

Keynote Address at Installation Ceremony of Raintree County Plaque, Henry County Courthouse, New Castle, Indiana, May 23, 2015, 2:00 p.m.

As at an Academy Awards ceremony, I'll begin by thanking just a few of you. My warmest thanks and appreciation to Mayor Greg York, to Elizabeth Edstene of the Henry County Historical Society, to Kim Cronk, Joy Constantino, and Richard Ratcliff, whom you have just heard speak; also thanks to commissioner Butch Baker and his wife Rebecca, to representative Tom Saunders, to former councilman James Kidd, and to documentary filmmaker Terry Swindol, who is immortalizing this event today. And I'd especially like to thank Mark Orr, the moving force behind this commemorative marker and, as Henry County photographer and author of *Raintree County Memories*, someone who has worked hard to keep the spirit alive of both the novel *Raintree County* and the MGM adaptation. Because of health problems Mark is unable to be here today, but his wife Pam, son Dakota, and parents Wayne and Marilyn Orr are here.

It is remarkable that the stand-ins for the three leads of the MGM *Raintree County*—Ron Chilton for Montgomery Clift, Liz Kermen for Elizabeth Taylor, and Virginia Baumann for Eva Marie Saint—are all here today. I was with you on location in the summer of 1956. MGM was shooting in Danville, Kentucky, but as former Mayor James Small well knows, the film should have been shot right here in Henry County. That summer my younger brother Ross III was eleven, and on one occasion Monty Clift was being filmed amorously chasing Liz Taylor down a creekbed, with Liz squealing. My brother shouted out at the top of his

lungs, “**Mom, is that acting?**” The director Edward Dmytryk cried “Cut!” Liz Taylor approached my brother and said, “Honey, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

I am deeply moved that Mark Orr has organized this ceremony honoring the installation of the plaque that makes the connection, for all time, between the mythical Raintree County of my father’s novel and Henry County, from which he drew his inspiration. Without Henry County there would have been no *Raintree County*, so greatly invested was Ross Lockridge, Jr. in the history and culture of Henry County. In his first sketches of the map that would appear in the front matter of his novel, he did not even change the place names. He drew Straughn, which would become the Waycross of the novel; he drew New Castle, which would become the Freehaven of the novel, with its Victorian courthouse. He owned a copy of *The Illustrated Henry County Historical Atlas of 1875*, which would become *The Illustrated Raintree County Historical Atlas of 1875*, the most important single book referenced in the novel with the possible exception of the Bible. On the inside covers of the first edition one sees a reproduction of this Henry County Courthouse taken directly from the 1875 historical atlas.

As a young boy Ross Lockridge, Jr. enjoyed visiting his grandmother Emma Rhoton Shockley in her modest house on the Great National Road in Straughn, which is still there with its gingerbread porch. She would become the Esther Root of the novel. His grandfather John Wesley Shockley had died in 1907, seven years before my father Ross was born, but there were all sorts of memorabilia, especially the poetry that John Shockley, a Hoosier schoolmaster, had written with elegant calligraphy, sometimes publishing in local newspapers

under the name of “Will Western.” Ross Lockridge, Jr. would spend part of his honeymoon in 1937 with his bride Vernice Baker in this very house. John Wesley Shockley became John Wickliff Shawnessy, hero of the novel. I wonder what John Shockley would have thought had he known that he would someday become a local American hero played by a famous actor, Montgomery Clift! But it was especially Ross Lockridge, Jr.’s mother, Elsie Shockley Lockridge, born in Spiceland in 1880, who was the principal inspiration for the novel *Raintree County* and to whom it is dedicated. She would become the young character Eva Shawnessy, who late in the novel unknowingly stumbles upon the mythical raintree.

It was in the summer of 1941 that my father, accompanied by his mother Elsie, drove from Bloomington to Henry County to see again the old sites of his mother’s youth. First they visited the graves of John Wesley Shockley and Emma Shockley in Lewisville, then they drove to the old Harvey graveyard, where Emma’s father Franklin Rhoton is buried. Then to the old conservatory house at Bluntsville where Elsie had lived two years as a girl, and then to Mooreland, and then, as my father wrote in a note soon thereafter, “on down the narrow dirt road and across the Rail Road tracks again to a jog where Pedee College, at Dan Webster, Indiana, was, . . . passing the so-called old Messick place where Grandfather Shockley was born, and then to the Old Home Place where he lived and had his office . . . Then away from there to Messick not far down the road where the old Messick Graveyard is.” These sites profoundly influenced my father’s historical imagination, as he strove to recreate the culture of nineteenth-century Henry County.

Indiana University Press has republished my biography of my father, *Shade of the Raintree*, with a new preface, and available here today at the tent set up by the Henry County Historical Society. It is being sold for the reduced amount of twenty dollars, all proceeds to be given to the Henry County Historical Society. You will see a photograph of Ross Lockridge, Jr. on the new cover, as he stands next to a fence at the Old Home Place that figures so greatly in the novel. This photo was taken five years after his 1941 visit with his mother, just after his novel had been accepted for publication by Houghton Mifflin in Spring, 1946. He had left the 2,000 page unsolicited manuscript in a beat-up suitcase with a clerk in the foyer of the Boston publisher's building. Even before publication *Raintree County* had won the large MGM novel award, had been excerpted in *Life* magazine (the Great Footrace scene that takes place in Freehaven—that is, New Castle—and run in the film version by Monty Clift and Lee Marvin). *Raintree County* was also the Main Selection for Book-of-the-Month Club. Soon after publication on Jan. 5, 1948 it topped the best-seller lists. Not bad for a novice 33-year-old writer who had pretended to be writing a doctoral dissertation on Walt Whitman when he began *Raintree County*!

When it was republished in 1994 by Penguin USA, seven or eight critics pronounced it the Great American Novel, just sitting there all along and underrecognized. Whether it is this or not I cannot say—literary offspring should keep their mouths shut in such matters; I'd say only that I hope they were right. *Raintree County* is now in print with Chicago Review Press. Ross

Lockridge, Jr. left us too soon but his novel remains in print as a testimony to his spirit and to Henry County.

I'd read some words of Herman Wouk, best known for the novels *Marjorie Morningstar* and *War and Remembrance*: He wrote a foreword to the new edition of *Raintree County* in 1997. "Once long ago when I reread *Raintree County*, I had a momentary impulse to write a literary critique, something I never do, to be called 'He Came, and Ye knew Him not.' By *him* I meant the author of 'the great American novel.' For I realized in that reading that Ross Lockridge had pursued and—insofar as he could—captured the phantom prize he was really after, with movie money the farthest thing from his aspiring spirit."

So my thanks to all of you, and especially once again, to Mark Orr, for this commemorative plaque. Ross Lockridge, Jr. was fascinated by memorials—by how the past retains its ghostly powers over the present—and I feel he would be both honored and astonished that a plaque that will outlast the ages has been erected in honor of his novel *Raintree County*, of the movie he didn't live to see made, and in the shadow of the very courthouse that figures so deeply into the culture and plot of his novel.

Here are the words of the plaque:

Side One:

HENRY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

1869

The Henry County Courthouse, designed by architect Isaac Hodgson, replaced a courthouse that had burned in 1864. Featuring a mansard roof and a 110-foot clock tower, it is pictured on the inside covers of Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s iconic novel *Raintree County* (1948), in which Henry County is the original on which the mythical Raintree County is based. The image of the courthouse is taken from *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Henry Co. Indiana, 1875*. Lockridge writes, "The clock in the Court House Tower on page five of the *Raintree County Atlas* is always fixed at nine-o'clock, and it is summer and the days are long." The principal character, John Wickliff Shawnessy, is based on Lockridge's maternal grandfather, John Wesley Shockley (1839-1907), long-time Henry County resident, who lived out his days with his second wife, Emma Rhoton, and three children in a small house in Straughn, Indiana, on the Great National Road.

Side Two:

In *Raintree County*, Lockridge aspired to write the epic of the American people. He acknowledged Henry County as the real Raintree County, whose raintree symbolized the tree of life and the stubborn American idealism Lockridge found here in the heart of the Midwest. His grandfather John Shockley had been a self-taught Hoosier schoolmaster and dreamer who wrote poetry, participated in the Civil War, and was married briefly to Susannah Duke of Henry County, who became the Southern belle Susanna Drake of the novel. Regarded by some critics as the Great American Novel, *Raintree County* was adapted in 1957 by MGM in a film starring Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, and Eva Marie Saint. Clift played the role of John Shawnessy, Elizabeth Taylor played Susanna Drake in her first Academy Award nomination, and Eva Marie Saint

played Nell Gaither, based on Lockridge's high school sweetheart and wife,  
Vernice Baker.

So a salute to the Raintree!

Larry Lockridge

Professor of English

New York University

2 Washington Square Village

Apt. 10M

New York, NY 10012

212-674-2554

LL3@nyu.edu