

# The Rancher & the Writer

by George Getschow

## *PART I: The Rancher*

IDIOT RIDGE – It looks like any other cattle gate in west Texas—crude and rough as the ranch behind it. A rusted stirrup, the ranch brand, is mounted on top, and its white paint is rigid and cracked like the ground beneath.

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*“The hold the  
landscape had on  
me was so  
powerful...”*



But this is no ordinary gate. It’s the entryway into the McMurtry Ranch, a scruffy plateau bordered by sharp rocky ledges known by locals as Idiot Ridge. It’s the place where stories were born and passed around until Larry McMurtry, part of the last generation raised on the ranch, became one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, shooting holes in the romantic portrayals of the Old West.

On the other side of the cattle gate, a dirt road leads up to a mesquite-covered hill. It’s the spot where over a hundred years earlier Larry’s grandparents unhitched their wagon and made a life, and it’s the spot where Larry’s life as a storyteller was born and remains.

“To this day, if I attempt a rural setting, I invariably produce the contours of the hill where I first walked,” Larry writes in an autobiographical essay.

As a young cowboy on Idiot Ridge, Larry lived on the raw edge between the live frontier and its last gasps for breath. He was raised in the shadow of his pioneering grandparents, and he heard story after story of adoration for the free-spirited McMurtry cowmen running cattle on the open range. The old ranges had been cut up into fenced pastures by the time Larry was born. But a few longhorns—wild and

powerful beasts that once roamed freely across the southern plains of Texas—were kept on the ranch as reminders of the McMurtry’s early days on the vast, empty frontier. The power of the Comanches and the Kiowa had been broken shortly before the McMurtry’s arrived in present-day Archer County, but not the ever-present fear of their return.

William Jefferson and Louisa Francis McMurtry, pioneers from Missouri, had filled the emptiness surrounding them with a log cabin, cattle, horses, chickens, a cow or two, a barn, a smokehouse, a cellar, a windmill, and a rambunctious flock of three girls and nine boys all bent on becoming cowboys.

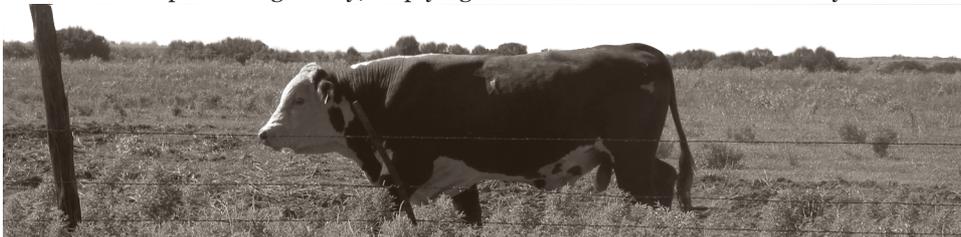
Idiot Ridge was an ideal springboard for the McMurtry boys, who all but slept on their horses, to realize their cowboy dreams. A long, dusty cattle trail had opened up just over the ridge of the ranch. The McMurtry boys watched in awe as hundreds of cowboys on horseback rode by in chaps and big-brimmed hats, pushing thousands of steers across the open pastures just outside their front door.

Before long, all of the McMurtry boys were saddling their horses to join the stream of cowboys heading west toward the virgin ranges of the Panhandle, with nothing more than a yen for adventure, a lust for land and an appetite for grueling work. Jeff Mac, the youngest of the McMurtry boys, was the only one of the brothers who returned to ranch in Archer County to care for his aging parents.

When Larry, Jeff Mac’s first son, was born, his destiny was all but carved on the back of his saddle. The McMurtry way of life, Jeff Mac figured, would be his son’s way of life. At age three, Larry was lifted on his saddle and day after day rode with his dad out on the pastures, beneath the big sky, to learn the cowboy way.

As he got older, Larry’s days were spent mostly alone, a nomad on horseback, rounding up cattle from the pastures, branding and castrating the calves the old fashioned way—tossing them hard into the dirt and making a swift slice with a sharp knife. He’d return to “the homeplace” at night, caked in dust and blood from a day of working stock. He’d watch his grandfather whittle a toothpick from a nearby cedar, or lift a glowing coal from a fire with bare fingers to light his pipe, and listen to his stories about longhorns and lonely trails blazed by the hard-core McMurtry clan.

His father, Jeff Mac, got his ear torn off getting drug through a mesquite thicket by a bull. But Jeff Mac kept working all day, emptying a boot full of blood when he finally returned



home. His uncle Jim, who earned a stake in his brother's Panhandle ranching business by breaking wild broncs for the U.S. Army, broke his neck busting a fierce bronc that hadn't been ridden in years. And when Larry's Uncle Johnny, his favorite uncle, couldn't climb atop his horse or secure himself to his saddle because he had so many broken bones, he had his cowboys wire him on with baling wire.

Growing up on Idiot Ridge, young Larry's connection to the range ran deep. He felt the power of the big Western sky, the empty and mysterious plains and the majestic horizons breaking over the ridge of the ranch and stretching north all the way to Canada. Riding out in the early dawn through dewy grasslands, watching the sunlight turn the prairie gold, enthralled him.

"The hold the landscape had on me was so powerful that I couldn't imagine living long in any other place," McMurtry writes.

But as he grew older, Larry saw the deep blue skies and rolling prairie that he embraced early on turn cruel and treacherous. He witnessed tornadoes barely miss the barn, grass fires threaten the homestead, and sandstorms and furious rain bury the ranch in dust and mud. He was swept up in stampedes, hurled off his horse by a panicked steer in an intense lightning storm and trapped on "the wrong side" of the surging Little Wichita River that runs through Idiot Ridge, "stuck on a weak horse in a world of mud."

Slowly, over time, a split developed in Larry's Western soul. As the years went by, the young cowboy became increasingly disenchanted with the glorious and romantic notions of the cowboy god and the traditional frontier values that prevailed in the West, particularly in his own family.

He saw cowboys crushed under their horses, a teenager decapitated by a drilling rig and a young skunk-trapping woman bought and sold like a steer at the local auction. He watched his duty-bound father, day after day, "struggle against the mesquite" choking his precious grass on the hill.

"Larry saw the loneliness and futility in their lives," says Sue Deen, Larry's sister.

Larry's father, Jeff Mac, believed in cowboying the old fashioned way, working cattle from the crack of dawn until dusk, disallowing even a single Dr Pepper or cup of ice water. Warm water from a canteen was enough of a luxury. With so much to do, no one dared leave the homeplace without good reason. And so it was common for Jeff Mac to become unglued every time his wife, Hazel, went off to play bridge, shop or attend the local Amity Club Meetings, as she often did.

"It grated on Dad's nerves that other people might have the time to socialize a little," says Charlie, Larry's younger brother. "Dad thought of Mom as hopelessly irresponsible."

One morning, Larry watched his grandmother, a fiercely independent woman who had raised twelve children on the frontier, slap his mother hard across the face when she tried to make herself useful in the kitchen. His father stood nearby and offered no defense. Larry explains in one of his essays, “My father could not forgive my mother for having an easier life than his mother had.”

That slap in the kitchen forever changed Larry’s world on the mesquite-choked ranch. The disharmony and conflict at the homeplace left Larry “affected and wary.” Jeff Mac began expecting more and more of young Larry and less and less of his mother.

An ever-multiplying list of duties and obligations faced Larry: cleaning out the barn, moving hay, mending fences, fixing the windmill, feeding chickens, shoeing horses, and chopping out the ever-invading horde of prickly pear and mesquite.

Larry feared he could never live up to his father’s expectations while his father was away from the ranch. He writes in his nonfiction book, *Paradise*, “I began to feel bound, in my small way, to hold the world together long enough for my father to run over to Odessa and watch the steer-roping for an afternoon.”

Larry’s inner conflicts rose up like a sandstorm on a quiet night. As a young cowboy, his grandfather, his father and his uncles had taught him that the only thing in the world that mattered was ranching. “McMurtry means beef,” was the family motto. But Larry began to feel more and more detached from the ranching world and more and more interested in the world outside.

Each night, instead of sitting on the front porch, listening to the old-time tales as he once did, he would climb the ladder of the windmill and sit on the platform beneath the blades, looking out across the West Texas plains, seeing an escape in the distance.

He’d gaze at the dim lights strung across the tops of oil derricks and hear cars roaring down the highway that ran alongside the horse pasture. He would watch the headlights of the eighteen-wheelers pointed toward Fort Worth, Dallas and beyond. And he’d hear the rumble of the nightly Zephyr fly by and watch the lighted windows filled with passengers headed west to Denver and points between.

Larry began wishing he were on the highway or the train heading anywhere, anywhere away from Idiot Ridge.

“It got to the point where he couldn’t tolerate it,” says Abby Abernathy, a friend and fellow rancher. But what else could he do? Ranching was the only world he knew, the only way of life his grandfather and father ever talked about. The McMurtry brand, the simple stirrup, might as well have been burned onto his soul. Ranching was Larry’s birthright, and someday the mesquite-choked hill on Idiot Ridge would be his.

## PART II: The Writer

Growing up a cowboy on Idiot Ridge, young Larry didn't have the vaguest notion that he would end up a writer. The only life he had outside of Idiot Ridge was showing 4-H calves and riding in the annual rodeo parade. So young Larry figured he "would have to deal with cowboying, either successfully or unsuccessfully, because there was nothing else in sight," he writes.

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*"Literature,  
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Then, his cousin, heading to boot camp and World War II, dropped off a box of nineteen books. Those books would change Larry's life in a way he never could have imagined.

When at age six he lifted his first book, *Sergeant Silk, the Prairie Scout*, from that box of nineteen books, a new life outside of cowboying opened up to young Larry.

*Sergeant Silk, the Prairie Scout* is about a young man sent to learn farming in Western Canada, who meets Sergeant Silk of the Canadian Mounties. Sergeant Silk teaches him how to be manly, self-reliant and resourceful. "The prairie teaches you a lot," Sergeant Silk tells the boy in the opening pages.

Larry identified with the young character immediately, seeing the struggle of Sergeant Silk to teach the same values his father and grandfather tried to instill in him as a young cowboy. Larry was hooked on words.

"I began a subversive, deeply engrossing secret life as a reader," McMurtry writes in one essay.

Young Larry would often walk the narrow dirt path leading to the red barn a few hundred yards from the homeplace, climb the wooden ladder up to the musty hayloft and read. He knew if the cowboys caught him with a book, they'd tell him "to take off my spurs and check myself in at the nervous hospital."

Eventually, Larry read *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, a story about a knight-errant, a gallant horseman on the plains, who attempts to

right the injustices of the world around him. But on his first expedition, Don Quixote returns, battered and bruised, something Larry could easily identify with in his many misadventures on horseback through Idiot Ridge. Don Quixote meets Sancho Panza, a peasant, who agrees to accompany him as his squire and protector. Similarly, on the McMurtry ranch, an old cowboy named Jesse had assumed the Sancho Panza role of watching over young Larry whenever he ventured out on the range. Despite failure after failure, the idealistic knight and his practical-minded squire persevere. But gradually, Don Quixote becomes disillusioned with the romantic notion of knighthood and renounces his life of chivalry.

The adventures of Don Quixote, Larry thought, were not unlike his own.

His small library of books gave Larry a feeling of independence, freedom. “Literature, as I saw it then, was a vast open range, my equivalent of the cowboy’s dream.” Larry continued to ride across Idiot Ridge, moving cattle, mending fences and grubbing mesquite. But his head was in a different world. Reading became “the central and stable activity of my life,” he writes. “Making a living would have to be made to fit in somehow, but if I could help it, it would not involve cows.”

Larry figured the cowboys of Idiot Ridge wouldn’t care if he stuck with their way of life or not. But he knew his father would. Cattle, horses, grass and the open skies were Jeff Mac’s life, his only religion, and his devotion to it ran deep. Day after day, he had attempted to instill in Larry the same sense of devotion for the values and traditions of the ranching life that his father had in him.

So as high school graduation neared, Larry had to make “a painful choice,” as he once described it, to leave Idiot Ridge and the ranching way of life. The prospect that Idiot Ridge might not survive his father, Larry knew, would be impossible for him to bear. So when Larry decided to attend Rice University in the fall of 1954, he left torn and conflicted—knowing he no longer cared about cowboying but unsure whether he could abandon his heritage.

But the moment he stepped into the Rice library, his conflicts disappeared like heat after a hard cold rain. As he writes in an essay, “I felt that I had found my intellectual home and began to relax in ways that had not been possible on the ranch.”

At last he had found a place where he could read openly without worrying about getting the boot from one of the cowboys or his father for wasting time that could be devoted to the cattle and the pastures. Larry roved around on the “vast open range” of literature in the library. He began by reading literary journalists like H.L. Mencken and Edmund Wilson, who directed him to books he had never heard of by Victorian, Edwardian and early twentieth-century English writers. Soon he ventured outside the Rice library into used bookshops, hunting for books that he intended to take back with him to Idiot Ridge as “my support group” whenever he had to return to Archer County to take up the cowboy life, which he still assumed was inevitable.

The more Larry read, the more he wondered if he could write, too. He put his pen to paper and began trying to imitate the writers he was reading. But his days as a writer at Rice were short lived. He failed a calculus course and, feeling defeated, transferred to North Texas State, now the University of North Texas. In Denton, Larry decided to pick up his pen again, hoping “to make some weird combination of writer-rancher-professor out of myself,” as he wrote in his undergraduate “Abridged Autobiography.”

He wrote fiction, poetry and essays about everything but the ranching life he had escaped. He also wrote fifty-two short stories that he felt were so bad he burned them. Reluctantly, he returned to his cowboy roots, writing a short story about the destruction of a diseased cattle herd, another about a cattleman’s funeral. Then he began weaving the short stories together and expanding them into a novel that he worked on during the summer of 1958 in Archer City after graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree from North Texas.

The novel, *Horseman, Pass By*, is autobiographical, exploring Larry’s deep internal conflicts with the cowboy culture, the disharmony in his family, the loss of the open range and the emergence of the oil patch with its materialistic values.

The book created a stir in the literary world when it was published in 1961 and launched Larry’s career as a writer. “Never before had a writer portrayed the contemporary West in conflict with the Old West in such stark, realistic, unsentimental ways,” raved the publisher.

Set on Idiot Ridge with a cast of characters who live on the ranch, the novel reveals Larry’s deep reverence for the land and the old cowboys who devoted themselves to it. Like Larry’s grandfather, Homer Bannon, the old ranch owner keeps two rangy longhorns on Idiot Ridge “for old times sake” to remind him of the days when cattle roamed free and a rancher’s heritage meant something.

The novel also reveals Larry’s repulsion for the violence, the sentimentality, the small mindedness and other dark elements of the ranching ethos that produced in him “an ambivalence as deep as the bone,” as he described it *In a Narrow Grave*.

During a dance at the annual rodeo, the biggest event of the year, Lonnie (Larry’s alter ego) sprawls across the back of a pickup near the outdoor dance floor listening to an old Hank Williams’ song that expresses his conflicted feelings about the cowboy way of life.

It fit the night and the country and the way I was feeling, and fit them better than anything I knew. What few stories the dancing people had to tell were already told in the worn-out words of songs like that one, and their kind of living, the few things they knew and lived to a fare-thee-well were in the sad high tune. City people probably wouldn’t believe there were folks simple enough to live their lives out on sentiments like those—but they didn’t know. Laying there, thinking of all the things the song brought up in me, I got more peaceful. The words I knew of it, about the wild side of life, reminded me of Hud and Lily, but more than that, the whole song reminded me of Hermy and

Buddy and the other boys I knew. All of them wanted more and seemed to end up with less; they wanted excitement and ended up stomped by a bull or smashed against a highway; or they wanted a girl to court; and anyway, whatever they wanted, that was what they ended up doing without.

The next day Lonnie left Idiot Ridge in search of a life that was more stable, more civilized, more fulfilling than the cowboy life. He took a few clothes and a few of his paperbacks with him, and drove to Thalia (Archer City). He spotted a red cattle truck parked at the filling station, heading for New Mexico, and asked the driver for a ride.

We rode through the outskirts of Thalia. The sun was going into the great western canyons, the cattleland was growing dark. I saw the road and the big sky melt together in the north, above the rope of highway. I was tempted to do like Jesse once said: to lean back and let the truck take me as far as it was going...

Lonnie left, but Larry stayed in Texas to write five more novels exploring his strained, ambivalent attitude toward his blood country. In 1969, feeling he was “sucking air” after exhausting the central themes of his frayed connections to his homeplace, he left Texas, moving to Virginia in search of a fresh story. Yet even as he was cutting his ties to Texas, he continued to pierce “the cowboy myth” in newspaper articles and magazines, such as his piece published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1975.

Texas was built on the myth of self-reliant individualism...In a culture long on work and short on the kind of discourse that creates community, a deep sense of isolation and valuelessness seizes and blights many personalities just at the point at which they finally mature. Men and women seem no longer able to recognize themselves, either in their works or in their lives; they suffer, drink, do crazy things, to a degree go mad, not merely because they have no one to talk to, but because even if they did they would feel it was wrong to talk.

Larry concluded that he no longer felt any connection to his homeplace. After living in the lush, tree-filled landscape of Virginia, he was now “rooted differently,” he writes.

“That really hurt daddy,” says Sue.

Two years later, Jeff Mac died of a heart attack on Labor Day, after working a full day in the pastures. A card was found in his wallet, written by his own hand, asking, “If worse came to worse and in the end there was no grass, what would you do?” His father’s death caused Larry to do some serious soul searching. He traveled to Archer City in the summer of 1978 to reexamine his frayed connections to home. In an eighty-three page essay he wrote in Archer City, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, Larry found himself reconsidering his views about his homeplace.

In the end, my father's career and my own were not as different as I had once thought. He cattle ranched in a time he didn't much like, and I word ranched, describing the time he longed to live in and the kind of cowboys he would have liked to know.

In 1981, Larry moved back to Idiot Ridge, back to the place of his heritage, asking his sister Sue to get someone to remove the mesquite that was taking over the hill, a painful reminder of his father's lifelong "struggle against the mesquite."

Larry once again began gazing over the hill to the long horizon stretching northwest toward Montana. Inspired, in part, by his father's frustrated ambition to be a trail driver, Larry began working feverishly on a trail-drive novel that he had started as a screenplay. As he was writing *Lonesome Dove*, a novel about a harrowing trail drive from Texas to Montana, Larry says he felt very much at home. He writes in an essay that he "didn't feel that I was writing about the Old West, in capital letters—I was merely writing about my grandfather's time, and my uncles', none of whom seemed like men of another time to me."

*Lonesome Dove* earned Larry a Pulitzer Prize and international fame. His one regret was that his father never knew that his heartfelt desire to drive cattle across the Great Plains "had found its way into one of my books."

Larry found himself drawn back to his ranching heritage in other ways. Shortly after his trail-drive novel was published, Larry began herding more and more books into Archer City, making the former cowboy a big-time book rancher. In a place he once disparaged as "a bookless town in a bookless part of the state," Larry has since filled the entire town with books, more than 400,000 of them—"my equivalent of the King Ranch," he writes.

"Larry grew up a herdsman and he's still a herdsman," says Sue.

In attempting to understand his recurring desire to drive back and forth across America's Interstate highways while working on an article for *Esquire*, Larry began to realize that he hadn't escaped his cowboying days at all. "What was I doing, proceeding north on I-35, but driving the trucks and cars ahead of me up to their northern pastures?" he writes. "My driving was a form of nomadism, and the vehicles ahead of me were my great herds."

If Larry's father had a religion, it was grass. After his father's death, it became Larry's. When a neighboring rancher and close friend of Jeff Mac died a few years ago, the rancher's family asked Larry to give his eulogy. Larry spoke so eloquently about the majesty and grandeur of grass that "everyone was in tears," says Sue. "Daddy had instilled in Larry a reverence for the grass. It's something that's sacred to him."

More recently, Larry made a trip to the Panhandle where his uncles had built their cattle kingdoms on the wide-open range. Larry realized that all of his kinsmen who had settled on

the grassy plateaus were now gone, every one of them who had only a few decades before posed proudly for a family reunion photograph, resolute and determined to stay put on their patch of prairie no matter what adversity they might face.

Alas, as Larry discovered and later reflected on in *Roads*, “The grass is there still but the McMurtrys are gone.”

