

Reflections of  
A Cow Man's Daughter

Larsh Bristol Stipend Proposal  
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March 7, 2011

### Purpose:

Wyoming has a rich history of cowboy culture, and still uses this imagery as a source for attracting visitors. It is ironic, however, that the public perception of the cowboy is full of romance and sexuality, while ranching itself is often regarded as a profession left to the uneducated and untraveled conservative. Having been raised on a Wyoming cattle ranch, I am keenly aware of such discrepancies and misunderstandings regarding the ranching community. I regretfully observe this land-based lifestyle slipping down the same path of extinction as other past agrarian societies. Because of the unknowingness of the intimate aspects of ranching, as well as its struggle to be maintained by younger generations, a reflection of the modern rancher's daily interactions is proposed. The purpose of this project is to create a photographic collection representing the dynamic and multidimensional life of the rancher, from the perspective of a cow man's daughter.

### Introduction & Background:

I have always cherished the lessons of my rural upbringing, but was more intent on fulfilling curiosities about the world around me, upon leaving home as a teenager, than carrying on any ranching traditions. I traveled and lived in as many different places as I could afford throughout my young adulthood. To support my tours, I put to use my undergraduate degree in zoology and physiology, and worked many seasonal positions throughout the West. I was employed by several government agencies including the Forest Service and USGS, as well as private entities such as an environmental consulting company, whose primary income was ultimately generated from oil and gas production. I also developed many recreational interests including skiing, rock-climbing, mountaineering, and mountain biking. This combination of involvements exposed me to a broad group of people with diverse opinions regarding management of our natural resources. I often heard frustrations expressed over grazing of public lands or the restrictions ranchers impose on access to private lands. I spent a lot of time listening to different viewpoints from co-workers and friends, and tried to objectively evaluate the role of the rancher as a steward of the land.

A few years ago I was living in Bozeman, Montana and blew my knee out skiing. This put a drastic halt to my nomadic lifestyle of working temporary jobs to support my recreational passions. I took a position in Pinedale working as a biologist, which gave me a chance to

reconnect with the Wyoming landscape. While there, I applied to two graduate programs, a documentary and filmmaking program at MSU Bozeman, and the soils program at UW. I was accepted to both and, after lengthy contemplation, decided to remain in Wyoming. In addition to financial considerations, I was influenced by a strong sense that my purpose of existence lies in protecting Wyoming's landscapes and representing my childhood culture. I realize the open-minded objectivity surrounding ranching which I left home with in my youth, has been replaced over time with an opinionated defensiveness and emotionally rich loyalty to the ranching community.

I feel a strong desire to give back to this culture, which so hugely shaped my connections to the natural world. I feel extreme gratitude to my parents for choosing to raise their children in the country and on the land. To my father I especially owe thanks for exposure to a work ethic and integrity which have gone unequally witnessed across all of my travels and experiences. As a child I spent countless days on horseback, roaming Wyoming's sagebrush deserts. I have many memories of being forced from bed, already in the work clothes I had put on the night before just to catch an extra few minutes of sleep in the morning. I would eat a big breakfast eyes half closed, knowing it might be that night before I ate again. Once outside, even the jolt of a brisk frost on exposed skin may not raise my alertness. It usually took the jog around the weathered wooden corral in pursuit of my pony of the day, to bring me to a more conscious state. I was usually dreading the day ahead, imagining the soreness in my body from whatever physical endeavors lie ahead. Whether it was gathering cattle on horseback, fixing fence, driving a tractor, or trying to get out of some kind of wreck, I could count on being tired and enduring the harsh scrutiny of my dad along the way. I was the only ranch kid that went to the schools I commuted forty-five miles to every weekday. I did not own my heritage as a child the way I so possessively do today. I was always anticipating going to town, where there were lots of treats and people who realized a person did not need to work so hard to make a living.

My parents did not try to impose their choice to live in the country on their children, once we left home. They instead encouraged us to pursue our own passions and happiness. I spent many years away from Wyoming, and the immediate influences of the ranching lifestyle. Despite this hiatus, the remnants of a childhood filled with sagebrush, dust, hayfields, blisters, galloping horses, bellowing cows, and extreme consequences for poor choices but deep gratification for thoughtful ones, have left a permanent impression. Along with the physical and

emotional memories of ranching, I am now able to add the comparisons of my interactions with other types of land managers and users, to my assessment of the rancher as a steward. Not all ranchers do a great job of taking care of their resources, but when they do not nurture the land, eventually the odds overwhelm them and they cannot make it here anymore. In my experience ranchers have been among the most hard-working, thoughtful, and honest people to whom I have been exposed. They are a leery bunch, skeptical of promises and long-winded explanations founded on inexperience. But they also share a love and appreciation for the landscape and its inhabitants, which I find is the ultimate connection between this group of people and all others who seek to protect and honor Wyoming.

All the prompting in my youth to be involved in range judgments and similar activities fell on deaf ears. Now I wish I had participated in those forms of education which highlighted areas of knowledge I am now finally embracing. I imagine my father finds it highly ironic that I now spend a large portion of my time in the Ag building. It is certainly not where I would have anticipated being at thirty years old. Yet, I am surprisingly comforted to be in a setting where I see young people from other ranching families coming to town for their education. I also spy many imposters, though, and am suspicious of their desire to be a cowboy. I worry that they may misrepresent a culture, unintentionally reinforcing false stereotypes surrounding ranching. Their focus is on having the biggest truck, belt buckle, and gun, all things supporting that romantic and sexy image. They must be unfamiliar with the hardships of the gambling population who depend on intelligence, experience, the forces of nature, and the ability to endure suffering to determine their vitality. These are the characteristics I seek to capture in documenting the images of ranchers across Wyoming.

#### Project Description:

*Time Line-* Although the proposal guidelines state preference of a project which only spans one semester, I would ideally like to gather images for a year with completion in the spring of 2012. It has been my experience that each season on a ranch creates unique imagery to photograph. Also, because the activities and energy of ranchers vary so strongly depending on the time of year, a longer time frame will allow for the most comprehensive collection.