Pg 5

I was fortunate to meet the last of Earl Thode's siblings - his sister Mildred Sleep (92) - and get another glimpse into the past through her stories and her sharing of photographs of her days of growing up on the ranch. It is quite a feeling to ride across the same White River and across the same pastures - working cattle the same as the Thode's did back in the day.



John Thode on the ranch - Early 1900's



Bringing cattle across the same White River -Thode's 1920's

Getting into the ranching business changed my life drastically. I am now ‘in the photograph’- riding around inside this beautiful Western diorama under a cyclorama sky. I am ever thankful to Lyle O'Bryan for the opportunity to try my hand at cowboying and for being my cowboy mentor - these will be the years of my life I will never forget.

I continue to ranch & document ranch work from horseback and in the process of transitioning to managing the ranch. Mingling with the past as I photograph **MY RANCHING LIFE** in the present. It has been quite the journey so far ...

Jean Laughton





Shooting From the Saddle

A relative newcomer to the Badlands is capturing the cowboy culture from horseback.

By Katie Hunhoff

HUNDREDS OF GOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS have visited Badlands ranches for a day or two, and some have probably clicked a shutter while on horseback. Few understood the place like Jean Laughton, however, and her hard-earned insider's perspective shows in her pictures.

Before moving to the Badlands six years ago, Laughton lived in New York City and owned her own casting company. That supported her passion for photography. She began taking summer road trips in her 1967 Impala, capturing standard scenes of Americana; old signs, buildings and livestock.

Originally from Iowa, she began feeling an "urge and obsession" to travel West, toward home. In 1995 she traded the Impala for a Bronco and spent summers traveling through Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana to photograph portraits of rodeo performers, a series she titled "Go West." Along the way she photographed country music legends and women bronc riders.

Bringing cattle across the White River on the Quarter Circle XL Ranch in South Dakota's Badlands country.



Wade Fox, dragging a bawling calf to the branding iron on the Badure ranch south of Belvidere.

Cowboys holding a calf while Ray Hunter applies the brand at Stanton Anderson's place north of Corn Creek near Norris.

Fascinated with the West's people and culture, Laughton reluctantly returned to her life in New York after every trip until, in 2002 at the age of 39, she purchased a house in Interior. The Badlands town has 70 residents, a small store and no restaurant — hardly the amenities she'd grown accustomed to in the nation's busiest metropolis.

Laughton thought she would use the Interior house as a base as she worked on rodeo and ranch photography projects throughout the West and continued to travel back East for work.

Soon after moving to Interior, Laughton met Lyle O'Bryan, a long-time rancher, cowboy, and storyteller who runs the Quarter Circle XL Ranch near Belvidere. His ranch was originally owned by the Thode family, Earl Thode, who won the first all-around world champion cowboy award in 1929 and 1931, grew up on the ranch.

O'Bryan offered to have Laughton come down and photograph cattle in 2002 and that led to an opportunity to ride and work on the ranch. "She helped me quite a bit that winter," remembers O'Bryan, 74, "She got to running some cattle and she's still hanging around. She don't mind working," he says.

Her new job on the ranch prompted her to start a photo series



Corraling cattle on a foggy shipping day on the Brunsch ranch near Norris.

Lyle O'Bryan, the photographer's mentor, breaking a colt on the Quarter Circle XL Ranch south of Belvidere.



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titled "My Ranching Life." Six years later, she is still working for O'Bryan and still packing her camera.

Looking back on her first days on the ranch, Laughton admits she had a lot to learn. "I was so naïve and happy, I wasn't afraid of much," she says. On one of her first days, she tried to rope a cow that needed "doctoring." She got the rope around the cow's neck, but she mishandled the slack and her horse stepped over the rope and went down. "Back then that stuff was kind of funny since I was so new to it," Laughton says. "I hadn't yet fully realized the possible dangers of cowboying."

On another occasion, she climbed aboard "a green colt" that bolted for nearly a mile. "He slid and turned and I fell and hit my head on a fence post. It knocked me out for a minute and I had a concussion. It took the shine off of things for a while."

But Laughton quickly absorbed roping, riding, herding and fencing from O'Bryan and other Badlands ranchers. "She's learned to handle cattle pretty good," O'Bryan says. "It doesn't matter what I do, she helps me."

It hasn't been all bumps and bruises. "One time I was wrangling horses and I looked up and there were five bald

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O'Bryan, riding near the White River on the Quarter Circle XL, which once was known as the Thode Ranch.

eagles flying over me," she says. "Or, roping in front of a whole crew and having a good day, that makes me feel pretty good. Or just going out to a neighbor's and meeting the crew when the sun is coming up."

She especially appreciates the community aspect of West River ranching. During roundup and branding seasons, she has a chance to photograph numerous ranches, some with larger crews which make for great photo opportunities. She carries a Noblex panoramic camera in the saddle bag, shooting most of her photos from horseback when work will allow. "It's different than going out just as a photographer. I would be getting ahead of the herd, getting in the perfect spot," she explains, but at the Quarter Circle XL the cattle come first. Still, she has an insiders' knowledge of ranch life and a view from the saddle that most photographers never see.

O'Bryan has lived more South Dakota history than most historians ever learn. From 1958 to 1972 he worked for Baxter Berry on a ranch once owned by Baxter's father, Tom Berry (South Dakota's colorful cowboy governor during the Great Depression). O'Bryan

remembers a photographer once riding with them to document their work. He views Laughton as doing the same thing.

"I don't know if it's important or not," O'Bryan says of documenting life on the ranch. "If people pay attention they can learn from things that happened in the past. The ranching business has changed so much since I've been around. There's some good but there's things that were better the way I used to do it. But it's changing and the past affects the present and the present affects the future."

As for Laughton's future, she has no plans to leave the ranch life. Six years after beginning her saddlebag photo series, she now intends to show the pictures in galleries around the country. But she especially hopes to have a show in the Badlands to thank her fellow ranchers. It's the neighborly thing to do. **b**



Now as comfortable with a horse as a camera, photographer Jean Laughton has adapted to cowboy life.

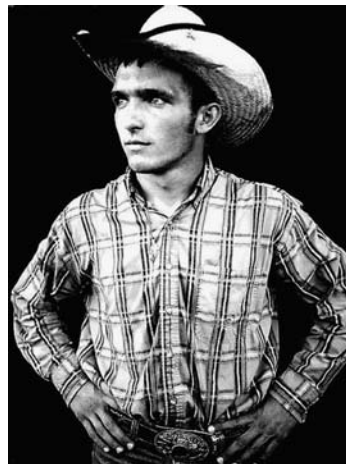
For more information and to see photos from Laughton's "Go West" and "My Ranching Life" series visit www.jeanlaughton.com.

You can see more photographs from
MY RANCHING LIFE
GO WEST
COUNTRY WESTERN LEGENDS
TRUE AMERICAN ORIGINALS

AT

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