

“My Story” : A Photographic Journey 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 Las 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.



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 visited 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 in NYC as the first woman country western DJ and how Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin would 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 ... and I continue to add to this series.



Little Jimmy Dickens



Merle Haggard



Kitty Wells & Johnny Wright



Rosalie Allen

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

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 and became multi faceted.



Jan Youren

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.

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



Louise Serpa

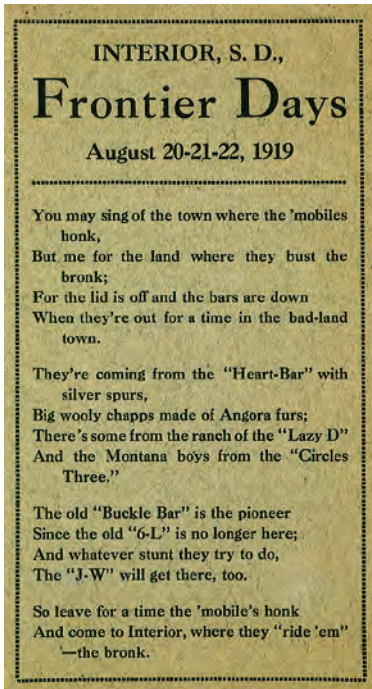
After returning West for several summers, pursuing my personal photography projects, I found it harder and harder to return East. So one summer I purchased a house in Interior, South Dakota - near the Badlands National Park. I had done an artist in residency in 1999 at the park and the area was always 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.



Mayme Stroud Trick Riding - Interior, S. Dakota 1920's



Kittie Cannutt riding broncs Interior SD 1920's



You can see the ghost of the outline of the former railroad tracks 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 below 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 are 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 on Lyle's ranch while working on his ranch 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 and 1931. Again, I felt a true connection to the past and to my photographic journey.



EARL THODE



EARL THODE ON 'SKY HIGH'

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.



One of the Thode Boys 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 diorama. I am ever thankful to Lyle O'Bryan for giving me the opportunity to try my hand at cowboying and for being my cowboy mentor - these will be the years of my life that I will never forget.

I continue to ranch - documenting ranch work from horseback - Mingling with the past as I photograph **MY RANCHING LIFE** in the present. It has been quite the journey so far ...



Jean Laughton 2009