

**TO VERA
A SMART TEXAS WOMAN**

**So beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly
Play the dead march as you carry me along
Take me to the green valley and lay the sod o'er me**

These lyrics are supported by a beautiful melody with such profound cadence to possibly cause a haunting feeling in the chest. Originally published as a funeral processional in 1790 from County Cork, Ireland, it rode the waves across the Atlantic and was adapted by immigrants as a cowboy's lament in Texas: The Streets of Laredo It suggests the bigness, boldness, and even at times the starkness of the earlier lives of many in Texas.

No one in my mind characterizes the hardiness, courage, resourcefulness and romance of the Old West than those of the family of Vera Sherrard Price. Her grandparents made their way west from Tennessee. It was a long hard trip.

By the time the exhausted dusty travelers came to the fork in the road which lead to the final western destination, "Oh, let the oxen decide!" was the cry. Would it be the Oregon Trail or the Santa Fe Trail? The oxen took off to finish the trip and that trail led straight to Texas. This land where the little group of the oxen's passengers and their progeny lived, toiled, loved, and suffered is what most of us have only seen in old movies or exciting thrillers about the Wild West.

There are stories of a grandmother dying in childbirth, a grandfather shot in the back over a land dispute, stealing land from them, and a farm house burning to the ground. We know that Vera's parents worked hard to build a substantial dairy farm only to lose everything in the Great Depression.

Vera's mother, a real Texas survivor, who endured the death of two husbands, put together enough resources to buy some washing machines to start a laundry business to keep the family afloat. Vera and one of her sisters would iron the laundry after school.

Little Vera was a busy one - all of her life it seems- a gifted individual with talents and determination supported by more spunk than even Anne of Green Gables. She would milk cows sometimes giving into temptations to scoop the delicious cream from the top of the pail for a treat. Quarantined in a little room with scarlet fever, her ceaseless energy devoted itself to producing comic books. She cut out, pasted pictures, and then wrote dialogue into wonderful stories. After sewing her little books together she would design attractive covers then pass them out the window to eager children awaiting her next publication.

By the age of 12 Vera made her own clothes and clothes for others. Her designs were so well done that a younger sister would slip into her room to change into Vera's dress after she left for school.

She was a little girl with a thirsty mind reading whatever she could find. Her mother would catch her with a book at the ironing board or propped up on a broom Vera should have been using. This very bright little girl, interested in almost everything it seemed, had to drop out of school to help support the family. It was a time so dire that Vera's mother had to place her two youngest children in an orphanage.

It was in those hard times that Vera found her mother softly crying in the kitchen because she was only able to feed her children cornbread. Vera gently caressed her mother and said, "Don't worry Mother. I love cornbread." And to this day Vera will tell you, "I do too love cornbread." She often seeks out places to eat a nice slice of hot cornbread warm with memories of the love of a mother.

When Vera married Lee Price her life again took on a new dimension. Her husband had a pipefitting business which forced them to follow his work. Undaunted Vera armed herself and her girls with a pop-up tent and off they went to follow Lee from place to place. They learned so many new and wonderful things as they traveled. Most of all she read to her girls and had many discussions. Many a happy day was spent with hours in a local library.

Vera wanted to be thought of as smart because it was such a value to her. Those of us who are teachers will especially have empathy for a gifted child who loved to learn, and loved school, yet was denied the opportunity to engage in it. She used the word "smart" often and just a few days before she died she said, "I am smart!" Indeed, she was. The most self-educated person I know.

She was also very involved in the real world and in current events. She debated issues from her Rockdale Hospital bed just two weeks ago. She told all of us there she was getting out of that hospital in time to vote in the presidential election.

One high point for her was the night her daughter, Anne Davis, was honored at the Teacher of the Year Banquet. It was a grand occasion, but the highlight of the night was watching Mrs. Price's overwhelming excitement. She arrived at the last minute stepping out of a big car and was escorted in with her sister, Bettie. They proceeded down a long hallway into our magnificent open room complete with a high school band blaring, tables covered with linen cloths and elegant decorations. There was much joy. For me it was like watching someone at the Oscars!

It was not the Oscars!! Ever the astute observer, Mrs. Price did not miss the smallest detail or word said about excellence in education, especially

regarding her daughter. This was her dream. Intelligence and learning was being honored and she uniquely saw it demonstrated through the work of her very own daughter.

When she settled into her home that night overcome with joy and pride she telephoned me three times in a row to reflect upon the ceremony, learning, but above all her pride in each of her daughters, Anne Davis and Sandy Peters. Both girls became excellent teachers, very learned women. Knowledge and family met that night. It was a night for the "Smart"!

Born on September 2, 1918, Vera Sherrard Price would have been 86 years old in just a matter of days. Born into a world fresh with hope after the completion of World War I she lived in part of two centuries. She first lived in a world of no electricity, few telephones, and saw new fangled cars that appeared to bounce like little black boxes atop bicycle tires. She left this world as women who hooked a 300 pound tuna, held an airplane pilot's license, and authored her own blog site. She had played golf against men for the challenge. Ever the wordsmith she was solving crossword puzzles aloud in a semi-state of consciousness three days before she died.

What then can we learn from the life of Vera Sherrard Price?

- She knew she was not a perfect person but continued to try.
- She was a plain spoken woman who knew how to be friendly. An avid conversationalist, she could draw people out and make them feel the true value she saw in them or their ideas.
- She appreciated all kindnesses toward her and never forgot them. Her appreciation was so genuine that it gave more joy to the giver than the receiver.
- She took the responsibilities of democratic citizenship seriously and remained well informed, critical-minded, and voting until the end.
- She valued learning. Unable to finish her schooling she became a highly self-educated woman.
- She took the responsibilities of motherhood very seriously and mentored her girls to be well-educated, good, caring, contributing people.
- She made sure that anyone she loved knew it. This was especially true of family including in-laws.

It was also obvious that she cared greatly about her grandchildren and

great-grandchildren, reaching out to them in so many ways. She kept abreast of their activities, achievements, and sorrows. Vera communicated with them, cheered them on, and reached out to help them. More importantly, the children knew and felt her deep love. Even at the age of 85 she threw a baby shower for a granddaughter.

- She modeled what folklore refers to as the “true grit of Texans”.

So now we can...

Beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly

to commend this very courageous woman's remains back to Texas. Her noble spirit has most assuredly already been received in Heaven the very moment of her passing.

Amen

Ann Leonard

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