

BECKY SUE COOPER'S PHOTO ALBUM

by

Donna Chapman Gilbert

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Other Books by Donna Chapman Gilbert
Safe Pasture

(For a preview of *Safe Pasture*, see the end of this book.)

***For Mother,
who was there with me.***

Author's Note

When I was growing up in Texas during the 1960s, the small Methodist church we attended sat fifty feet off Odom Road, just outside the city limits. That bleached brick building is gone now, swallowed up by progress, but what an interesting place it was in its heyday, a microcosm of colorful characters, some of them more outlandish than even Becky Sue dare tell. There were thieves and hypocrites among us, to be sure, and true saints sprinkled here and there, but most were simply good, honest people who worshiped their Creator the best they knew how.

We were a family. We laughed together when the wind blew off Clara Higgins' wig during dinner on the grounds. We rejoiced when Brother John baptized Kenneth Fallin in Fossil Creek. And we shared Mrs. Gentry's tears when her lifetime companion clutched at his heart that Christmas morning and went to be with Jesus. (Beat her to heaven by twenty years. I don't know that she ever forgave him for that.)

There are drawbacks to a small congregation. Every member must have at least three jobs in order to make the thing run. At one point I was church pianist, kindergarten Sunday School teacher and president of the youth group. And I was only fifteen years old! Then there's the inevitable fact that everyone knows everyone else's business. You couldn't scratch an itch without everybody and their Uncle Henry knowing about it; you couldn't express an opinion but what it didn't come back to haunt you. The worst part, though, was the discouragement. It is positively maddening to give of yourself unstintingly year after year, only to realize an average annual attendance growth of five. And if anyone dies or moves away or gets their feelings hurt and stops coming, even that small gain is lost.

Despite the frustrations, overall my memories are happy ones. As I look back on my childhood through the rose-colored lens of time, I must admit that even the things about my church that I perceived as negative served a good purpose. Those years of shouldering multiple responsibilities honed my skills to better serve my Master later on. In our modern, instant world, we tend to give up when success does not come quickly. My struggles with discouragement developed in me a perseverance that many people don't have. (They also taught me that at times giving up is appropriate.) And associating with the same people year in and year out taught me that life is a fish bowl, and surely our sins will find us out. In the long run, it's best to live a clean life so you don't stink up the bowl.

I pity people who don't go to church. It goes without saying that their neglect of the means of grace will have eternal consequences. But just think what they are missing in the meantime: support in times of trouble; camaraderie in times of joy; people who love you as you are, zits and all. The covered dish suppers aren't bad, either. You can keep your jet sets and country club memberships. I'll take my church over them any day. Of course, should the Lord suddenly decide to bestow a couple of million dollars on me, I might join a country club or two, but even then I'd continue to place the bulk of my efforts on relationships that are eternal.

As far as Becky Sue Cooper goes, she's 80 percent memory and 15 percent imagination. I'll leave it to you to decide what the other 5 percent is. I personally knew most of the people she describes, although the names have been changed to protect the innocent. If any reader recognizes himself and remembers the story differently, chalk up the inconsistencies to the incomplete and shaded recollections of a girl who was nine years old many (ahem!) years ago.

Sit back and enjoy. And remember: Always be careful what you say around your kids.

BECKY SUE COOPER'S PHOTO ALBUM

Hi, Brother Dowd! Have a seat here on the porch. Mama and Daddy went to Monkey Ward's over in Marshall, 'cause they were havin' the rip-roaringest sale in East Texas, Mama said, but I expect they'll be back soon. Why don't you have some lemonade with me? I mixed it myself. Rover licked the spoon, but I rinsed it off.

I guess, being the new preacher and all, you have your hands full just gettin' to know everybody. I know what! I'll get out my photo album and show you pictures of the church people. Then maybe you'll recognize some of 'em better on Sundays.

Here's pictures of our Fourth of July picnic we had last year. I took 'em myself with the camera I'd just got for my eighth birthday. It was hotter than blue blazes that day, and everybody was sweatin' like a pig in the sunshine. We'd all been to the square to hear the high school band play first, then while the rest of the town was bringing out the beer, we went over to the park and

started hauling out the food. Daddy's says he's never seen another group of people that can eat like we can.

Turn the page.

That there's Grady Hicks. There's no finer person this side of the grave than him, I reckon. Grady's got a nickname for everybody he's ever met. He calls his wife Mother Goose, and everybody else calls her that, too. I used to wonder why her mama gave her such an outlandish name 'til I learned her real name wasn't that at all—it's Hermione Hildegard. Guess maybe Mother Goose isn't such a bad name after all.

Anyhow, Grady's such a nice fella, he wouldn't hurt a flea on a hound dog. A real gentlemen, my mama says. But one time, Grady and Mother Goose were taking this new couple at church out to Luby's after the morning service. This new couple had a brand new baby, and they were sittin' in the back seat of Grady's car on the way to the cafeteria, and the lady was nursin' the baby, only Grady didn't know that. Anyway, the baby was making all sorts of gurgling noises and Grady thinks he's takin' a bottle, so he says, "Something sure sounds good!" Mother Goose said he liked to died when he found out the truth.

There's Mr. Knapper, and a real fine poet he is, too. He's always making up poetry and trying it out on the church people. My favorite goes like this:

Oh, where shall I go, sweet Molly Malone,
To ease the cruel pain in my heart?
You've taken my love and left me alone,
When you told me you'd never depart.

I forget the rest of it, but isn't that beautiful? I could listen to that all day, but Daddy doesn't like it much. Once Mr. Knapper comes up to him and says, "Mr. Cooper, have I recited my latest poem for you?" and Daddy says, "No, Mr. Knapper, and I sure do thank you for that."

The girl with the hat is Gwen Culpepper. She isn't too bright, bless her heart. Daddy says Gwen's the only person he ever knew that was whittled out of wood. And Mama said, "Well, Frank, when they passed out brains, you weren't exactly standing in the front of the line."

One day Gwen went to the doctor and he got out his little hammer and hit her on the knee, and her leg didn't jerk or anything, and Gwen says, "I ain't got no reflections!"

That guy next to her is her boyfriend Ray, who was workin' at the lumberyard back then. That was before he lost his job. Anyway, they got married last year, and as soon as Ray gets his settlement from his hurt back, they're gonna buy a color TV and go to Hawaii. Turn the page.

I like this picture, 'cause I caught Brother Rosy with his mouth open, and you can see most of his teeth are out. He's awful nice, always laughing and saying "Praise the Lord!" He doesn't have much family to speak of, so the church is his family, I guess. Everybody's real nice to him. We've had him over for supper a couple of times, and he makes me and Betsy laugh tryin'

to eat corn on the cob with so many teeth out. He says he's been blessed, 'cause even though he only has three teeth on top and three on bottom, at least four of 'em meet!

I feel real sorry for Brother Rosy. He suffers from hemorrhoids something terrible. He's always askin' the Wednesday night prayer meeting to pray for 'em.

This is Mylanta Brown. Isn't she the prettiest little thing you ever saw? See, her daddy's black and her mama's white, and Mama says those marriages make the prettiest babies. Her mama used to be our church organist for awhile, and some people were all in a tizzy over it, 'cause of who she was married to and all, you know. 'Specially Miz Adams, whose husband owns the Feed & Seed. One day she was all in a uproar over it, and she says to Daddy, "Well, you know what the Bible says about all this, don't you, Frank?" Daddy says, "Why don't you tell me, Ruby?" And Miz Adams said, "It says that Ham is cursed." Daddy says, "Well," he says, "My Bible says *Canaan* was the one that was cursed, and they all died out centuries ago. Guess somehow Jimmy Brown's line got left out of the purge." Made her so mad she didn't speak to Daddy for nearly a year.

I sure do miss little Mylanta. Her mama and daddy aren't married to each other anymore, and her mama packed her up to Houston. We still see Jimmy every so often around town, and Daddy tries to get him back to church, but he won't come.

Here's some of the teenagers acting like they don't want me to take their picture, but I knew they really did. That girl there is Debbie Adams. She's the head cheerleader at the high school now. And sittin' next to her is Donnie Hart. He's captain of the football team, and they've been going steady for the longest time. Debbie's dad owns the Feed & Seed—you know, Ruby Adams' husband—and Donnie's dad runs the liquor store across the county line. But Donnie's as nice a guy as you'd ever want to meet, and he was saved last year.

Daddy, he really likes Donnie and he's trying to get him to go to college. But Mama says Debbie and Donnie are a disaster waitin' to happen.

This teenager making the funny face is Rusty Denton. He talks all the time—a regular motor mouth! Once Daddy drove some of the youth over to a rally in Henderson, and came home tellin' that Rusty had just about talked his ear off. They got to talking about birthdays and the like, and Rusty tells everybody's birthday in the family, and then he says, "Yeah, my birthday is July 19, 1949. And Mom and Dad's anniversary is March 4, 1949." Daddy just about busted a gut laughin', but I don't know what's so all-fired funny. I think Rusty's pretty smart to remember all those dates like that.

Turn the page.

I bet ten cents you know this fella already. He's Wallis Witherspoon, the song evangelist. He's pretty old, at least fifty, so he doesn't hold lots of revivals anymore, but sometimes he sings in our church, and when he does Sister Lula Pearl Jenkins gets out her hanky and waves it. He sings the old-timey songs like:

It's real, it's real, oh I know it's real!
Praise God, the doubts are settled
And I know, I know it's real.

I don't sing as good as Brother Wallis, but you get the idea. The only problem is, Brother Wallis don't ever use music. Says he wants the Spirit to lead him anyway, so he doesn't want to count on a little sheet of paper. It makes Mama a nervous wreck to play for him, 'cause she never knows when he's gonna break out of one song and into another. He usually sings five or six together at a time, and he's liable to sing part of one verse, then skip over and sing part of another verse of the next song, and Mama's head's just a-bobbin' trying to keep up with him. Sometimes he forgets the words, but it don't seem to bother him. One time he was singin' in a protracted meeting somewhere, and he forgot the words, so he made 'em up as he went along, and ended up singing, "The blessed Holy Ghost is servin' roast on toast." Daddy swears that story's true, too.

This fella spittin' out the watermelon seeds is our last preacher, Brother Bullard. He came here from North Carolina. He was a Presbyterian before he got sanctified.

Everybody kinda wanted to fix up the church before he came here, so we all painted and cleaned up the place, and out by the side of the fellowship hall they planted a whole row of honeysuckles. Well, Brother Bullard hadn't been here anytime when he called the board members together and says, "Boys, we've gotta get rid of them honeysuckers! They're nothing but a blight." Guess they don't think much of honeysuckles in North Carolina. Anyways, it might near made a couple of people mad, and you can see those honeysuckles are still growin' right where they set 'em.

Brother Bullard has this favorite hymn that goes:

I am dwellin' on the mountain where the golden sunlight gleams,
In a land whose wondrous beauty far exceeds my fondest dreams;
Where the air is pure ethereal, laden with the breath of flowers,
They are bloomin' by the fountain, 'neath the amaranthine bowers.

We had to sing that every month or so when he was preaching here, and every time we did, he'd wipe his eyes and say, "People, if that don't bless you, you just can't be blessed."

Here's Charlie McClellan, who I suppose is the oldest person in the whole church. Daddy says he's vying with Brother Rosy over who has the least number of teeth. He always pats me on the head when he sees me and says, "Hi-dee, Becky Sue!" Only it's a little embarrassing 'cause he's so hard of hearin' that he talks so loud you can hear him clear to Tyler. Every service he turns to his wife and hollers, "What'd that preacher say?"

Daddy says Charlie can't hear 'cause he don't want to, so he doesn't use his hearing aid to its full advantage. Once, though, when Brother Bullard was preaching about how it's good for a man not to touch a woman, or some such verse, everybody hears this loud screeching noise. It was Brother Charlie turning up his hearin' aid.

Sitting next to Charlie is Eldon. Eldon's the custodian, and I guess he's been at it for fifty or sixty years. He's real handy at fixing things. If you want something put up on a cement wall, Eldon'll just grab the Liquid Nails and go to hangin'.

In the old church—before we built this new one— there was rats something awful. You could go into the church building, and if you got there early enough on Sunday morning when everything was quiet, you could hear 'em scratching in the walls. Well, once Brother Boone—the one before Brother Bullard, so that's two back from you—hears Eldon hollering from the hallway. He runs out and there's Eldon holdin' a rat down by its tail with a Coke bottle, and he yells, "Preacher, run get a butcher knife and kill this rat!" It wasn't more than a week later that Brother Boone up and left us for a big church in Colorado.

There's Chauncy Limberg. Brother Limberg is really old, about ninety I guess, but he still drives hisself around town. Once he was pulled over by a highway patrolman, who says, "Sir, you were goin' too fast and I'm gonna have to give you a ticket." Brother Limberg says, "Well, you might as well give me two, 'cause I'm a-comin' back this way pretty soon and I'm gonna be drivin' the same speed."

Daddy's known Brother Limberg all his life. Says he's kind of a legend around here. After he retired from the railroad, he worked part time at the hardware store. One time a robber came in and held a gun on everybody in the store and told them to all get down on the floor. Well, Brother Limberg just stood there straight as a flag pole and the robber hollers, "What do you think you're doin', old man?" and he says back, "I'm 72 years old and I've never seen a robbery. I'm not just about to miss this 'un."

That's Edna Culpepper—you know, Gwen's mom. She's smarter than her daughter, but not by much. Once she came over to our house one evening for the women's missionary society meeting, and she picks up this airbrush-painted ceramic pitcher that was brand new and Mama was real proud of. Mama said, "Edna, be real careful with that—it scratches easily," and Edna starts scratching on it to see if Mama was right.

Mama says she admires Edna because she's so thrifty. She buys all their clothes used. She's always saying something like, "You like this skirt? I give just fifty cents for it at the Goodwill."

That whole Culpepper family is a sight. They're from Arkansas, where they only started wearing shoes twenty years ago, Daddy says. Edna was the youngest in a big family of boys back during World War II. When she was 13, Curtis Culpepper met her at a social one night and goes and asks her daddy for her hand. So her mama and daddy goes to her and says, "Edna, do you want to marry Curtis Culpepper on Saturday?" And Edna says, "Married! I don't want to get married Saturday! I want to go to the picture show!"

Well, they married her off anyway, and Curtis and Edna hadn't been married long when one day Curtis sent her into town with five dollars to buy him a hat. She saw a doll in a store window and bought herself that instead. Said she'd never had a doll before. Daddy says like as not she'd never seen five dollars before, either.

This picture was taken in our back yard one Sunday evening after church. You can see we're all eating home made ice cream. There's me sittin' on the freezer while Daddy turns the crank.

Betsy Lou just about mortified me to death that night. Dr. Lawson was there, who I guess you know is just about the most important man in the whole entire denomination. Anyways, he was just minding his own business when Betsy, who was about six then, I reckon, goes up to him and says, "Dr. Lawson, do you know how to do the hula?" and proceeded to show him! I could have died. I don't know how she could be related to me. Mama must have found her under a rock.

Turn the page.

Here's an old picture of Miz Russell. It's a wonder she was smiling here, 'cause most of the time she looked like her dog just died. I don't mean to be disrespectful, since Miz Russell passed away awhile back. But Daddy said she hadn't had much life in her for years, so the funeral just made it official.

One time, though, I saw her move real fast. It was in the old church building and the air conditioner had give out that summer, so they opened up all the doors and windows for Wednesday night prayer meeting. Well, not many people were there that night, so all the grown-ups were kneeling at one time around the altar. Me and Betsy were sittin' together, and the only other kid there was Johnny Scott, and he was sittin' by himself toward the back. All at once Johnny hollered at the top of his lungs, "Daddy, there's a rattlesnake!"

Me and Betsy jumped up and, sure enough, there was this great big old snake making its way down the aisle. Brother Boone grabbed the snake and took it outside and killed it. Turned out it was only a grass snake, but it was about three feet long, so no wonder it scared everybody. Some of the those women were shrieking to high heaven, and you should have seen Miz Russell jump up on that prayer bench! Daddy said she was the only person he ever knew who really did put her all on the altar.

That same summer that the air conditioner was broken, a choir of American Indian Bible School students came and give us a concert. The june bugs were terrible that night, all swarmin' around those Indians' heads. One girl opened her mouth to sing and a june bug flew in it. She got so tickled she had to leave.

Here's a picture of that old church building. It was awful small, but it had some good points too. We didn't have a buzzer then to let everyone know when Sunday School was over, so one of the farmers brought in a cowbell, and the Sunday School superintendent would clang it when it was time for church to start. I bet we were the only church in town that used a cowbell, and I kinda miss it now.

The best thing about that building was the lights. We had flat plastic covers over the lights in the ceiling, and in the winter us kids would lean our heads back and watch the shadows of the mice chasing after the bugs. It was a better show than what Brother Boone put on.

There's Bud Benton. I guess he's about the saintliest person I know, but when he was young he was a regular ring-tailed tooter. He knew Bonnie and Clyde. Well, he didn't really

know 'em—he saw 'em once. He used to drink up every paycheck, and one time he watched the bill collectors cart off all his furniture. But his wife was a member here and kept prayin' for him. Finally, during a revival meeting, he came in and sat in the back, drunk. He doesn't remember a thing the preacher said, but then somebody got up and sang "Softly and Tenderly" and it was all over. Brother Bud hit the altar rail before "Ye who are weary, come home." Says he got up from there sober and he's been sober ever since. Well, being saved from a life of sin like that, you can appreciate how come he gets blessed sometimes. Lots of people raise their hands and things like that, but Brother Bud is noisy when he gets blessed. Once Mama was singing in a ladies trio, some soft sort of song that just about put me to sleep, when all of a sudden Bud hollers "GLORY!" Scared the pea-waddin' out of me, and Mama forgot the words and sputtered around for a couple of phrases or so.

Turn the page.

I told you about the Indian choir we had that summer. Well, this is a picture of the choir from Haiti that came the next year. One Saturday night Brother Bullard got a call from the director of the choir saying they'd been on their way to Houston and their bus broke down this side of Tyler. Wanted to know if we'd put them up for the night. So Brother Bullard bedded 'em all down in the church and they give us a concert the next morning.

Let me tell you, those colored people really know how to sing! They'd sung on the steps of the White House and everything. Brother Bullard said we were privileged to have 'em, but Ruby Adams got up and walked out. Daddy says every church has a Ruby Adams. She gave Brother Bullard fits, and I expect you'll have a run-in with her sometime, too. Mama says Ruby needs a new dip, but you could look a hole through me and not find out what *that* means!

This is Josiah Carmichael standing with Betsy and me. Don't he look nice though? He's always teasing us. When Betsy was little he drove her just about crazy, saying, "Betsy Lou, did you know you have a garment on your back?" and Betsy'd turn round and round trying to see it. She don't have a lick of sense.

There's just one thing about Mr. Carmichael—you can't talk politics with him. He's a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, regular flag-waver. One time he and Daddy were discussing the sheriff's election coming up, and Daddy says, "Josiah, don't tell me you're gonna vote for that Jack DuBois—everybody knows he's a crook." And Mr. Carmichael says, kind of sorrowful-like, "Well, Frank, I guess if the Democrats ran a monkey, I'd have to vote for him."

Here's Richard. He's sort of feeble-minded, so he can't keep a job, but somebody takes care of him, 'cause he always looks clean enough. I bet you've seen him around town already. He rides all over the place on that bicycle of his. Shows up at every wedding and funeral in town. Once he got to a funeral late and tagged along behind the procession to the graveyard. When he got there he asked who'd died. They said, "Why, Richard, don't you know?" and he said, "Nope, I just come along for the ride."

One time he came to a wedding dressed fit to kill in big old boots and a ten-gallon hat. He comes up to Daddy and says, "Can you keep a secret?" Daddy says, "Sure, Richard, what is it?" Richard gets up real close to his ear and whispers, "I'm dressed like a cowboy."

Turn the page.

You remember Dr. Lawson, the one my sister did the hula for? Well, this is his granddaughter, Holly Noel. He puts a lot of stock in his granddaughter, let me tell you. In fact, he may preach against dancing all day, but he'll tell anybody who'll listen about Holly Noel's ballet. Just about busts his buttons telling that she's the best ballerina in Nacogdoches.

Once Holly was visiting relatives—that's when I got her picture—and she was braggin' to Mama about how she was going to be in "The Nutcracker." Mama asked her what her part was, and she said, "I'm just a mouse. But I'm an understudy to a cookie!"

There's a story behind this picture. This is Jeremy Watkins, and I took this just after the doctors pronounced him well. You see, Jeremy was only two years old when he started limping. It got worse and worse, and pretty soon he was limping real bad. His mama took him to a passel of doctors, and they all said the same thing, that he had a degen— degener— a disease of the hip bone that was gonna get worse and finally Jeremy wouldn't be able to walk at all. So Miz Watkins brought him before the church and those who had faith prayed for him. Well, sir, after that Jeremy's limp got better every day. His mama took him back to the doctors and they said it was a bona fide miracle.

Directly, Rachel Jenkins quit wearing her glasses. She testified about how she'd worn glasses all her life and she was tired of it. Said she was claiming healing right then and there. Well, sir, she never said anything more about it, but a few weeks later she was back to wearing those glasses again.

Here's my Aunt Effie. She's not really a blood relative, she's Grandpa Cooper's sister-in-law, and we see her about once a year, when she comes to spend a couple of weeks with us. Aunt Effie don't have a place of her own, she just flits from one relative to another. Mama says she's the flittin'est one woman she's ever seen.

Aunt Effie tells the best stories you've ever heard, only Mama says you can't put much stock in 'em. Everybody knew her husband was healthy as a horse in clover until he up and died all of a sudden one day from a heart attack, but by the time Aunt Effie got to our house for her visit, she swore he'd been suffering from TB and amnesia for years. Daddy takes up for her, though. Says he knows Effie can tell the truth—he caught her at it once.

Oh, I like this picture. It's Miz Catherine Polinski, and a wonderful lady she is, too. She hasn't been at our church long. She's a widow woman who moved here from Presidio a couple of years ago, and Ginny Graham invited her to our Easter cantata and she got saved. She's been coming ever since.

Last August we had a missionary in to speak and he asked everyone to dig deep to spread the gospel. Well, Miz Catherine went up to Brother Bullard and said, "Father Bullard,"— (you know, she used to be a Catholic and giving up those ways don't come easy)— "Father Bullard, the Lord told me to give my Social Security check for missions." Brother Bullard said, "Sister, I

can't let you do that. What will you live on?" and she says, "Well, I don't know, but I'm not gonna argue with the Lord."

Well, Mr. Adams, Ruby's husband, heard about it and gave Brother Bullard cash to give Miz Catherine for the amount of the Social Security she gave up. When Brother Bullard tried to give it to her, she wouldn't take it, and he said, "The Lord told Theron Adams to give this to you. You gonna argue with the Lord?" She took it.

Turn the page.

This is my mama sittin' at the church piano when it was brand new. She was mighty proud of that baby grand after the old clinker we'd had for so long. Pretty protective of it, too. We hadn't had it more than a couple of weeks when Mama saw a place in the ceiling, right over the piano, that looked like the roof was leaking. So she asked Eldon to check it out. He goes into the attic to replace the bad Styrofoam tiles, and instead of lifting the bad ones out, he pushes them down and they crashed all over the piano lid. Mama was sputterin' mad about it, but Mama's always nice to people, so she didn't say anything.

Some time later Mama was sittin' on the bench practicing one day, and along comes Eldon to dust the piano. He flipped out an old work shirt, buttons and all, and took out dustin' that piano for all he was worth. Before she thought, Mama hollers, "Eldon, don't do that!", thinkin', of course, he'd scratch it with the buttons. Well, I guess it made him mad. He hasn't dusted it since.

Here's another one of Brother Bullard, standing next to Mr. and Miz Ford. Mama says it's a wonder the Fords ever came back to church after the first time they visited. See, Brother Bullard was an awful nice man, and a rip-roarin' preacher, but sometimes he started his mouth moving before his brain was in gear. The Fords were from a holiness church up in Indiana, and the women up there don't cut their hair or wear make-up or anything, I guess. You can see from this picture that Mr. Ford is kind of skinny and still has a mess of black hair, but Miz Ford's hair is grey and she wears it pulled back in a bun. Anyways, the first time they come to church, Brother Bullard goes up to them afterwards and meets Mr. Ford, and then looks at Miz Ford and says, "And this must be your mother."

Here's one of everybody in the fellowship hall gathered for a supper. You paid \$2.50 a head and the money went to send the youth on a work-and-witness trip to Mexico, so they thought it'd be a nice touch to serve Mexican food. Brother Bullard's wife was on the cooking committee, and when they brought up the idea for Mexican food, she says, "Oh, good! I've got a great lasagne recipe."

The joke was that lasagne is Eye-talian, don't you see. They liked to never let her live that down.

Turn the page.

This man with the burr haircut is George Jenkins. The Jenkinses moved to Fort Worth, so they don't go here any more.

Mr. Jenkins did love to talk. He was a delegate to the district assembly one year, and the Sunday night after assembly, Brother Boone asked all the delegates to give a report about the meetings, but to please not talk longer than five minutes. Mr. Jenkins was first, and he started out, "We stayed in the best little hotel you ever seen, with a view of the Trinity, then we had breakfast with some people we hadn't seen since college. Maybe some of y'all know the Cantrells from Henderson. Well, they lived in Marshall before that. Miz Cantrell was a Fitzwater from Tyler. By the way, if you're ever in Dallas, the place to have breakfast is the Calico Spatula. Their biscuits'll melt in your mouth."

Well, sir, I want you to know he went on to tell who prayed every prayer and who sang every song and all fifteen points of every sermon. After about 20 minutes of that, Brother Boone was turning red in the face and young people in the teen choir were giggling behind their hymn books, but Mr. Jenkins didn't pay 'em any mind at all. Daddy was gettin' antsy, and Mama could tell he was thinking of standin' up and callin' a halt to it all, so she showed Daddy the Bible verse that says we should have patience toward all men. That calmed Daddy down a bit, but when Mr. Jenkins was still goin' strong ten minutes later, he leaned over to Mama. "Let me see that verse again," he says.

I'm proud Caesar Wheelock let me take his picture. He's the town photographer, you know. His studio is over on Lamar Street, and let me tell you, he's the best around. Takes mine and Betsy's every couple years, and Mama has 'em all hanging in the stairwell. I guess Mr. Wheelock would rather take pictures than eat, which is sayin' a lot, cuz you can tell from this picture he does like to eat.

They live on an acreage out east of town, and they have this water tower that must be a hundred feet high. One time his wife couldn't find their little boy anywhere. He was two years old at the time, and after looking around awhile she finally sees him way up at the top of the water tower ladder, just laughing and looking around and having a grand time. Well, she just about had a heart attack. She ran to the tower hollering for Mr. Wheelock to come help her. He dashed out of the house, saw the situation and then ran back inside. He'd gone to get his camera.

When Jenetta Jenkins was fixin' to get married, he told her he'd take the pictures free, as a wedding present. You should've seen all the fancy shots he made, standin' everybody up in those fancy poses, don't you know. It never dawned on him 'til the couple was on their way to a honeymoon in Eureka Springs that he'd forgot to put film in the camera. Daddy told him, "Well, Caesar, failure is the great leveler of mankind," whatever the hec *that* means.

Here's a shot of Brother Bullard and his family, just before they moved. A nicer girl than his you've never met, but that Junior was a pistol. Junior was four years old when the Bullards were invited out to dinner on the farm by this real nice old couple that came to church once in a coon's age. Miz Bullard threatened Junior within an inch of his life if he tore up anything or didn't behave hisself. So he just sat there with his feet danglin' from the sofa, looking around while the older folks talked. Miz Bullard was starting to relax, thinkin' that maybe this was one time Junior wasn't going to embarrass the whole family, when pretty soon there was a quiet spot in the conversation, and Junior piped up, "This house is filthy!"

Daddy gets a kick out of that story. Says he never knew 'til then that foot-in-mouth disease was hereditary.

Turn the page.

This here's Bob and Anita Parr. They first came to church after Brother Bullard visited Anita in the hospital when it looked like she wasn't going to make it. She gave her heart to the Lord in the hospital, but she wasn't gettin' any better, so finally Bob shows up at church, too. Daddy said he smelled like a still, but that night he went to the altar, and the day after, Anita started recoverin'.

Well, they started showin' up at church every time the doors opened. Pretty soon Anita went back to work, which didn't set well with Brother Bullard because she was a singer over at the Swanky Lady. But she told him it was all right because she made sure she sang the Lord's Prayer at every show. Then Bob got up and testified how glad he was that he didn't have to pay his bill at the grocery store. Said when the Lord forgave him He canceled all his debts.

That was some time back. You'll be glad to know that Anita's working in the school cafeteria now, and Bob finally did pay that grocery bill.

This is Brother Gerald McDonald, a retired elder. But you know him already, 'cause he's the one that filled in as preacher when Brother Bullard left. Brother McDonald is a wonderful preacher, with that booming voice of his. He says the Lord blessed him with a built-in P.A. system.

Just before prayer one Sunday morning, the organist was playing real soft and Brother McDonald was givin' the prayer requests. He said real sorrowful-like, "And let's remember Sam Tate. His mother just passed away."

Well, Sam was sittin' out in the congregation, and he starts flailing his arms at him, and then the song leader whispered something to Brother McDonald, and Brother McDonald says, "Oh, she didn't die—she's just sick."

That reminds me of the time that Daddy was looking through the obituaries and says to Mama, "I see here that Miz Maples died." See, Miz Maples was 103 and had been living in a nursing home for years. Mama gets this sad look on her face and says, "Oh, I didn't even know she was sick." Daddy teased her about that for weeks.

Turn the page.

Here's one of the quartet that came from the Bible college. I'm sure they had a real good program, but all I remember about it was what happened toward the end. They'd brought their own sound system, and it must have had a short or something, 'cause it'd been buzzing like a june bug all night. Well, one of the fellas got his lips too close to the microphone, and it shocked him. He let out a yell that'd scare the dead. Lula Pearl Jenkins thought he was caught up in the Spirit, and she hollered, "Bless him, Jesus!"

This is my Greatgrandpa Cooper. He's my favorite relative, next to Uncle Tate, who can take his teeth out.

Grandpa says the funniest things. Like one time when we went to the old cemetery over out east of Sulphur Springs. Grandpa's got a lot of family buried there, and he wanted us to help

clean up the place. Well, me and Mama were reading all the tombstones. We came to a great big marker that had five names carved on it, all with the same last name and all with the same date of death—June 5, 1910. Mama called Grandpa over and asked him if he'd known those people. He said, "Yes, I remember them well. That family lost five children one night in a fire." Mama gave a little gasp and said, "I declare! How awful!" and Grandpa kinda shook his head and said, "Well, they didn't much miss 'em. They had eighteen."

Turn the page.

That little boy acting like a tom fool, crossin' his eyes, is Hankie Jenkins. You know, there's a mess of those Jenkinse in the church, if you haven't figured that all already. Be sure you don't talk about any of them to anybody else, 'cause they're related to just about everybody in the church one way or the other. They're even related to me somehow, but I forget whether Hankie's my third cousin once removed or my kissin' cousin.

Hankie's a sight. That's not his real name—it's Henry, but his daddy started calling him Hank and then his mama called him Hankie, and it sort of stuck. Daddy says he pities the little guy when he gets bigger, with a name like that.

Anyway, he's always cookin' up some scheme to make money, has ever since he could talk. Daddy says he's a real entra—, entre—, a real go-getter. Last year around Christmas he comes down to the house—they just live down the street from us— selling pot holders that his sister Clara wove on her potholder loom. Daddy asked him how much they were, and Hankie says, "They're one for a dime, two for a quarter, and three for sixty cents." Daddy tells him, "Well, son, I'll take three—one at a time."

This here's Hankie's big brother Alfred. He's in the Juniors class with me and he gives me the willies, 'cause he can turn his eyelids inside out, and then he sticks his face up to mine and I just about pass out, it's so awful! I wouldn't have ever taken his picture, but Ethelene Jones double-dog dared me to, so here it is.

One Wednesday night during prayer meeting, when Alfred was in the first grade or thereabouts, he was givin' his mama fits, and she finally had enough of him, and commenced dragging him down the aisle to take him outside for a whippin'. And Alfred, he shouts out, "Y'all pray for me!"

Here's my Uncle Jake, Daddy's brother. You can sure tell they were poured from the same mold, 'cause Uncle Jake likes a joke as much as Daddy does. He lives in Dallas, has his own business there, and once this Jewish fella from New York City come down to work with him for a spell. After a couple of weeks, this fella says to him, "I've gotta admit, you Dallas people are a sight better than I expected." Uncle Jake asked him what he meant, and he says, "You know, y'all killing Kennedy and everything." My uncle says back, "Tell you what, if you won't hold it against me for killing Kennedy, I won't hold it against you for killing Christ."

Well, Uncle Jake was just teasin' him, you know, but it didn't set too well with him, just the same.

Turn the page.

This here's Jimmie Sue Davis, who was our church secretary for a while. Her husband had run off with some Jezebel from Henderson, so Brother Bullard gave her a job here. Me and Mama stopped by one day on the way to the fruit stand, so I took her picture sittin' behind her desk. Ain't she beautiful? Mama says her hair is straight out of a bottle, but I think it's awful pretty.

One time Mama was over at the church working on Vacation Bible School stuff, and Jimmie Sue says, "Miz Cooper, how do you spell 'sight'?" Mama says, "Which one?" and she says, "You mean there's more than one?" Mama said, "Well, there's s-i-g-h-t, like you see with your eyes, and there's s-i-t-e, like a building site, and c-i-t-e, like in a citation." Jimmie Sue's eyes got real big and she said, "No wonder I didn't know how to spell it!"

Well, she moved to Dallas before long and then she didn't work here anymore. Mama said maybe now we wouldn't have so many mistakes in the bulletin, but Daddy said Jimmie Sue spelled as good as Brother Bullard talked, and besides, she wasn't hard to look at, either.

Oh, here's Mama and Daddy back from the store. I sure did enjoy our visit, Brother Dowd. Wait just a minute while I get my camera. I want to add your picture to my collection. Say "whiskey"!

Turn the Page

About the Author:

Donna Chapman Gilbert is proud to be a lifelong Texan. She lives near Dallas, and is married with two grown sons. When she's not manning a secretarial desk or working on her next novel (it's coming someday!), she enjoys collecting funny stories for Becky Sue to spring on her next unsuspecting victim.

Also by Donna Chapman Gilbert:

Safe Pasture

Susanna Parker, a newly-unemployed single mom, visits her Aunt Ora in Wyoming and discovers that Ora's God is full of surprises. Susanna begins her own journey of faith amid a swirl of new experiences. From a handsome businessman to a sprawling cattle ranch, she encounters joys and dangers she never expects.

Zeke McCall is haunted by a past that neither his young daughter nor his beloved ranch can overcome. Then Susanna signs on as ranch cook. Does he dare love again? And must Susanna be forced to make the most difficult choice of her life?

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT *SAFE PASTURE*:

Delightful! Her characters are warm and real, the story's conflicts entirely believable, and the protagonists' faith journeys gripping.

-- Peggy Stoks, Author of *Olivia's Touch*

A page turner along the same caliber as a book by Tracie Peterson or James Scott Bell.

-- Michelle Connell, On-Line Book Reviewer

Ms. Gilbert has a great command of dialogue and dialect—the conversations are easy to hear.

-- Robin Hardy, Author of *Striker's Bride*

The characters keep you riveted and the dialogue is strong. Trust in *Safe Pasture* to be an entertaining read.

-- Tracy Farnsworth, Roundtable Reviews

This is a well-crafted story. I just couldn't put this book down.

-- Jeffrey A. Davis, Author of *Invasion of the Togakura*

Excerpt from Safe Pasture:

The sun was high enough to give promise of a glorious summer day, but had not yet taken the chill from the air. We had climbed a thousand feet since leaving Beeline, and were driving at better than 8,000 feet above sea level. I pulled my jacket closer and glanced at Rusty, wondering whether I had dressed him warmly enough.

I had chosen my favorite outfit for this dreaded trip: a red-on-white cotton knit dress with matching jacket, red pumps and bold white earrings. Looking my best had always put me at ease during an interview. Ora seemed surprised at my choice of attire, but had said nothing.

At first Rusty had been consumed with curiosity about the landscape, but had soon tired of battering us with questions. Now I was able to lean back and survey the countryside as Ora drove.

Except for the approaching mountains, there wasn't much to see. Grass and sagebrush, sliced clean through by highway. The only thing of interest was a stretch of fence posts on which were impaled animal carcasses of some kind.

Ora anticipated my question. "Coyotes. They're a menace to farmers and ranchers both, and they're everywhere. I read in the paper that last year one coyote hunter killed two hundred in Johnson County alone."

"That's scary. Do they ever attack people?"

"Nope. Sheep and calves, mostly, though I wouldn't want to tangle with one myself."

Ora slowed the car at a road sign that read *Broken Bow Ranch* and turned onto a dirt road. We continued to drive northwest for several miles over rolling hills. The Big Horns rose imposingly out Ora's window.

Finally the old Plymouth climbed one last hill. Ora slowed to a crawl and announced, "Here we are."

After the miles of monotonous grasslands we had just traversed, the valley below was breathtaking. The ranch compound sprawled over several acres, the mountains rising above it like majestic giants. Adjoining pastures had not yet surrendered their greenery to summer's

scorching heat, and mountain lupine and wild irises splashed them with color. Cultivated fields lay to our right, their crops waving in the wind.

I never forgot my first view of the Broken Bow: the barn's white walls reflecting the sun; horse corrals, rail-fenced and ready; a garage flanked by seasoned pickups, victims of many a pothole. The road led past the barn to a bunkhouse, and several small outbuildings dotted the compound.

To our left, across the road and up a gentle incline, sat the main house in regal simplicity. A pillared porch, and veranda above, ran the length of the house. Behind it grew a row of thirty-foot cottonwoods, perhaps planted years before as a windbreak against notorious Canadian northers. Beyond the house rose another hill covered with evergreens. Abutting the hill was a small building which I took to be a spring house. And standing sentry over all was a towering windmill, its blades churning in the ubiquitous winds.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" said Ora.

"Sure is." No wonder the pioneers had braved Indians, drought and pestilence to keep their land. I would have, too, for a spread like this.

"Look! Horses!" cried Rusty.

A remuda of horses was fenced in one corral, a mare and colt in another. We parked to the south of the garage and started up the incline to the house. Someone called out to us from the barn and we turned to see a grizzled old character coming our way, followed by a little blond-haired girl in faded jeans and tee shirt. His broad grin revealed a few missing teeth, and a weather-beaten hat rode high on the back of his head. The child remained behind him, tentatively peeking at us with big inquiring eyes.

"Howdy. Been expectin' you," he said, extending a gnarled hand.

Ora said, "Susanna, meet Charlie Waters. He's been at this ranch since Hec was a pup. Charlie, this is my niece, Susanna Parker, and her son Rusty."

"I'm right glad to meetcha, Ma'am, and you, too, son." Charlie tousled Rusty's hair. "Ooo-wee, would you look at that red mop. This here's Laura Leigh McCall, the purtiest little thing in this whole county."

Laura peered at us shyly.

"Hi, Laura," I smiled.

Rusty's eyes had not stopped moving since we crested the hill. He asked excitedly, "Is this a honest-to-goodness ranch?"

"It is for a fact," said Charlie. "Laurie, why don't you take Rusty here out to see the colt? But don't go in the corral. And mind where you step, son!"

He led Ora and me to the house, talking all the while. "Yep, I'm what you might call a fixture around this place. Come here as a young buck and stayed on. I've knowed Zeke McCall ever since he wore three-cornered pants. Learnt him a good part of what he knows about runnin' cattle. Guess that's why he keeps me on. Lord knows I ain't much help anymore on the range."

From the looks of his sinewy build, I had a hard time believing that. Charlie Waters appeared to be a man who could hold his own.

We reached the porch, where a chuck iron dangled from a rafter. Charlie led us through the main door and into a very large room, perhaps fifty feet in length. It was a combination living and dining room. To our right was the living area, where a huge stone fireplace, which I supposed could generate a lot of comfort on a blustery winter evening, now gaped vacantly. Dominating the mantle was a magnificent oil landscape. Sunshine poured through the massive picture window and bathed the rich oak paneling and parquet floors with light. Scattered

tastefully around the room was an eclectic assortment of furniture: leather couches, covered easy chairs, a coffee table, antique pump organ and a cherry wood grand piano. The living area was tied together with an expensive rose-colored area rug.

At the opposite end of the room sat a dining table that could easily seat a dozen people. A matching china hutch stood near it. I was admiring the set when through an open door in the corner came Zeke McCall. When he saw us he stopped short, as though startled and uncertain of his next move. Then he drew himself to his full height and strode purposefully forward, his boots clomping on the hard wood floor.

I studied him as he made his way across the room. He was a tall man, over six feet, with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He wore the same sweat-stained Stetson that capped every cowboy I had ever seen, and as he approached us he removed it to reveal windblown hair the color of autumn wheat. Even at this early hour, he was dusty from the range, and shared Charlie's faint aroma of leather and sweat. It was difficult to guess his age, since a graying beard covered most of face. Inwardly I squirmed. Beards always made me wonder what the wearer might be trying to hide.

Once he reached our side of the room he barely glanced at me, turning his attention to my aunt instead. "Good to see you again, Ora."

"It's been quite a while, hasn't it?" said Ora pleasantly. "Zeke, this is my niece, Susanna Parker."

Eager to appear self-confident, I flashed him my best smile. He met it with a curt nod.

"A little young, isn't she?"

"She's older than she looks," Ora said.

I resented being discussed in third person, and found his manner extremely irritating. I felt my hackles rise.

He turned to me and came directly to the point. "What makes you think you want this job?"

I did my best to hide my anger, and said evenly, "I don't want it. I'm here at Ora's request. She said you needed someone temporarily and I'm between jobs at present."

"So—you have experience?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow as though the very idea were ludicrous.

"If you're asking whether I've ever cooked for a living, I haven't. But I assure you I can hold my own in a kitchen."

"You know about Laura?"

"Of course."

He looked me over with frank curiosity. From his expression, it was apparent I had not impressed him one bit.

Suddenly I did want this job, if only to prove to this condescending jerk that he was wrong about me.

With an exasperated grunt, he said, "Well, if you want it, it's yours. If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Zeke donned his hat and strode out the front door, muttering to the old man, "Keep looking, Charlie. She won't last a week."