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by Cille Gates

From the turn of the century
The white frame building
Had remained on an
Obscure corner of prairie
Reserved for it by
A western Oklahoma pioneer.

There was no painted sign,
Nothing on the outside
To indicate it was the
Valley View Missionary Baptist Church
A “Landmark” Baptist Church,
Whatever that meant.

The grounds surrounding it
Boasted only occasional
Sprouts of waving native grass that
Had survived the continual parade of
Wheels, and feet of every age
Through the years.

The red dirt was packed hard
From Progress ranging the span of
Saddle horses, horse-drawn carriages
And wagons, to early Model T’s and Model A’s
An occasional Dodge or Packard with
Crystal flower window vases.

Inside, the building was equally as
Spare and totally unadorned
Except for bouquets cut
Hurriedly on Sunday mornings from
Someone’s clump of iris, rose bush,
Or old-fashioned country garden.

Over to one side of the pulpit
Was the floor furnace, and
Beside it sat a
Captain’s chair, always
Reserved for the old cold bones
Of Grandpa Treadaway

Who sat attentively,
Head slightly lowered,
Walking cane beside the chair
With his fingers intertwined,
Turning his thumbs first
One way, then the other,
And wore neat gray serge suits,
Starched white shirts and a black
String tie that somehow complemented
A silver mustache; beard,
Piercing dark eyes,
Validating a Confederate heritage.

It was he who homesteaded
The Church land.
His son Charlie
Had overseen building of the
Church, and right well he did,
To withstand violent prairie winds.

The congregation was an
Unusual mix of hard-working
Country folk; gentle and kindly
For the most part;
Unpretentious but unrelenting when
It came to the devil of the devil.

Locks on their doors or locks on
Anything else in that community
Were unthought of.
Wordly ways and pleasures
Were totally unacceptable and,
Once indulged in, never quite forgotten.

A man’s word
Was his bond and he
Matter-of-factly was
Responsible for his actions
As well as those of all
Members of his family.

A community where
Parents, aunts, cousins,
Runaways from the city or
Even broken down cowhands who
Came to “visit” and stayed for weeks
Were never turned away.

In that Church
One piano served
The early community
Musical needs albeit
There were others
To be sure

In almost every home.
Why Aunt Mary Brence even had
An organ with a bouquet
Of paper flowers on top,
Exciting foot pedals to be pushed
And glorious knobs to be pulled.

“Mis” Maude Fletcher played the Church
Piano for twenty-five years
In every type of service, guiding
The fledgling singing groups
That more or less were the center
Of much social activity.

Unusual “singing schools”
Met there and taught the
Do - re - mi - fa
So - la - ti - do
Method of singing and
Reading music;
Music written with
“Shape” notes rather than
The very complicated
“Round” note theory used for
More sophisticationally
Written song books.

Singing Schools conducted by
The preposterous Old Man Kays
Who wore tiny wire-rimmed
Spectacles on the very end
Of his nose and seemingly
The same black serge suit

With a watch chain across his
Vest and said repeatedly
“Hold that lawhst note!”
Which was silly and made
Everyone snicker because
No one talked with such put on.

Church singing conventions
Usually lasted for days
When people from all
Denominations far and wide
Came to sing those
Wonderful Gospel songs -

“Are You Washed In The Blood,”
“Standing On The Promises,”
“Amazing Grace,” always sung acappella,
“I Am Bound For The Promised Land,”
“When the storms of life are raging,
Stand By Me...”

Songs that resounded
Across a countryside
Subdued and brought to order
And production by
Gnarled hands, strong backs
And determined wills.

Church conducted funerals,
Always a community affair, were a
Combination of eulogy,
Evangelistic plea for souls
To be saved, and a
Simple time of celebration;
Visiting and sharing
Hearty food with
Friends greeting each other,
Especially those who
Were not seen often or
Lived far away.

A people who did not
Consider funerals with disgust,
Scorn, or horror, but simply
An honor, tribute and respect
Given to one going -
Going on to rest.

Never overlooking, however,
The sobriety of the burying
Or the feeling of loss -
The diminishment - as red clay
Covered a lowered casket
And flowers

Often handmade from crepe paper
Were awkwardly left
As mute, lonely testimony
Of a worthwhile person,
Who had once lived.

Then there were the
Sermons of the Church,
Those uncompromising sermons,
The likes of which are
Almost a thing of the past.
“Fire and brimstone”
They were called and
People don’t want
To hear that anymore.
It’s too abrasive, unpopular -
Too strict, so they say.
A real bore.

Splendid preachers they were.
Transformed from toil and struggle
With weather, seed and soil.
Who took wisdom from one book
And, with peculiar eloquence.
Never spoke from a set of

Notes. No, not ever.
Who broke the Word of Life
That could break the
Hardest heart and open
The most stubborn mouth
To repeat the sinner’s prayer.

Frontier preachers,
Who sometimes hadn’t even
Laces for their shoes;
Uneducated, but who could do
No less. On and on they came,
Those soldiers of the Cross.

Cunning men, knowing
Exactly welcoming kitchens
With coffee strong and black;
Platters of fried chicken,
Golden corn and "okry" -
Peach cobblers and chocolate cakes.

Bounty from the land, combined
With conversation and good humor.
Lively but uncomplicated.
Hospitality given and accepted
And no feeling of ever
Being the lesser for it.

It was a plain country Church
With noisy youngsters who
Often got taken outside by
Parents and spanked
When they misbehaved.
“Younguns” who sat together

On the front row -
When they were good -
And sang along with
Everyone regardless of
Whether they knew
The words. Strange lyrics -

Shriilled in high childish trebles,
Prestigious songbooks held upside down,
“When the roses crawl up yonder
I’ll be there . . .”
Or, exhausted after playing
All afternoon, an exciting Baptising

At the Swafford place
In their meandering creek;
Lulled by distant sounds,
Special smells and vapors
Waiting through windows opened
To soft summer nights.

The children wilted into sleep.
Some mothers would take pity,
Placing them on pallets
Made from handsewn quilts
Brought from home
For just that purpose

To be spread on the bare wooden floor
Within easy reach of a waving fan.
A place envied by many.
Later, lifted by strong arms,
Daddy’s arms, sleepy children were
Carried out into cool darkness.

The Church is no longer there.
Even the building is gone.
The only reminder is a carved stone
Anchored in the red clay,
Surrounded with the eternal waving
Obeisance of native grass
Canopied in splendor by a
Cornflower blue sky,
Billowing white clouds, or
Scarlet and golden sunsets
That still fade into vistas
Of lavender and rose afterglow.

The only sounds now are those
Of restless wind sweeping across the
Land once prairie; a mockingbird
Singing from a high wire;
Mysterious sounds of nature
In concert - the lowing of cattle,

A rush of birds on the wing,
Thunder rumbling in the distance,
An occasional engine.
Peace prevails. A happy lonesome -
An expectant calm -
Seems to be waiting . . waiting.

1”When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder,”
Gospel song written by J. M. Black, 1921