

# Her Rightful Place

Amy Hale Auker writes of her love affair with the working cowboy and the American West.

By Kathy McCraine

*Every horseman rides beside an open grave. – Old Spanish Proverb*

She thought, Being a wife and mother and cook just isn't *it*; there has to be more. At that moment she faced and conquered her greatest fear, "that terror of being substandard, middle-of-the-pack, good enough," and said, "I am a *writer*."

After years living in West Texas cow camps, writing her life down in notebooks and journals, sharing voluminous letters and e-mails with friends, writing bits and pieces about the ever-changing colors of life on the prairie, at 41, Amy has finally found her rightful place as an author. Her recently released book of essays, aptly titled *Rightful Place*, from Texas Tech Press, paints an intimate yet unsentimental picture of an almost vanishing way of life on the big outfits of West Texas, with its itinerant people, horses, cattle, wildlife, windswept prairies and unforgiving climate.

A petite young woman with a thick mane of long blond hair and eyes the color of robin's eggs, Amy knows

life in the Texas Panhandle well, having moved within it some 27 times since she was born there. Her father was at various times a cowboy, feedlot hand, rancher, oil field worker and English teacher. When her parents moved to Guthrie, Texas, both to teach English at the Four Sixes Ranch headquarters, Amy knew she had found her roots.

Savoring the occasions when ranch manager Tom Moorhouse let her ride with the wagon, she knew she never wanted to go back to the city. But she soon faced a harsh reality – women could never be part of the cowboy's world on those outfits. Her only hope of living her

dream was to marry a cowboy with a camp job.

She spent two miserable semesters at Texas Tech.



photos by Kathy McCraine

Amy's work chronicles her life on ranches throughout West Texas.



“College was a groomed and manicured world where the clock rules and my dorm room was the size of a coffin,” she would later write. “I missed the sky.” Then Amy found her escape in Nick Auker, a South Dakota farmer’s son who had come to Texas to cowboy. Nick was tired of living in a bunkhouse and ready for a camp, so after dating for three weeks, he told Amy, “Hey, if you marry me, Bob Moorhouse will give me a camp at the Pitchforks.” Not the most romantic proposal, but she accepted. She was 19, and Nick was 25. For the next 18 years she would move and move again – the Fulton Quien Sabe, the Pitchfork, the JA, Holt Brothers – always another cow camp.

On the 7D Ranch that first spring, she learned that there was no cook for the crew and they packed sandwiches for lunch, so she offered to cook. “It never crossed my mind to ask why I couldn’t just hire on as day help and pack my lunch too, because this was Texas,” she says. Women simply had no place on a cowboy crew, so armed with the cookbooks she got as wedding gifts and a few instructions from her mother over the phone, she taught herself to cook, sometimes getting paid by the plate, and sometimes working for groceries and day wages.

She worked hard on those ranches, but never horseback. Besides cooking, she helped Nick dig ditches and build fence, calve out heifers, halter break and start colts, though only on the ground. The rule was she couldn’t get on them. After ground work she turned them over to the cowboys, and that was hard.

The early years were a crash course in being a camp wife. “I didn’t know how to buy groceries for a month at

a time, what to buy a lot of, what wouldn’t keep,” she says. “We didn’t make a lot of money, and you just went to town for groceries once a month because once you did that, you were out of money.” And, she hated the city.

“The city is in constant motion with cars and vans and pickups and trucks speeding by or waiting or turning the corner or baking in the sun. Every human being is going somewhere. Even the asphalt, concrete, and glass scream hurry, hurry, hurry.” That was never the life she wanted.

Over the years, Amy and Nick raised two kids, Oscar and Lily. While other camp wives escaped their lot by taking jobs in town, Amy was determined to homeschool her kids at the ranch. “I could not fathom putting a child on a school bus for three hours a day. Why raise them on a ranch if they’re never there?” she reasoned.

After many moves, the couple found themselves working on a yearling outfit owned by the Holt Brothers at Goodnight, Texas. It was the first time Amy had moved out of the river brakes and up onto the caprock and Llano Estacado, a land of flat prairie, blue northers and blizzards. Running yearlings was intense work.

“The man we worked for was a bargain hunter,” she says. “They’d call and say there was a truckload of Mexican yearlings coming up from the border. Always, it would be Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or the middle of January when it was raining or snowing. They’d come dump them out, and you just hoped for a manageable death loss. Death loss is a personal thing to a cowboy. I never liked running yearlings.”



Amy Auker, author of the essay collection  
*Rightful Place*



Amy now calls the Spider Ranch, near Prescott, Arizona, home. She's completed two novels and continues to write about her ranch experiences.



Frustrated with her segregation from the world she longed for, Amy began to do two things: she walked endlessly over the prairie, and she began writing e-mails about her life.

"I ran to two places for solace. First, I ran to the land. And when I came back into the house with flushed face and full heart, I ran to the keyboard. I was becoming enamored with the watershed of the Salt Fork of the Red River, that place where I found myself when I needed it most. I wrote about colors, blue herons, blizzards, eggs warm in the nests, long-legged colts on yellow pastures..."

Amy sent some of her work to John Erickson, whose company, Laid Back West, marketed the work of several western humor writers and cartoonists. Erickson

was enthusiastic and encouraged her to write more. Soon her humorous "ranch wife" stories were being published in magazines and small-town newspapers. Still, she was discouraged because she felt "the writing was not good, and I got tired of being funny because there is so much to this lifestyle that isn't funny."

Meanwhile, Amy had gotten acquainted with singer and musician Red Steagall at the JA Ranch, where, every year, he pulled a wagon out for Texas businessmen to help brand calves. Amy's son Oscar was growing up to be a cowboy and, after studying poetry in his home schooling, discovered he was a natural performer. Steagall took him under his wing and became his mentor. Amy and Oscar began to travel with



him to shows, and then to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada. It changed her life forever.

“All of a sudden I was around all these people who were living the lifestyle, most of them, and they were making art,” she says. “It was a time when my children were getting very independent and sailing away from me. I hated that, and I had to find something positive.”

Steagall introduced Amy to Andy Wilkinson, series editor for a Texas Tech project called *Voice in the American West*. He was looking for undiscovered talent, and when he read Amy’s work, he was “knocked out.” He told Amy, “Stop writing e-mails. You’re wasting your writing.” Wilkinson began sending her essays to read, and she attended his writing workshops.

“She has a very strong, clear, fresh voice in the way she writes,” he says. “Those essays are poems as much as they are prose, but even more important, she has something to say. There is nothing predictable or trite about her writing.”

Between the spring of 2005 and 2006, Amy completed the manuscript for *Rightful Place*, but it would be five years before it was published. A university press differs from a commercial publisher in that every book has to go through a review by peers to determine if it is scholarly enough to make the cut. In the end, Amy’s book was accepted and praised by the established writers that reviewed her.

“When I finished the book, I realized two things,” she says. “One, I had to break free from a culture where I couldn’t be a part of what I loved, and two, I couldn’t stay in my marriage.”

Amy made the break in the winter of 2008 and wound up living in a “terrible house” in Chino Valley, Arizona, where she took a miserable job at the local Sonic and continued to work on perfecting the book.

She now saw it as her only future.

Then her life took another turn. At that January’s poetry gathering in Elko, she met Gail Steiger, an Arizona cowboy who was managing the 68-section Spider Ranch near Prescott, Arizona. A songwriter and filmmaker, Gail was a regular performer at Elko and other poetry gatherings. When he heard about Amy’s book, he insisted on reading it before it was published.

“My heart went out to her,” Gail says, “because she seemed so lost without the prospect of living on a ranch or finding a ranch job. As soon as I read the book, I was a goner. I just fell in love with her.”

Now Amy has found a home at the Spider Ranch. She and Gail are partners, sharing all the work, whether it’s branding calves, fixing fence, or digging out a muddy spring. During the spring and fall works, they camp for days on end, instead of trotting the seven miles back and forth to headquarters every day.

Amy has found that when she’s trailing cows, her mind goes into creative mode, and at night back in camp, she writes feverishly by head lamp, tearing out pages and pages of longhand copy from yellow pads to stuff in her cantele bag. Back home she rewrites and transfers it into her computer. Already she has finished two novels – fiction is her latest passion.

She tells the story about branding a bunch of big calves last fall, ones that had escaped the spring branding. “We finished and turned everything back together. We had some calf fries on the branding pot, and each of us had one warm beer apiece left, so we sat down in the branding pen and ate our calf fries and drank our beer and watched the calves mother up. It wasn’t a big crew on a huge outfit. They weren’t even our cows, but we both knew we were exactly where we wanted to be. This is our rightful place.”



Amy Hale Auker’s book *Rightful Place* is available at [www.amyhaleauker.com](http://www.amyhaleauker.com).

Kathy McCraine is a rancher and writer from Prescott, Arizona.