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## Country Church

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## Country Church

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  
Sparse 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 complimented  
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 wiles 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 sophisticatedly  
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,  
Regardless of status,  
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 cobbles 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 -

Shrilled in high childish trebles,  
Prestigious songbooks held upside down,  
"When the roses crawl up yonder  
I'll be there. . ."<sup>1</sup>  
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  
Wafting 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.

<sup>1</sup>"When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder,"  
Gospel song written by J. M. Black. 1921