

LEAVING ARCHER CITY

The late afternoon sun reflecting off its passenger side mirror, a beige Honda Accord heading south on Highway 79 from Wichita Falls halted at the 4-way-stop intersection. Simultaneously, a 1970's vintage beat-up, red Ford pick-up reached the same intersection, coming in from the east on Highway 25, from the direction of Windthorst. Another truck, pulling a trailer full of hay, slows to a stop behind the Ford. From the covered porch of the Spur Hotel, I turn my head with detached interest to watch the traffic jam at the only signal light in Archer City, Texas.

This intersection at the corner of Archer City's Main and Center Streets is the middle of town, the Archer County seat, the historic courthouse its centerpiece. The courthouse is framed by the Spur Hotel, Archer City Hall, the Fire Station, the shell of the Royal Theatre made famous in the Last Picture Show, a smattering of retail shops and local businesses, including native son Larry McMurtry's Booked Up stores 3 and 4 (numbers 1 and 2 located just down the block on Center Street). Except for the influence of McMurtry's brand, hand drawn within each of his nearly half-million volume book ranch, the square looks much as it has for the last 130 years. Archer City is a small town, unchanged, languishing in a time warp on the vast west Texas plains. Or is it?

I ambled over to my car and loaded the last of my bags, the adventures of the past 8 days replaying through my mind like scenes from a movie. I'm one of 10 aspiring writers who were collectively The Archer City Tribe, students studying literary non-fiction writing under George Getschow, Professor and Writer-in-Residence at the University of North Texas' Mayborn Graduate School of Journalism. One week each year, Getschow treks to Archer City with a handful of hopefuls like us and baptizes them in something he calls "immersion journalism." He

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had us every waking hour for the entire 8 days. For most of us, maybe all of us, our first impression of Archer City was a sleepy, dull town in the middle of nowhere, Texas. His challenge to us for the week? See Archer City. Get below the surface, drink it in, and write, write, and then write some more.

The temperature over 100 degrees, I turned on the A/C and let it run full blast before I slipped into the driver's seat. I wiped sweat from my face with a napkin I found crumpled in the console between the seats. Almost forgetting about the tender skin on the bottom half of my face, I jerked the napkin back before returning to gently dab the bruised and still slightly swollen skin.

The stitches through my bottom lip and under my chin burned and my body ached all over as I headed northwest toward Archer City from my home in Lewisville last week. An accident on my bicycle just days earlier had spared me broken bones or teeth, but left my face a bloodied mess and my brain muddled with pain-killers throughout the Mayborn Literary Non-Fiction Writers Conference in Grapevine. The conference had ended only a couple of hours before I bid my husband goodbye for the week. Physically aching and burdened under an inherent weariness extending months prior to the accident, I laid off the pain meds and determinedly set out toward the sunset.

My face looked and felt 100% better upon leaving Archer City than it had when I arrived. The change throughout the week amazed all of us as we watched the healing transformation. My face wasn't the only thing that changed during that week.

I looked up at the third floor of the Spur where my room #7 looked out over Center Street. I smiled, remembering the bewildered feeling of waking up the first morning in Archer City to the pounding of a typewriter. Rose Marie had the room across the hall from mine. When

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she was writing, everyone in the building knew it because of her preference for the old-fashioned, loud method of putting words on paper. It resonated through the walls and wooden floors of the old hotel. Danny wrote on an artist's sketch-pad, in blocks beside which he drew, appropriate for an artist such as he. Some of the writers utilized laptops, but several, like Diane who was never farther than arm's length from her pen and paper, persevered with long-hand journals, legal pads or spiral notebooks. We were a group of vastly different individuals with a common goal: to change. Our aim for the week was to stretch ourselves, to grow as writers. We, every one, hoped to change in some way in this place of apparent unchange. And we did. Every one of us did.

I don't know what I expected to find in Archer City. I do know that when pondering adventurous get-aways, this place had never once made my wish list. I could not imagine anything beyond rest and isolation from my fast-paced city life when I first arrived. However, Archer City turned out to be one of the greatest surprises of my 47 years.

Torn between wishing I could stay longer and knowing I must go home, I buckled up. I put the car in drive, bypassed the direct route back to Dallas via Highway 25, and set my course for the long way out of town.

Near the southern city limit sign, I stopped for a burger and a Diet Dr. Pepper at the Dairy Queen, one of only a handful of dining establishments in town, a couple of which are convenience stores. While I waited for my order to go, I studied the walls of this Archer City landmark where Larry McMurtry read Walter Benjamin, later immortalizing that read in his collection of essays called *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*. The walls are a tribute to Archer City's two most celebrated authors, McMurtry, of course, being one. Framed book jackets from a few of his most famous books like *Horseman Pass By*, *Lonesome Dove*, *Cadillac*

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Jack, Texasville, and Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen hang between large windows on one wall. A mural on the opposing wall next to the counter portrays an artist's rendering of the Anarene Hotel, General Store, a covered wagon and a couple of pigs, all scenes reminiscent of the *Lonesome Dove* movie.

Jack Loftin is Archer City's other Dairy Queen celebrity. While his books never went to Hollywood, they are captivating collections of Archer County history. Where McMurtry focused most of his writing career on fiction developed from his experience in this place, within this landscape and among these people, Jack's writing is all non-fiction, his mission to preserve the real events, places and personalities that built Archer City out of the mesquite-choked, unbridled land. Framed between the front door and window is a photo of Jack Loftin above a short biography that includes praise for the more than 60 years he invested in research that resulted in *A Centennial History 1880-1980* and *Trails Through Archer County*. Another mural, this on the back wall of the restaurant, depicts the 1910 Archer City School, a 1913 Avery tractor, the old jail which now houses the Archer County Museum assembled in large part by Jack himself, cowboys working a herd of cattle, and a 250-million-year-old Edaphosaurus Boanerges dinosaur, all chapters within Archer City's real-life story.

My to-go order on the seat beside me for later, I continued south on Highway 79 toward Sam Cowan Road, the western edge of a maze of gravel and dirt ranch roads that wind across the county to Highway 281, the eastern and most major thoroughfare cutting through this open country. My rearview mirror reflected the Archer City water tower, the town's only skyline, as the Archer City limit sign, population 1848, faded from view.

I turned the radio off and opened the sunroof to the summer heat lingering in the late July afternoon. There was no sound but the highway and a sense of change rearranging the contours

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of my mind. Hanging a left on Sam Cowan Road was like driving through a thin curtain separating dimensions in time. The Andy Griffith-like pace of Archer City gave way to a distant era when settlers were first arriving, staking their claims, building lives out of nothing but land. Half a mile from the familiarity of the highway, the gravel road gives way to just plain dirt. I stopped the car, turned off the engine and listened to the din of silence. The wide open barrenness before me was a balm, reminding me of the over-stimulated life waiting at the other end of this dirt road. Sweat tricked down my back and my legs were slick against the leather seats. But still I sat, every sense alert, longing to absorb this place into my pores, to sear it into my memory forever. A bob-white sang nearby.

A cow lowed somewhere in the distance. I started the car and crept along the dirt road, the Archer City water tower in the distance to my left a tether to the spirit I discovered there. The pioneers didn't have that security. Awed by the strength of those people that tamed this wild place, I drew courage from their stories, some centuries old and most never told. My tires inched off the gravel into the soft dirt.

Archer City's most appealing aspect for me was that it is everything my everyday life is not. Within a matter of hours of arriving, this Archer City state of mind began to emerge and, like an old-fashioned chalkboard eraser, clear my mental slate. The Archer City adventure for most of us was about digging deep, discovering the writer within ourselves, and finding significantly fresh chalk with which to write from completely new perspectives.

Having spent a career in marketing, my success in business has been my weakness in the genre of creative non-fiction writing. I am highly competent in spinning stories in an effort to persuade readers to act according to the goals of our organization's strategic plan. However, genuine, empathetic stories told through real, multi-dimensional characters are not the marketing

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norm. My own catharsis in Archer City revealed a desperate desire to become a transparent storyteller of whole truths and complete characters.

Robert Frost's well known poem "The Road Not Taken" is a story about the choice awaiting each person at the crossroads of life. Borrowing from Frost's analogy, I felt in Archer City much as he must have when he penned his poem. For me, it didn't happen in a yellow wood but on the vast and dusty west Texas plain. And rather than two roads, my experience seemed more like two lives diverging. The similarity is greatest in the decision required. One or the other road must be taken; one or the other life lived. There is no way to do both. Frost thought it true for himself, and so did I. Will I write my own words tomorrow? Or will I continue to create images with words prescribed by those who currently own my craft?

Four miles along San Cowan Road, the Archer City tower still visible on the western horizon, I noticed a few beer bottles tossed into the grass beside the dirt road. Backroaders, I suspected. It's an Archer City adventure the casual visitor is guaranteed to miss all together but that we writers experienced first hand. I smiled at the memory of the tribe's backroading venture with a few Archer City locals earlier in the week: pickups stopped in the dirt road, surrounded by pastures and open plains in the middle of the night. Ice chests packed with beer, country music filling the night from the radio, dancers scooting circles in the dirt under the giant star-studded Texas sky, diamonds on black velvet. The stars are brighter than city stars because the night sky in Archer City is almost free of the light pollution that permeates my world.

Dust clouded my vision through the back window as I rolled slowly on. Ahead, no phone or power lines marred the span of sky between me and the horizon, no barns or silos, not even a fence between the 15 head of cattle grazing 100 yards away. I saw the landscape as those first settlers saw it – wild with possibility in spite of terrible hardship. I felt it, metaphor of my heart

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at the end of this pilgrimage. A $\frac{3}{4}$ full moon rose in the south-eastern sky ahead even as the sun began to set behind me.

The decision between my two lives was heavy on my mind as I inched along. I wondered whether these two lives are completely irreconcilable, or if there exists a way to merge them into a better whole than either experience would be on its own.

A few nights before, our group was gathered on the Spur's front porch, our nightly hangout. Some evenings, Archer City locals like Crystal the cowgirl and Zach the songwriter would join us. Zach sang stories, others told them, and still others were creating stories right there on the spot. On this particular night, however, it was just us, the 11 tribe members, our conversation ambled and slow. Suddenly, a bolt of creative economic development jolted me and I said, "Have any of y'all ever been to Marfa? Because Archer City could be a Marfa if it were managed right." In my mind's eye, I was seeing an art gallery, coffee shop, artsy commercial venues, and visitors enjoying attractive sidewalks, visiting the museum, and relaxing on the courthouse lawn – images of economic dollars infusing health into Archer City's dry veins through tourism.

My offhanded comment became the focal point for a short, but impassioned debate between members of the group. In reality, the debate was really between all of them and me. Turning Archer City into Marfa would change everything; and changing Archer City would destroy the magic of this place, their argument posed. They were seeing WalMart instead of my quaint vision. I backed off quickly, 10 of them against one of me, feeling almost ashamed I had voiced that thought out loud.

The subject didn't resurface after that night, but I never stopped thinking about it.

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Crunching southward on Loftin Road, named for Jack's geneology, I savored this last gravel gamut before Highway 281, visible as a thin gray ribbon atop the plain bathed in sunset pink. I contemplated, "What will happen when I reach that highway? Will I lose Archer City? Will this whole week fade into the fuzzy place where dreams die?" Far off to the north and west, the Archer City water tower was a dot on the horizon.

I fell in love with Archer City. I completely embraced the slow monotony of the place and decided my tribal colleagues had been right. Changing Archer City would be akin to a criminal act. Discovering myself as I had in the past week could never have happened in the cacophony of racket that is my life in the real world. My disparate lives were clearly identified and magnified in this place. My quest at this point seemed to be severing one life and building the other if I could negotiate no merger of the two.

At the corner of Loftin and McMurtry Roads, I pulled into the McMurtry driveway, the overgrown ranch stretching behind the house where nothing but books lived anymore. Looking past the McMurtry hand-styled horseshoe brand atop the gate, my eyes drank in the vista, a major character in almost everything McMurtry has written, including his memoirs. I recalled from *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* how he would sit in the loft of the barn just a quarter mile beyond this gate and read. From our own exploration of this now uninhabited ranch earlier in the week, I knew McMurtry had had a clear view of Highway 281 from his perch in the barn. He writes about that highway, how watching trucks speeding along its length had born in him hunger to leave this place far behind. He considered Archer City as somewhat stuck, unimaginative, creatively blessed only by his book ranch empire ensconced between Booked Ups 1-4, his in-town mansion, and this ranch house. Even as a boy, Highway 281 symbolized a

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freedom road of sorts, the way to places where life was happening, culture was rich, and change meant forward motion.

I got out of my car and snapped a few final photos with my little digital camera. I focused my lens on the street sign and thought it interesting that Jack Loftin's road name sits perpendicular under McMurry's at this dusty, gravel intersection, an appropriate image of juxtaposition. I thought about a painting Jack had showed me earlier this week. It hangs on the third floor of the museum in the Old Jail building downtown. The painting depicts a lone cowboy sitting on his horse at the top of a ridge, quite possibly about where I was standing at the McMurry gate. The cowboy is looking across the landscape, void of change but for the highway at the distant edge of the painting's north frame. The lone diesel truck painted on that highway haunts the cowboy. His shoulders slumped as if he was just awakening to the knowledge that his way of life was giving way to the speed and efficiency represented by that truck. As Jack told the story rendered in the painting, his passion for preserving not just that cowboy, but all the precious past, was tangible.

Larry McMurry saw Highway 281 taking him away from unchanging Archer City to adventure and progress. Next door neighbor Jack Loftin saw Highway 281 rushing change to Archer City so quickly that the adventures of the past and its legacy could be completely erased by progress. They both saw the highway as a change agent that would not be ignored. Change was coming, here or there.

The old saying, "the only thing constant is change" seemed to whisper in my ear as I turned back onto Loftin Road, Highway 281 now just a couple of miles away.

So, change is inevitable. It happens whether we want it to or not. It happened to Archer City since the Loftins and McMurrys first arrived over 100 years ago. It will happen again as

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the big city of Wichita Falls just 20 miles to Archer City's north continues to encroach to the south bringing people, and people, and more agents of change.

Archer City is itself a change agent. "Just look at me," I thought to myself. "I will reach Highway 281 a different person than when I arrived a week ago. What will I do with it?"

At the intersection where the gravel of Loftin Road meets the concrete surface of Highway 281, I turn around in my seat for one last look across the open country between me and the water tower, barely visible in the last light of sunset, a flaming ribbon along the horizon being hastily erased by the night sky.

We can't stop change. But we can manage it. While my Archer City to Marfa vision may have rattled a few minds, maybe it was at least based in the realism that change will happen whether we do anything or not. Why not lasso it toward our own best interest? Maybe my two lives are not irreconcilable after all. Maybe, just maybe, merging the past with today and tomorrow is what it's really all about.

A last glance in the review mirror confirmed the Archer City water tower lost from view and the day's sunset gone for good. Feeling a lot like Jack and a lot like Larry at the same time, I turned right, the last of the gravel road grinding beneath my tires as I punched the gas to turn right onto Highway 281.