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Saint Peter's Chief Harpist - A Eulogy

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Grima taught only a few hours in Western Oklahoma, but who can deny her the appellation
WESTERN OKLAHOMAN?



Ima Ramsey Howard

Saint Peter's Chief Harpist — A Eulogy

Uninhibited native Texan; transplanted Oklahoman. Genteel Southern lady. Sensitive poet and artist. Interesting conversationalist.

The first time I was to meet Ima Howard, the woman described above, I didn't know what to expect. One of my students in a Literature of the American South class, Jim Hill, had said to me: "My grandmother is really a character—a Southern lady of sorts. She's an artist and a musician who does programs all over the Southwest. Would you like for me to bring her to class someday to talk and show her Southern artifacts?" Thinking my students that summer would enjoy a change, I asked, "When can she be here?"

Finally, the day arrived. When I walked into my classroom, Ima Howard was already there. The room was gaily decorated with china dolls bought during the speaker's frequent tours of the South, oil paintings of Southern plantations that she herself had done, and numerous brochures that were mementoes of Southern travels. In the midst of all this

atmosphere was a most charming lady in her late seventies.

Jim introduced us and I was about to introduce our visitor to the class; but being a pro and a ham to boot, she swept over to the piano, sat down, and began to play a ragtime tune. After finishing the first piece, she modulated lavishly into "How Great Thou Art."

Continuing to play chords, she turned to us and said,

You can't know how happy I am to be back in an English classroom. I was just tickled to death when my grandson, Jimmy, asked me to come up here.

Teaching has been my life. I began in Terral, Oklahoma, in 1918. I taught altogether 42 wonderful years. I began in the first grade and ended up in high-school English. I retired from teaching four times before I finally made it stick. The

last time I retired was 1967. Since then I've been staying at home, doing church work, and going anywhere anybody would ask me to give a program. For the past ten or fifteen years, I've put on at least sixty musical programs for various clubs, high schools, banquets, and social affairs.

But the main thing that makes my life is that I'm a Christian. I love people, and I enjoy entertaining them. As far as I'm concerned, real Christianity is to love God and to love your fellow man. In all those 42 years of teaching, I never met a student I couldn't learn to love.

My life has been SO FULL! God has, indeed, blessed me in so many ways, and I give Him the credit for all my talents, but most of all for the wonderful friends I have met and loved over the years.

After that rousing beginning, she conducted us on an armchair tour of the South, using slides and all the other

by Dr. Leroy Thomas

effects already mentioned. Later she invited questions; and at the end of her program, she said,

Everytime I give a program, I always tell this little story, and I don't mean anything sacrilegious by it. When I finally get to Heaven, I'm going to ask Saint Peter for his largest golden harp. When I get it, I'm going to play "The St. Louis Blues" on it.

With another flourish she began "The St. Louis Blues" and then modulated into a softened version, which she sang, of the first verse of "How Great Thou Art."

But the best was yet to be. Ima, her son, James Donald, and Jim met my wife and me at a local restaurant for lunch.

I had already decided that she was refreshingly uninhibited; but as I walked into the dining room, she looked at me, a victim a year before of an arterial occlusion, and said,

Well, I see you're crippled too. Look at my old stiff leg. I got this back on Sunday afternoon, October 5, 1908, because of a runaway accident in a buggy. Both of my legs were badly cut when I was thrown into a barbed-wire fence near the Brazos River. I would have died if my wonderful mother hadn't nursed me through all those frightening nights that I ran high fevers. I was in a wheelchair and on crutches for almost a year--missed a whole year of school in Terral--but the only bad effect is this stiff leg. How'd you get yours? Jimmy hasn't told me a thing about that.

During lunch that day I learned many things about Ima and her family: most important, I had the feeling that here was the blossoming of a friendship that would last forever because of the spiritual hope that drew us to each other.

Over the next five years we corresponded and visited regularly. As a result I became a part of her family; and I called her Grima, just as her grandchildren did. Two years after her first visit, she came again to speak to another of my Southern Literature classes and even stayed over an extra day to be honored at a Southern Picnic in my backyard. My students, family, and I enjoyed a leisurely meal with Grima followed by an informal singalong around the piano. Typically, Grima asked all the students to sign a "roll sheet" before they departed; she wanted to be sure to have an accurate record of the event to add to her scrapbook.

Her life story she told at a slight bidding, and the details were at once delightful as well as captivating.

She was born Ima Ramsey on January 3, 1896, in Mineral Wells, Texas--ninth and last child of Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Joseph Ramsey, formerly of McConnells, Alabama.

The family lived in Mineral Wells, where they owned and managed two large hotels, until late 1909. They moved to Terral when Ima lacked three months being 14 years old.

She completed four years of high school and received a diploma from Terral High School in 1915.

Ima and her mother had a difficult time financially after Mr. Ramsey died in 1914, but through pioneer perseverance they survived.

After high-school graduation, Ima went to Central State College at Edmond and earned a lifetime teaching certificate; later she finished a Bachelor's degree at Midwestern University in Wichita Falls. In 1918 she went back to teach first grade in Terral, her hometown.

Music, which Ima began studying at the age of 9, was always an integral part of her life. She continued a study of piano and voice and was a member of chorus throughout her college years.

She was even pianist for silent movies and for some vaudeville acts in Mineral Wells, Terral, and Drumright.

Although her favorites were ragtime, blues, and Dixieland Jazz, she also appreciated and played classical music.

And hanging in my Family Room is a painting that Grima did for me of William Faulkner's home "Rowan Oak," which attests to her artistic ability.

Grima had two husbands. Her first husband was James Green Hill, a registered pharmacist. He operated Hill's Drugstore in Terral; it was formerly owned by his father (William Hill), who was also a registered pharmacist. Green's grandfather was Dr. Hill of Springtown, Texas, near Fort Worth. Although she knew nothing about operating a drugstore, Grima kept Hill's Drug after Green died in September of 1955 until November of 1956.

Pharmacy has continued to be a family profession; her son and his wife, Irene, are both graduates of the O.U. School of Pharmacy. James Donald is a district manager for Parke-Davis, and Irene is a practicing pharmacist.

Following Green's death Grima lived alone for almost four years; she then married Frank Howard, a childhood sweetheart, on July 19, 1959. From that time on, Grima always relished telling with a twinkle in her eyes: "My full name is Ima Ramsey Hill Howard. Can you top that?"

Throughout their marriage, Frank and Grima lived in the home Grima's mother

deeded to her, which meant that Grima had lived in the same house since 1918.

They lived there peacefully enjoying the produce of a huge vegetable garden which Frank always worked and the beauty of a flower garden containing roses, a lily pond, crepe myrtle, hollyhock, hydrangea, iris, althea, phlox, honeysuckle, numerous bird baths, and two bricked patios--supervised by both of them.

In her time, Grima received various honors. She was chosen Jefferson County "Teacher of the Year" in 1964; she was presented a certificate of award from the Oklahoma state legislature in 1967 for her civic service; and she was awarded an engraved wall plaque in 1971 by the Denton, Texas, Lions Club for programs presented.

Throughout her life she was involved with people, and she received personal letters from many outstanding individuals whom she admired: Mamie Eisenhower, Eddie Rickenbacker, Winston Churchill, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Alexander Dolgun.

Even after her own serious stroke and Frank's death in 1979, a letter from Grima was still full of hope:

Well, I've lived on this earth 83 years, and God has been so good to me. I taught in the public schools 42 years, and I never met a student I couldn't learn to love. God has been good to me. He has given me two good husbands; a good son; a kind, thoughtful daughter-in-law; and four remarkable grandchildren. If He allows me no more time here, I have already had a deep, intensely fulfilling life. With the psalmist I declare, "The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?" I'm thankful that I can still do paintings and play the piano, although I can't walk. My friends are wonderful to me; they come in and do whatever I need done and take me anywhere I need to go. I do miss Frank so much; he was such a wonderful man. But I know he's with God, so I know he's happy.

At 6:30 a.m. on April 4, 1980, I received word that Grima had died on April 3. I felt the same sense of loss I'm sure I would have felt if she had been my own grandmother; she was surely a wonderful surrogate.

But as long as life lasts, someone will see Grima's works of art in their various forms--including these four representative poems:

cont.

“The One-Horse Town“

I'm glad I live in a one-horse town,
In a little old one-horse town,
For the folk down there are the finest folks
You can find for miles around!
When you walk down the street, it's a "howdy-do,"
With a smile or a pat on the back,
And it's fun we have just sittin' around
Listening to some guy's "wisecrack."

The folks down there aren't famous folks,
Not rich, too smart, nor grand,
But they stand by a fellow when he needs it most,
And they lend a helping hand.
Your troubles are never your own, down there.
In that little old one-horse town,
There's always someone willing to share
And to give you a lift when you're down.

If I should die in some faraway place
Many miles from the home I know,
Please send me back o'er the long, long road,
To my one-horse town let me go,
For my old friends there will mourn over me
And sort of miss my being around.
Let me rest by the side of my loved ones there
In that little old one-horse town.

(written at age 41)

“Prayer at Night”

God must have known and planned just when
To send a peaceful night to end
A toilsome day.

Then weary hearts are made at ease
And daily worries such as these
Are wiped away.

Our tired heads are laid to rest
And sweet contentment comes to bless
All cares away.

'Tis then our thoughts are turned to God
With thankfulness that steps we've trod
Were turned His way.

Lord, grant our faltering feet may be
On pathways leading straight to Thee,
For'er we pray!

(age 41)

“Mother's Money”

At last she had the money saved
To buy those curtains that she craved;
But daughter saw a petty hat,
So all the money went for *that*.

“Oh, that's all right,” thought Mother then,
“I'll save my money up again.”
And when she had the sum she sought,
'Twas *Junior's sweater* that it bought!

But being a Mother is so much fun!
And--after all is said and done,
The way the money went was right,
Besides-----

Curtains keep out too much light!!!

(age 41)

“My Scrapbook”

Every morning God gives me
A new and perfect day.

He tells me I may use it
In my own kind of way.

But when my day is ended
And the light begins to dim,

I must check my record over
And give it back to Him.

He is making me a scrapbook
Of all the things I do.
Each page records one day of life
And how I've lived it through.
But when my days are finished
He'll show my book to me.
I hope it is good enough
For Him and me to see!

(age 71)

What's that I hear--“The St. Louis
Blues” being played on Saint Peter's best
golden harp by his chief harpist?