

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Willena Moore - Homemade Country Hospitality

Country to the bone, Willena was born and reared in Port Acres, Texas (a part of Port Arthur, Texas). She went to Steven F. Austin ISD, which schooled all of the grades from first through twelfth in one school. Growing up during the depression, her father took her fishing and hunting. She married young.

At 80, she has come a long way. She wondered about this article, too, because she has not climbed Mt. Everest or crossed the ocean. Yet, we know, the best in life is not so much *what* we have done, but *who* we are. That is the reason for these articles, too, to capture the heart. While everyone does not have a world-shaking adventure, everyone does have a precious heart.

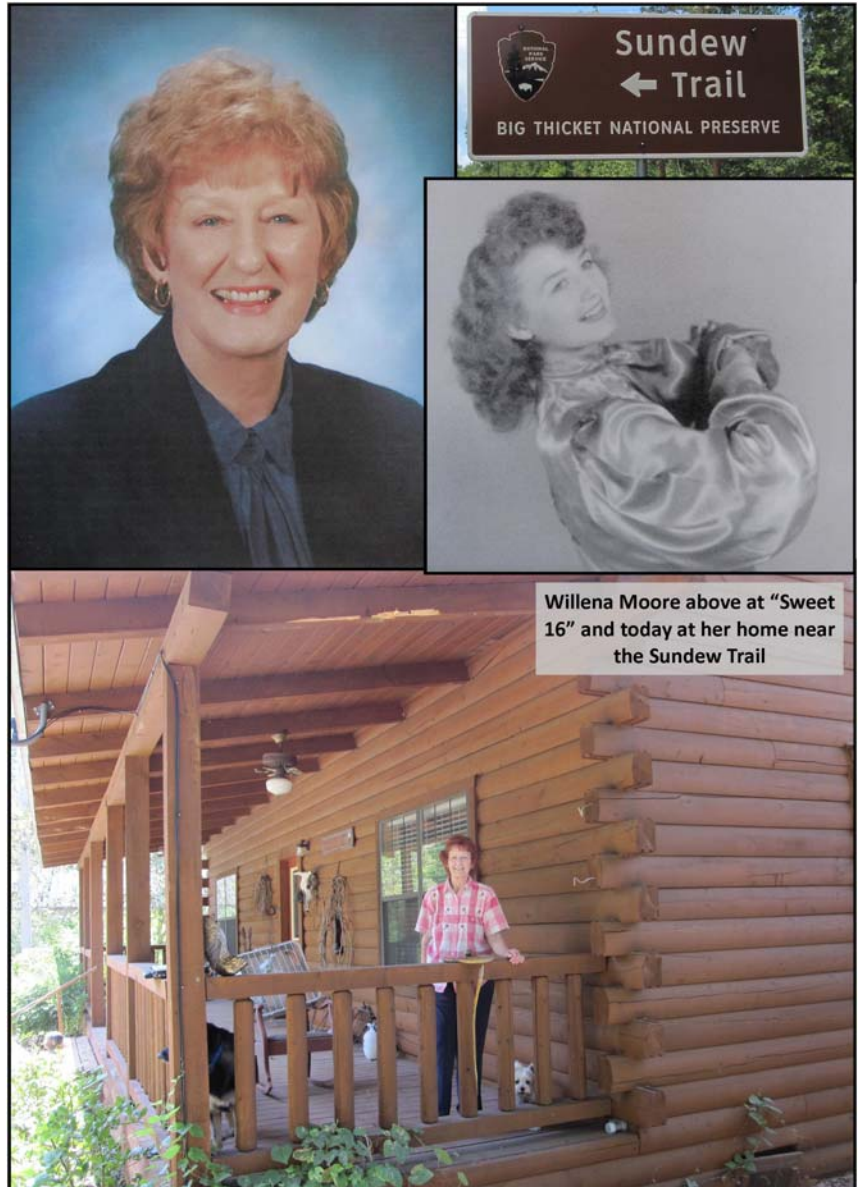
Willena is a fighter. She is a friend. She is a neighbor, a mother, a grandmother, and a tireless servant of others.

She loves to cook and serve others – many of us have enjoyed the fruits of her culinary art and had the pleasure of her hospitality.

It is her fiery energetic personality that many know best. She trusts to her friends her exact and often sharp opinion. She does not gossip, but to her friends, she is crystal clear.

Smiles – she smiles all the time.

She married Joseph Gary and had two sons, Rodney Wade and Jeffery Neal. Then divorced and remarried Joseph again and moved unto father's



Willena Moore above at "Sweet 16" and today at her home near the Sundew Trail

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property on the southern edge of Tyler County just north of the gated community of Wildwood. Then they had Stewart, their youngest son.

She went to work at Temple-Inland (now MeadWestvaco) in 1963 and retired in 1987.

Reflecting on her time with the union at Temple-Inland, she matter-of-factly declared, “I’d have been fired if I had not been a member of the union.” The union protected her and more.

In the 1960s at Temple-Inland, women could only stack paper and black men could only be janitors. As the Civil Rights movement began to take hold, women and blacks became the “affected class” and the union won some serious rights to promotion, helping to win a major lawsuit against Temple-Inland. The “affected class” won: black men got about \$30,000 while women like Willena only got about \$3,000 compensation.

She has a lot of stories about the struggles women went through – again, crystal clear – as she told of specific behavior. Those who survived had to be tough. After the lawsuit, women could bid on any job based upon seniority in the early 1970s.

“Bill Moore and I got married in 1974,” she said. She cannot remember much before that, as she said, “I was too busy working and raising my kids.”

Bill was an electrician at Temple-Inland, and she does remember how they met.

“I was stenciling paper,” she said. Bill came along and asked me for a date. She said, “I don’t even know you.” He said, “Go and ask someone about me and I’ll come back.” On their first date Bill’s old Toyota broke down. So they took her car, a Ford Maverick.

At Temple-Inland, “When people would mess with me ... I’d get Bill and he’d give them a ‘talking to.’”

It was a strange coincidence, she noted, “I drove 32 miles to the Temple-Inland when we lived in Orange, and then 32 miles after we moved here.”

She wanted to go into the lab. “When I put in for a lab job, they would not let me. My math score was not good enough,” she reflected. The union head at the time, Boyd Young (who became a top executive), told them to let her study. “So I studied hard, took the test and passed. It was all just a bunch of bull.” Moreover, she said, “Working that shift work was tough enough, watching people go home every evening. Then I went into the storeroom to work straight days. It was great to have regular hours.”

“Jean McCully and I used to fight a lot (she’s remarried now). Now, when we see each other, we hug,” Willena said affectionately. For the last five years or so, the retired Temple-Inland employees have a reunion gathering in Silsbee about every three months.

“When I retired, the salvage yard man at Temple-Inland, James McClain, made me a barbeque pit from Schedule 80 pipe. It’s thicker pipe.” She motioned out her window toward where the barbeque sits.

She loved Bill. Throughout their struggles and after their retirement, she watched out for Bill as his ailments took a toll on him and finally took his life in 2005.

When they first moved to their current location on her father’s land, and later built their log cabin, the road was not paved and called the “Oil Field Road.” Today it is FM 2827, and if one goes ten miles down FM 2827, the road

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turns to sand just as the whole road was decades ago.

After retirement, she quilted more and worked harder at her church.

She discovered prison ministry in the late 1990s, working from time to time to help John Morrison with the chapel-building project. Then, with staff Chaplain Michael Maness and for about two and half years, she led the Hospitality Program at the Gib Lewis State Prison with her friends George and Kandy Sanner, her Sunday School teachers at Wildwood Baptist Church.

Willena networked with many women, perhaps a hundred in all, but only a few became faithful. Before it ended, she had eighteen dedicated women who came to the prison every Saturday and Sunday. Toward the end, she started to have leg problems. She has suffered several ailments in the last ten-plus years, including two knee replacements, but she has never stopped serving.

Her Hospitality Program team would meet in the prison visitation area and counsel with the families as they waited to see the prisoner. She provided a TV with Disney videos and crayons and coloring books for the kiddos, and they would take care of the children. She remembers several of them vividly. After the families got to know her, they would open up and talk and often cry, especially the grandmothers.

She remembers one mother from Houston who visited every week and who had eight sons in prison. It is hard to get a handle on that.

Willena's youngest son, Stuart, worked on satellites on San Andres Island, the largest island of the southern group of Columbian islands in the Caribbean, as part of the U.S. drug interdiction work trying to bring down

the drug trade. To make a long story short, Willena developed a friendship with Ingrid, a young airport worker.

Strangely, on that Columbian island at the time, one could not become a member of the church until they were married, and Ingrid wanted to be baptized – undoubtedly influenced by Willena's missionary heart. When news of this strange membership requirement was heard by an African American minister on the Bill Glass Prison Ministry team, he went down to Columbia and got them straight.

Willena helped Ingrid get transportation to a job on a cruise ship. Eventually Ingrid was baptized at Wildwood Baptist Church and married in California, and remains a dear friend to this day.

When asked about Willena at a gathering of the Seniors with Smiles, a group from Wildwood Baptist Church, immediately Peggy Seiler said, "She makes the most delicious rolls." That was repeated several times; Willena is a famous cook. Doris Fail and Lavon Dunham seconded that opinion on the rolls, and Lavon called attention to Willena's colorful handmade vests that she usually wears, then said, "Wonderful sourdough rolls."

Janice Howerton, one of the coordinators of Seniors with Smiles, said, "Willena is a kind, generous lady, always willing to help – and gets mad if you *don't* call her."

Sadie Pankhurst calls three widows every morning at 7:30, including Willena, and noted, "Willena loves missions and her Sunday School."

Like many who have lived in the country all of their lives, Willena has several best friends. One in particular, Elsie Broadest, was a cheerleader with Willena in high school and lives just

down the road. Willena sees her friend several times a week, often bringing her the paper. It is precious to have a friend who keeps in touch all of your life.

Willena was a cheerleader and football queen; you can see her smile in the photos, then and now. On the bottom photo, look near the ceiling eave and you can see where a “huge woodpecker has tore into the wood.” Determined to stop the pesky creature, you can see in front of Willena on the hand railing a rubber snake, and also on the hand railing to the left by the post sits a battery-operated owl, that goes “who!” when one gets near. Behind Willena is fan blowing with some aluminum foil attached – all to fight off that pesky woodpecker.

Willena sews, quilts and cooks every chance she gets, for her family, church, or friends. She has been at Wildwood Baptist for twenty-plus years.

“I *have* to be around people,” she said. She especially loved their former pastor, the Rev. Don Mitchell and his wife Wanda: so many loved them that the church’s recreation building is named the Mitchell Life Center.

On her kitchen table, she pointed to a magazine picture of a lemon meringue pie, saying, “I am going to make one of those,” meaning she was not merely going to make a pie in general, but one that *looked* like the one in the magazine photo. Reflecting, she said, “Most people don’t know what *homemade* is anymore.”

Clearly, Willena knows what *homemade* is. She *is* homemade, and opens her homemade country hospitality to many, just off the old Oil Field Road, across from the Sundew Trail, on the southern edge of Tyler County.