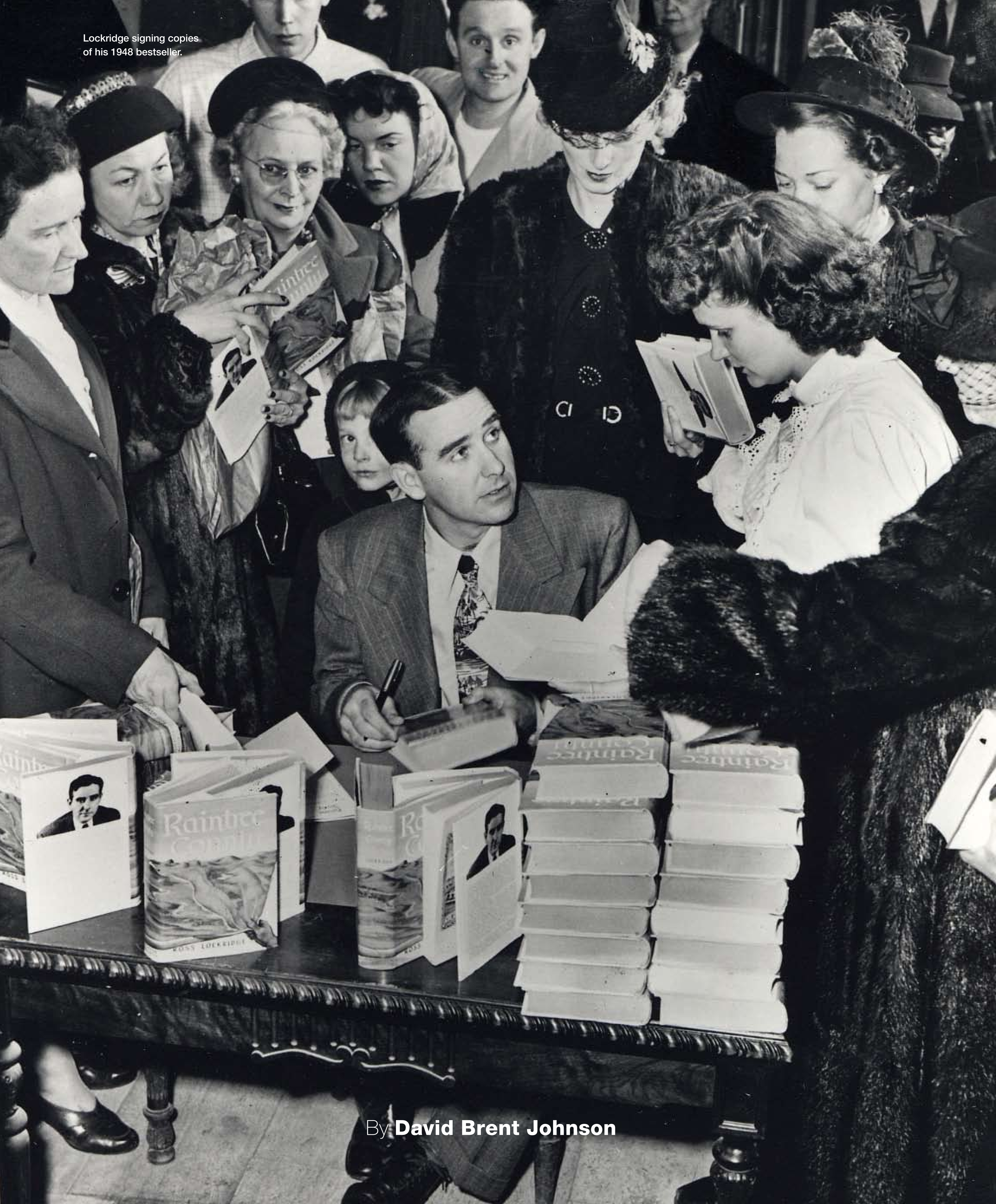


Raintree County
Ross Lockridge

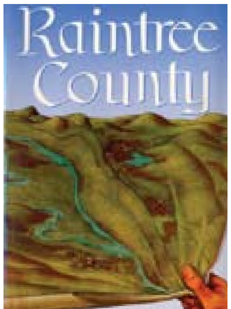
Lockridge signing copies
of his 1948 bestseller.

By **David Brent Johnson**

The Mysterious LIFE & DEATH *of writer* ROSS LOCKRIDGE, JR.

"FOR RAINTREE COUNTY is not the country of the perishable fact.
It is the country of the enduring fiction. 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."—Ross Lockridge, Jr.

The raintree is no longer there. Other trees now tower over the Bloomington backyard near the garage where a 33-year-old author's life ended just as his first novel was topping *The New York Times* bestseller list. His children planted the raintree after he was gone, and for a few years it thrived, showering the ground with golden blossoms every June. >>>



Lockridge and wife Vernice, seen here on their wedding day in 1937. “Without her, *Raintree County* would never have come into being,” he wrote in the novel’s dedication.

Ross Lockridge, Jr., the man who took his own life in that garage on March 6, 1948, was dynamic and driven and thought to be as handsome as the movie star Tyrone Power. He had quite suddenly become rich and successful as the author of *Raintree County*, a 1,060-page epic set in Indiana on one day, July 4, 1892. The book, a product of six years of hard literary labor, had garnered generally glowing reviews and netted Lockridge a $150,000 prize from MGM for the movie rights. Its author, an overnight celebrity, was now an overnight suicide. He left behind a wife and four children, a large house on Stull Avenue that had been paid for in full, and an enduring question—why?

“My father, in a very real sense, died because of a book,” says Larry Lockridge, the novelist’s son and author of *Shade of the Raintree*, a biography of his father published in 1994. “It was a great expense of spirit to produce this book. He was a perfectionist, he came to feel that the book was a failure, and he found it difficult to live with that.”

Ross Lockridge, Jr. had put heart and soul into what some thought was the Great American Novel—and some still think so today. He had put much of himself, his Indiana family’s past, and his nation’s history into a huge novel that was both a critique and a celebration of this country’s dreams and its reality. It’s a book full of both darkness and light, and in the end the darkness consumed the creator.

“There was a kind of nervy ambition in him,” says Larry Lockridge of his father, and it manifested itself throughout his short life in scholarship and competition. Born in Bloomington in 1914, Ross Lockridge spent his earliest childhood years in Fort Wayne, where his brother Bruce drowned when Ross was five—a “founding catastrophe in the family,” as Larry calls it. Ross’ father was an historical orator, author, and director of the Indiana Federal Writers’ Project; his mother a woman of thwarted intellectual ambition.

“I have my own theory THAT THIS BOOK IS *all about early Bloomington,* WHEN THE IU CAMPUS WAS JUST BEGINNING,” SAYS CHRIS STURBAUM.

The Lockridges moved back to Bloomington when Ross was nine; by then he had already decided that he wanted to be a writer. And he wrote, thousands upon thousands of pages in the next 24 years. He aided his father in his historical projects and excelled at all of his academic pursuits; at Indiana University, he was known as “A-plus Lockridge,” and he graduated with a 4.04 GPA, the highest ever awarded. (IU later abolished A-pluses.) In 1934 he spent some time studying abroad in Europe, where he first had the vision of writing a novel that would draw upon the would-be literary heritage of his maternal grandfather, a schoolteacher and poet who had lived in Indiana’s Henry County. Returning to the United States, he eventually married his teenage sweetheart, Vernice Baker; by all accounts the marriage was a deeply loving and supportive one, and in the next few years they would have four children.

The couple settled in Bloomington at first, living for a while in a log cabin at 612 Park Avenue. Lockridge taught and took graduate courses at IU before heading east in 1940 for a fellowship at Harvard. Teaching there and at Simmons College throughout the early 1940s, he began work on the book that would become *Raintree County*, his wife typing up the pages after he wrote them out longhand.

Raintree County is the story of John Shawnessy, a poet and schoolteacher who loses both his wife and the great love of his life, goes off to fight in the Civil War, tries to write a great American epic, and ends up spending most of his life in Raintree County—a place that Lockridge based somewhat on Indiana’s Henry County (where some establishments would later invoke the Raintree County name). In the course of its thousand pages, philosophy, religion, sex, and history all flow together in a narrative that spans 40 years, recollected in that single day in 1892.

In some ways it is an Indiana *Ulysses*, though Lockridge said that whereas Joyce wished to make the simple obscure, he wished to make the obscure simple. When the book came out, Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman were frequently cited for comparison, but it seems closer in technique and feeling to the panoramic narrative of John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* What Lockridge does share with Wolfe—a notoriously undisciplined writer Lockridge did not enjoy being paired with—is what his son Larry calls “a tragic sense of time.” He also drew upon Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Great Stone Face*, the story of a seemingly ordinary citizen’s spiritual odyssey and search for an epic personage who proves to be quite close to home.

By the summer of 1946, *Raintree County* had been accepted for publication, and the future seemed full of promise for the young novelist and father of four.

The book is undoubtedly too long in places, but it brims with lyrical energy. Its critique of materialism, its ecological themes, its portrait of a nation torn in two, and its reflexive tendency to comment upon itself yield much that readers in our age of bitter ideological divides and tarnished ideals may find relevant. "It's a novel that offers page-turning pleasure, and a novel that does anticipate developments in modern and postmodern fiction, but is a little more fun to read," offers Larry, who also adds wryly that "the literary judgments of offspring are worthless."

Nearly 60 years after its initial publication, the author's son laments that *Raintree County* is generally not considered part of the American literary canon. A flurry of positive critical reappraisals accompanied his biography and the Penguin paperback edition of the novel in 1994, but ultimately it wasn't enough to keep his father's work in print.

Even in Bloomington the book is not well known or read. One resident who has read it and rereads it every few years is preservationist and city council member Chris Sturbaum. "I have my own theory that this book is all about early Bloomington, when the IU campus was just beginning," says Sturbaum. He admires the novel for its "mix of the heroic and the mythic with everyday life," and because the hero's quest leads him to "an appreciation of the reality of the glory and mystic depth of his own life, whatever his surroundings." Larry Lockridge also sees some of the author's hometown in Raintree County: "We have county fairs and patriotic programs and outdoor sex and footraces and weddings and temperance dramas and rough talk…all of this he picked up in the culture of Bloomington."

Now, in 2007, *Raintree County* has been reprinted again, this time by University of Chicago Press, with a new foreword by Herman Wouk, in which Wouk recalls an "impulse to write a literary critique…to be called, 'He Came, and Ye Knew Him Not.' By him I meant the author of 'the Great American Novel.'" Such messianic allusions inevitably crop up in the narrative of Lockridge's life and book; his novel deals in heroes, myths, religion, sex, falls and redemption, quests for renewal, and a protagonist who metaphorically returns from the dead—all of it written by a charismatic man who died at the age of 33.

Lockridge and son Larry in 1945. "His legacy to us has been more light than shade," says Larry Lockridge, who chronicled his father's life in *Shade of the Raintree*.

Ross Lockridge, Jr. wrote the bulk of what would eventually be published as *Raintree County* in a two-year period. The trajectory of his labor, success, and devastating ending is remarkably short. He delivered, unsolicited, a 2,000-page manuscript to Boston publisher Houghton Mifflin in 1946. Houghton Mifflin accepted it, beginning a year-and-a-half of revisions and editorial and financial conflicts that would contribute greatly to Lockridge's demise. He was strongly advised to cut the 356-page "dream section" that ended the novel, and finally did. (Today that section is retained at the Lilly Library in Bloomington.)

In 1947 he and his publishers entered the novel-in-waiting in an MGM contest that resulted in the award of a $150,000 prize—nearly $1.5 million by today's standards. However, the award was contingent upon Lockridge's cutting 50,000 more words from his book. After an agonizing debate he agreed to do this. Then the Book-of-the-Month Club made *Raintree County* a main selection—that is, if Lockridge was willing to make more cuts.

All of these compromises ate at the author's considerable vitality. He revised and rewrote in a feverish state as the book's publication date was pushed back to January 1948. Letters he wrote to his publisher during this period veer between grandiosity and anguish. A bitter dispute in the autumn of 1947 over how to divide a portion of MGM's prize money appears to have been a breaking point, one from which Lockridge never recovered. He felt that he'd been cheated, but there were other anxieties plaguing him as publication approached, these chronicled in painful detail by his son in *Shade of the Raintree*.

> “It seems *Mr. Kinsey* and I have succeeded in making *Bloomington the sex center of the universe.*”
>
> —Ross Lockridge, Jr.

Vernice Lockridge and Eva Marie Saint at the 1957 movie premiere of *Raintree County*. Saint played Nell Gaither, a character Ross Lockridge modeled after his wife.

He was worried about what his family would think of the book. He was beginning to worry that the book wasn't as good as he'd thought it to be. In the midst of rising praise and accolades, on the apparent verge of the kind of triumph that every writer dreams about, he suddenly found himself in a nightmarish state of mind. Eating, sleeping, talking, and other normal aspects of everyday life became difficult, sometimes impossible. He was entering into what we would now know as a severe depression, but doing so in an age without Prozac, no highly developed or humane ways of treatment, and little or no understanding and sympathy for such a state—especially in the case of someone just about to make his first prominent appearance on the public stage.

Late in 1947 the author and his wife headed out to Hollywood to hobnob at MGM, look at possible places to live, and hopefully reverse Lockridge's declining spirits. After the trip failed to produce much in the way of house hunting or an improvement in Lockridge's condition, he and his wife decided to buy a large, newly built house in Bloomington, just north of what is now Bryan Park. He had come home to the city where he'd been born.

“Perhaps he should not have,” says his son Larry, for here the problems he was beginning to confront became inescapable. His mother attempted to minister to him with Christian Science, a philosophy he reluctantly entertained, and one very much against the grain of what his book was about. Increasingly desperate to find a cure for his worsening condition, he and his wife decided that he would undergo hospitalization.

A 1947 portrait of the author.

Lockridge was not the only member of his family to suffer from psychological distress; his cousin Mary Jane Ward had just scored a literary success herself with her autobiographical novel *The Snake Pit*, which depicted her experiences in the 1940s world of mental health treatment. He entered Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis under a pseudonym during the holidays and was given very crude electroshock convulsive therapy, which served only to humiliate and terrify him—but he was able to persuade doctors that he was better and was released the day before publication of his novel. He returned to the new house on Stull Avenue that lay on a raw lot, with red clay and little vegetation around it.

Raintree County was perhaps only the second-most significant book by a Bloomingtonian that came out on January 5, 1948; that was the same day that Lockridge's neighbor Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, prompting Lockridge to remark, “It seems Mr. Kinsey and I have succeeded in making Bloomington the sex center of the universe.”

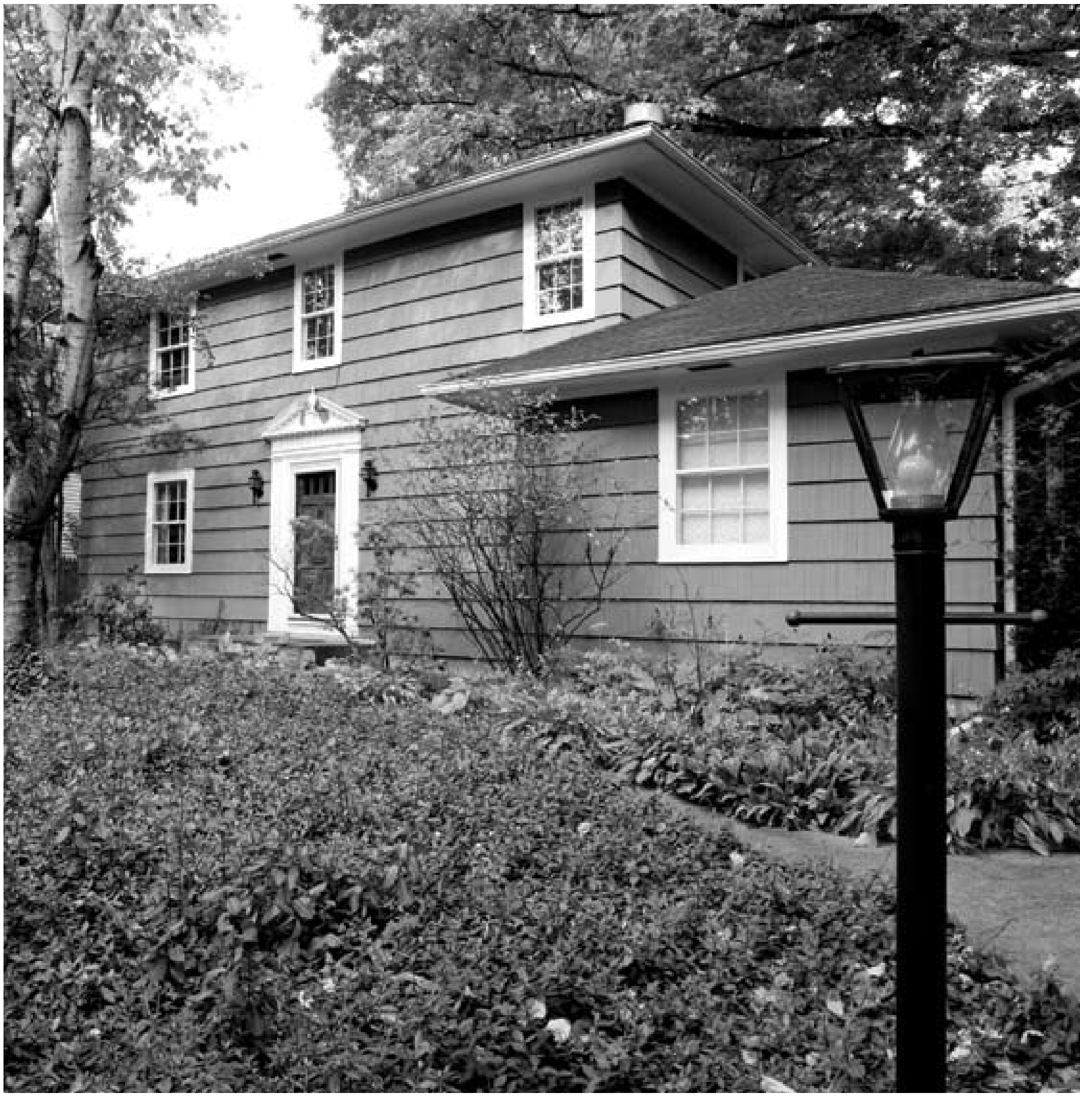
Such wit was rapidly becoming atypical of Ross Lockridge, Jr., who spent most of his days lying down, enervated, avoiding publicity and the press as much as possible. He did several book signings and tried to respond to the attacks that clergy and cultural conservatives were now launching at him and his novel, with his wife regularly intercepting hate mail. The erotic themes of the book and its irreverent musings on Christianity also outraged some Book-of-the-Month Club members. And several high-profile journals drubbed it, including *The New Yorker*, which printed a piece erroneously referring to the author as "Ross Lockwood, Jr." and describing his work of six years as the "sort of plump turkey that they bake to a turn in Hollywood." Still, in general, the novel received highly positive reviews in the nation's papers and magazines.

In a publicity photograph Ross Lockridge, Jr. had been shown holding a copy of a book called *Nothing to Fear*, but his son's account of his final months reveals a preoccupation with little else but that crippling emotion. The lifelong high achiever and perfectionist, who just a year before had thought that he might have pulled off the Great American Novel, began to suspect that he was a fraud, an imposter, and a failure. He feared that he had betrayed his family's secrets; he feared that he would not be able to write another novel, or at least one that could equal *Raintree County*. The wondrous vision he had carried inside himself for so long had been reduced to so much type on so many pages. For the next two months he existed in a state that Larry Lockridge describes as "barely functional." Friends who saw him in Bloomington during this time were shocked by his depressed state and his aged demeanor.

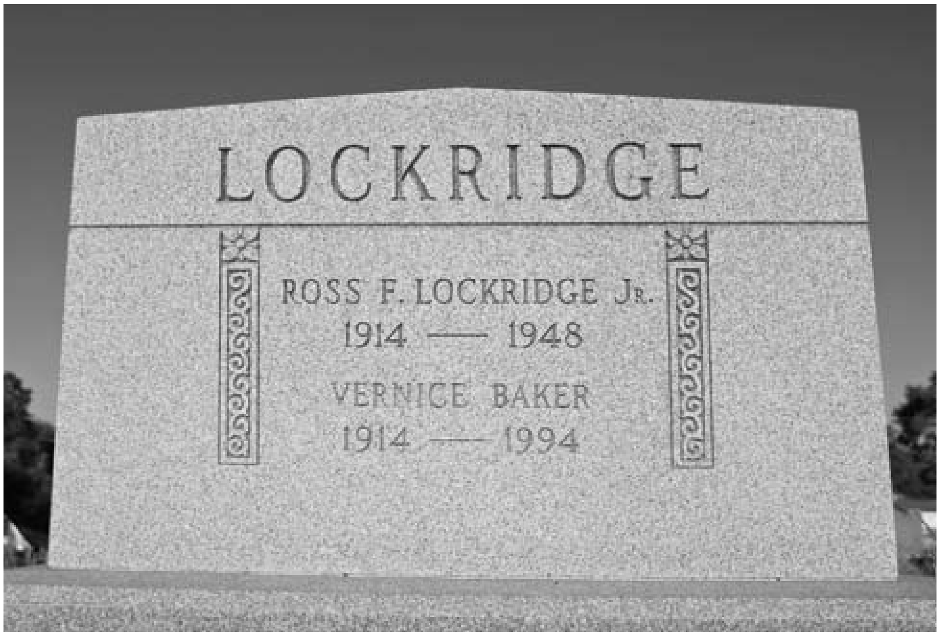
On the evening of Saturday, March 6, 1948, Lockridge told his wife that he was going to mail some letters and that he'd probably stop by his parents' house to listen to the Bloomington High School regional basketball game on the radio. Two hours later, well after the game had ended, Vernice Lockridge called her in-laws, only to be told that her husband hadn't been there. She ran out to the garage and discovered her husband in the car, inside the closed-up garage, with the engine running and the air full of fumes. Firemen attempted to revive him for an hour but gave up shortly after midnight. For years afterwards some in Bloomington believed that his death had been an accident, that he had struck his head exiting the car or fallen asleep listening to the basketball game on the car's radio. (The car, a new Kaiser, actually had no radio.) The coroner guessed otherwise and declared it a suicide.

Forty years later, when Larry Lockridge interviewed his mother for his book, she told him what she'd never told anybody else: that she found her husband sitting upright in the backseat of the car, not the front, that he had attached a vacuum hose from the exhaust pipe and run it through the rear ventilator window, sealing the window with rags. His sister, arriving before the firemen, had thrown his implements of death into a trashcan. "He was an efficient man," Larry notes, and he had ended his life with great and simple effectiveness.

Larry also made a startling discovery in the course of his research: on the evening of his father's death, the Bloomington *World-Telephone* had reprinted *The New Yorker* pan in a lame attempt to rebut it. Ross Lockridge, Jr. was an inveterate reader of local papers, and his son is almost certain that he saw this reprint of a sophisticated East Coast literary sneer, probably around suppertime. It may well have been the trigger for the fatal act that followed.



The Lockridge family moved into this house on Stull Avenue during the 1947 holiday season. The author would end his life in its backyard garage several months later.



Lockridge and his wife are buried in Rose Hill Cemetery on the western edge of Bloomington.

IT'S A BOOK FULL OF BOTH *darkness and light,* AND IN THE END THE DARKNESS *consumed the creator.*

In Bloomington and around the nation, there was astonishment and shock. Ross Lockridge, Jr. had been the youthful star of the season, a new literary light, snuffed out now just as the illumination he'd provided began to reach the public. His obituary made the front page of *The New York Times*, and more than 2,000 people attended the graveside ceremony on the outskirts of town. His widow and four children stayed in the house on Stull Avenue for the next 15 years; proceeds from the book continued to provide for them.

In 1957, MGM released a three-hour-plus movie version, starring Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, and Eva Marie Saint, that failed to live up to the studio's commercial expectations, and that most readers of *Raintree County* consider a travesty of the book. A 1974 biography, *Ross and Tom: Two American Tragedies* ("Tom" is Tom Heggen, author of *Mister Roberts*) shed some light on the author's life and sudden decline, and thrust him back into the limelight, but Larry Lockridge says it was poorly researched and relied at times on dubious novelistic methods that misrepresent what happened to his father and why. A literary scholar and author of several books himself, Larry undertook his own biographical work in 1988, partly because those who had belonged to his father's world and generation were beginning to disappear, and partly because he wanted to clarify the vague, somewhat sensationalized image of his father as a literary suicide.

Any artist who commits suicide puts an undeniable punctuation mark upon his or her career; the way in which we read or hear the works that are left behind is altered by an awareness of the chosen ending. We look for signs and prophecies, find ourselves haunted by the violent mystery of the act. *Raintree County* is studded with passages that sound the retrospective alarm. "He had come home and completed the necessary legend," Lockridge writes near the end of the novel. "But now he saw that he hadn't built new ramparts against the day when the old ones came crumbling down."

For Larry Lockridge the revelation 40 years later that his father's death was unambiguously intentional brought a sense of relief. "However bleak, suicide is a willed act invested with human meaning," he writes in *Shade of the Raintree*. He was five when his father took his own life, an eerie parallel to his father's age when his older brother Bruce drowned. Ross Lockridge "was a ghost in the house," says Larry. "There were certain relics, photographs of him, his shaving equipment, and especially the small portion of the original *Raintree County* manuscript that he didn't burn, that he wrapped up with a belt and which was in my bedroom. We grew up with a novel instead of a father. He had left what he thought was a spiritual testament in this novel, and we so read it. His legacy to us has been more light than shade."

Ross Lockridge, Jr. is buried in Rose Hill Cemetery at the western edge of Bloomington, a short walk downhill from the mausoleum and the Civil War soldiers' monument. "He had held the world for a little while, or rather he had drawn it with a sensitive pencil and had made a delightful legend of it," Lockridge wrote of his protagonist. We do indeed find the author in the epic, the unknown hometown hero who's been here all along. When John Shawnessy, thought to be dead, returns home from battle, he dreams that he is unable to find any familiar places or people in his beloved Raintree County: "The world that he had known was gone and gone forever, and he knew with a hollow certainty that he could never get it back." Ross Lockridge, Jr. knew well of what he wrote. ✲

You can find out much more about Ross Lockridge, Jr. and Raintree County *at the website maintained by his children: www.raintreecounty.com.*

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Why Wait To Address Your Aging Face?

Stephen W. Perkins, MD
Facial plastic surgery specialist

There's no magic age to seek some type of facial plastic surgery. Several factors play a role. Over time, heredity, gravity and environmental influences like smoking and sun exposure will contribute to facial aging. There are several options that can provide overall rejuvenation with a natural look. Choosing the right surgeon who understands which option is appropriate is the first step.

Everyone ages differently. Patients come in and may think they need something to improve their neck or jaw line but don't want a facelift per se. They may be able to benefit from liposuction only or simply a neck lift or isolated cheek lift. Patients don't want an operated look. They want natural looking results. Surgical technique plays a big factor. There are definite differences in techniques used between surgeons. "The techniques I've helped develop and personally refined are the least invasive yet yield extremely good results that last," says Stephen W. Perkins, MD, who has specialized in facial plastic surgery for almost 25 years.

Facelifts

If you've considered a facelift but thought you'd wait until your fifties, reconsider. There are facial and/or neck lift procedures you can have in your 30s and 40s to address the initial signs of aging. Having a facelift does not necessarily mean a major overhaul. Patients often misunderstand the terminology. The facelift can actually be broken down into 3 separate components: liposuction with under the chin lift; cheek-jowl lift only; neck lift only.

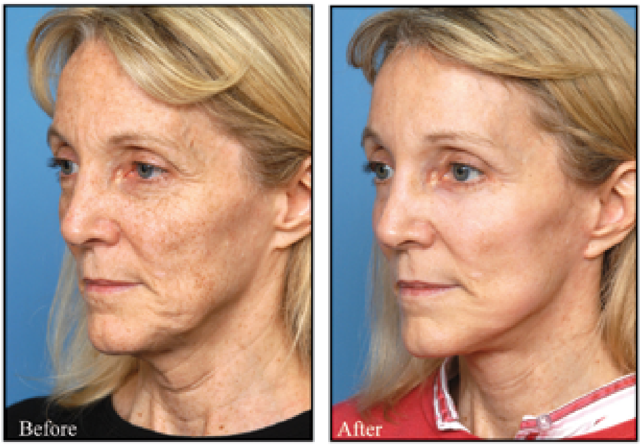
> *"...you may be a candidate for a minimally invasive facelift..."*

Some patients need all 3, while others do not. There are definite differences in the degree of improvement required to give a refreshed, more youthful look. The type of procedure Dr. Stephen Perkins performs depends upon each individual and the particular signs of aging. "Many patients tell me they look tired. They just want a refreshed look. If you're beginning to see signs of jowling, loose skin and fatty tissue below your chin and neck, you may be a candidate for a minimally invasive facelift (known as the 'Perk-Up') with a rapid recovery enabling you to get back to your daily activities relatively quickly," says Dr. Perkins. It's appropriate for younger women or men beginning to see the effects of hereditary traits and gravity, yet their skin still has elasticity. They enjoy a fresher neck and jaw line now rather than waiting until a later age to have a more involved procedure. There's no "dramatic" change in appearance, just a more youthful look – because Dr. Perkins performs a lift of the deepest tissues making even the least invasive lifts last a long time – producing a perfectly natural appearance.

Forehead and Eyebrow Lift

Another area that creates the tired or angry look is the drooping forehead and the heavy brow. A forehead or eyebrow lift eliminates saggy eyebrows and can take care of vertical lines and furrows causing patients to have a scowling or angry look. When performed by Dr. Perkins, you don't have to be afraid of looking different and having the "permanent" surprised look.

Muscles and tissues that cause frowning and drooping are removed or tightened to raise the eyebrow and smooth out the forehead. The procedure can be done endoscopically through very small incisions. And, patients with high hairlines are in luck. Dr. Perkins developed a modified version of the forehead lift he currently teaches to other surgeons. "In the past, patients with high hairlines were somewhat out of luck unless they wanted invasive surgery. What's different about my approach is the shortened length of the incision at the hairline so as not to raise it any further. I use an angled incision so hair can grow naturally through it, camouflaging the scar," Dr. Perkins says. Patients who have this surgery very commonly return to work within 5 days.



Actual patient of Dr. Perkins.
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