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MY NAME IS LOLA

by Lola Rozsa,
as told to and written by Susie Sparks

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Building a Gospel of Works

Preacher was a big man with a big personality. Hugely charismatic with a wonderful tenor voice, Preacher loved to sing, whether he was leading a gospel service, singing in a men's quartet or glee club, or simply singing with his family around the table. People of all ages flocked to him and his enthusiasm was so infectious he was a natural-born builder – both literally and figuratively. His boundlessly optimistic attitude toward the future made him the one that churches sought out to refresh the spirit of lagging congregations, and whenever an evangelical revival was proposed, Preacher was the one they called upon.

It so happened that a little church in Grandview, Illinois, proposed a revival to be held in October, 1908. The town was so tiny that its two churches, the Presbyterians and the Methodists, had only half-time pastors and shared the town's choir in services held every other Sunday. Fortunately, Miss Nannie Eleanor Morris had been taught to play the pump organ, so she served as the Methodist organist and alto voice. She was equally at home as a Presbyterian though and was quite willing to fill in at the Presbyterian revival when Preacher arrived for the autumn revival meeting. Even though Nannie was also teaching school in Dudley, she made herself available during the evenings for the services and, as the week progressed, a romance blossomed.

After the revival, Preacher returned to Indiana and commenced a letter-writing campaign that, by February, finally persuaded Nannie to become his wife. They married at the Presbyterian church in Grandview and then boarded the train to Fort Branch, Indiana, where Nannie had to learn to run a manse and be a preacher's wife – as well as mother to two-year-old John Dillon. In the next ten years, she would give birth to another son and five daughters, including me, the youngest. But that was the easy part. It was much more difficult to learn to adjust to the constant change as new congregations came calling.

It was a hard lesson to learn. Nannie was terribly homesick and had bound herself to the Fort Branch congregation in a kindred tie, making the congregation her surrogate family. In fact, they *were* like family. Preachers didn't make much money so congregants were expected to contribute not only their tithe for the preacher's salary but also a portion of their produce, whether from farms or kitchen gardens, not to mention their occasional spare chickens and maybe a lamb or two come spring. They would donate their own children's outgrown clothing and shoes and, in times of illness or childbirth, women from the congregation would make themselves available to help.

But preachers were expected to move along to new, and hopefully more prosperous, congregations every few years. It would keep the message fresh and provide new professional challenges for the preachers. Nonetheless, it created painful separations for their wives and families as they had to make new friends in new schools and towns.

Barely six months into their marriage, Preacher announced that he had accepted a call to a badly neglected church in Newton, Illinois. He and Nannie and little John Dillon arrived to find a small frame church desperately in need of repair, with a tiny manse tucked under the windows of the church, equally decrepit. Worse, there were fewer than three dozen people left in the congregation, most of them women. But, to their credit, these women had already

announced a reawakening and had had preliminary plans drawn up for the construction of a new church building. It was Preacher's job to sell the idea to potential new congregants, and he set to his task each Sunday morning with compelling messages wrapped in his sermons and supported by scripture.

Miraculously, in less than two years he was able to hand the keys to the new church to the trustees and, during the dedication service, an additional \$5,000 was raised to help defray most of the indebtedness against the new building. *The Newton Monitor* for November 22, 1911, reported, "Much credit must be given the pastor, Rev. Charles W. Estes, who first proposed the erection of a modern church ... and who, since the first shovel of dirt was thrown, has been constantly 'on the job.' His optimistic view of conditions encouraged the membership, and if any became blue or despondent, a short conference with the pastor would at once shorten the length of the discouraged one's face."

The Newton church was the first of many. Preacher discovered he genuinely enjoyed the challenge and seemed to be a builder at heart, and his success story spread rapidly to other congregations in Illinois. Nannie learned to pack up the household and move to a new location pretty efficiently, but she never really got over the painful separations from her church families. However, it was at one of their early postings in Illinois that they discovered the old oak table, forgotten by its owners and left in a dusty attic. It would become the focal point of our family, the place where all of us convened for breakfast and family worship, the table where the children did their homework, it was the site of our family sing-alongs, a place for story-telling and, best of all, a table big enough and with enough extra leaves to feed thirty people. It was the table that grew with our family, the table that gathered the family back together when there were inevitable separations. And even now, even though that table has long since disappeared, it remains in my memory as the heart of my family.

Today, most preachers are paid living wages and are expected to rent or buy their own homes, but a hundred years ago that wasn't the case. In those days, the manse was customarily owned by the church. And it was usually within walking distance of the church, if not, indeed, cheek-by-jowl. Life, for a preacher's family, was lived very much in a fish bowl.

For the Estes family of six children, it was a very busy fish bowl indeed. Preacher had already built several new churches in Indiana and Illinois, and along the way he had acquired a Jersey cow that accompanied the family with every move, so it was quite a contingent that arrived at their posting in Hobart, Oklahoma in 1918. The little town in southwestern Oklahoma had once been part of the Indian Reservation, and Preacher was to organize Sunday afternoon services for the Kiowa communities on the outskirts of town, as well.

The assignment in Hobart included a large modern church with a tiny six-room cottage hardly more than a holler from the church door, but the people were friendly and enthusiastically welcoming. There was an active Ladies' Aid Society, and the relatively prosperous congregation had even assembled a fine orchestra composed of the young people of the church. But 1918 and 1919 were unfortunately the flu years in the southwest.

The Spanish flu epidemic had taken hold during the final years of World War I. The war didn't cause the flu, but it spread like wildfire in the close confines of the soldiers' quarters. The massive troop movements across Europe accelerated its contagion, and it was lethal to the young men whose immune systems were already weakened by battle fatigue. It was first diagnosed in the United States in January of 1918 at Fort Riley, Kansas, just north of Oklahoma, and it had a strange affinity for young adults. Unlike most other strains of the flu that attack babies and weakened old people, the Spanish flu went after young healthy adults, so Preacher, along with many others in Hobart, worked tirelessly locating and isolating the sick, organizing soup kitchens, and nursing those who didn't die outright. Before it was finally over in 1919, the Spanish flu had affected 28 per cent

of the population of the United States and had killed more than 500,000 people.

If there was any good to come out of that terrible time, Preacher always said that it at least offered him the opportunity to meet everyone in Hobart and to offer them his service.

It wasn't long after that he and five other professional men organized the first Rotary Club in southwestern Oklahoma, and he became such an enthusiastic Rotarian that he once stopped the train in Mt. Carmel, Illinois when he was on his way to Indiana to conduct a funeral so that he wouldn't miss his obligatory Thursday Rotary meeting. The secretary of the Mt. Carmel Rotary Club met him at the depot, rushed him to the meeting place so he could register his attendance, and then hurried him back to the waiting train.

However, the ladies of the congregation evidently prevailed upon him to attend more closely to his wife than to his fellow Rotarians the evening I came into the world. Not only did they insist that my mother should have his seventh child delivered in an actual hospital, rather than at home where the others had been born, they also suggested that my father's place should be with her, not at his Rotary meeting. It was the only Rotary meeting he ever missed.

The ladies continued to watch over my mother as she recovered, and they presented her with a beautiful, handcrafted Tennessee cedar chest as a baby gift. I kept it until I was able to give it to my oldest daughter, and I hope that she, one day, will hand it along to hers.

I came along in 1920 and don't really remember very much about Hobart, but my mother often spoke fondly of her Oklahoma church family. She described how the congregation eventually purchased a new manse, a larger two-storey frame house across the alley from the church with a lovely garden and a chicken house. It had huge maple and locust trees shading the lawn where she and Preacher hosted garden parties and outdoor revivals on the hot summer evenings.

The new manse wasn't quite as close to the church as the other had been, but it was definitely close enough for the congregation to know what the seven Estes children were up to at any time of the day

or night. In truth, Preacher didn't really need any congregational monitoring because we all knew his rules and knew not to expect there would be any relaxation at any time. No child of his would play cards, use tobacco in any form, drink alcohol, go to dances, or blaspheme or use profane or rough language. Nor, by the way, would his daughters bob their hair.

One of my brothers, however, stepped out of line just one time – in extremely trying circumstances – and regretted it immediately. One very cold January night, the furnace in the church overheated and the sparks from the chimney set fire to the roof of the church just as the worshipers were arriving to attend an evening service. As the fire quickly leaped out of control, my brother was heard to exclaim, “Golly!” My father hauled him into the house and washed his mouth out with soap.

My brother never forgot that lesson, and the rest of us were forever respectful – not only of my father's cure for rough language – but also for how quickly a fire could devour a huge building. Sadly, it wouldn't be long before we would learn that lesson again, with far more tragic results.

Both Mama and Papa lived their faith and understood their Christian calling to minister to *all* those in need, not just to their own church family, so my father's ministry to the Kiowa people in the surrounding county was important to them both. He at first held Sunday evening church services in the Kiowa County Court House, but his congregation quickly outgrew the courtroom and he started a new building campaign in 1924, which his congregation back in Hobart enthusiastically supported, and they did what they could to help.

On Christmas Eve, the young people of the Hobart Church went out to the little Kiowa school in Babbs Switch bringing gifts for all the children wrapped in cotton batting to look as though they were covered in snow. Then they hauled in a huge cedar tree and decorated it with Christmas ornaments and tipped each branch with tiny candles. Santa was to appear later in the evening with Christmas

treats for everyone so, as that time drew near, the building filled with families excited to sing carols and celebrate the joy of the season.

My mother later told the story. As the program got underway, Santa entered on cue but as he began lifting the gifts from the Christmas tree one of the tiny candles came in contact with the cotton trim on his costume and caught fire. Then, in an attempt to smother the flame, someone accidentally upset the tree spreading the blaze to the gifts and decorations and in panic the more than two hundred assembled people raced to the exit.

There was no other escape. The windows were permanently screened with heavy hail-screen wire nailed to the outside, and the only exit was at the rear of the building. Its door opened *into* the room. Very few were able to get out in time; bodies were piled like cordwood near that door.

Word reached my father just as he was leaving the Christmas Eve service at the Hobart church to go out to Babbs Switch to join the Christmas celebration. The fire whistle blew along with all the church bells in town summoning help. But when he arrived, it was all over.

Thirty-six bodies burned almost beyond recognition were recovered from the smouldering ashes. The still-living victims of the fire were rushed to the hospitals in the area and were lined up in the corridors awaiting treatment. Preacher, along with many other volunteers, worked through the night and throughout Christmas Day trying to identify the dead. The women of Hobart turned their Christmas feasts into meals for the volunteers and the turkey carcasses into soup for the injured. And finally, the women organized to work in shifts at the hospitals and to help the families broken by the tragedy.

My father directed the mass funeral service for the twenty-one victims who were never able to be positively identified. Among them were members of the Babbs Christian Endeavor Society, the youth group that had been organized by the school teacher from

Hobart, a member of my father's church. She died with them that terrible night.

As a result of that tragedy new legislation was passed regarding the construction of public buildings that would in the future require numerous well-marked exits with doors opening to the outside and windows unimpeded by permanent barriers of any kind. Preacher led the building of a new, fireproof brick school to replace the little frame one that had burned and, at its dedication, he spoke with tears streaming, still grieving.

It's hard to imagine now, but in those days life was heartbreakingly precarious. Just as there were no building regulations to protect the citizens of those little towns, public health wasn't an issue for most town councils until much later in the twentieth century.

One summer afternoon when I was about five, it was decided that the Junior Christian Endeavor Society in the church, along with their adult leaders, would have a picnic in the town park and, much to my delight, I was taken along by my two older sisters. By evening, thirteen of the fifteen children who had been present at the picnic became ill, apparently from drinking contaminated water from the public fountain.

The next day, my sisters and I complained of headaches, and from that time forward we got progressively sicker. By the second week, all three of us were delirious and running dangerously high temperatures. We were diagnosed with typhoid fever – an often-fatal illness in the era before antibiotics – and my mother was nursing the three of us round the clock.

The women of the congregation realized she couldn't handle it alone, so they organized a twenty-four-hour-a-day rotating army of nursing care. They dragged our beds out to the screened sleeping porch where we could catch a breeze through those sweltering summer nights. I have no memory of it now, but we were told that these good women stationed themselves at our beds, wrapping us in cold wet sheets to bring down the fevers, trading them for fresh sheets as our hot little bodies dried them out. But despite their unrelenting

care, our temperatures kept rising until finally, after six or seven weeks, the fevers broke and we slowly began to recover. Fortunately, none of us developed encephalitis or septicaemia, but I remember that my hair all fell out and I was so weak that I had to learn to walk all over again.

When I think back on those times, I mostly remember my mother as the one who affirmed her faith each day with her work in the church and with her family. In her mind, the family was the core of civil society. The family's values defined the individual and the individual transmitted those values to the extended family and then to his larger community. There were no social safety nets; the family was critical to survival, literally and figuratively. In hard times the extended family would step in to help in a crisis, and when family wasn't enough the church or community family would take over – just as it had during the typhoid fever episode. To choose to step away from the family unit was unthinkable.

Nannie and Preacher were truly a team in a time and a place where most Southerners would have said that a woman's place is in her home and, like her children, better seen than heard. But in my mother's case, her role was to organize the women of the church who, in all honesty, kept it going. She would step up to serve in his place when Preacher was ill or was called out of town on church business. She not only sang in the choir but could fill in for the organist if necessary, and very frequently she attended church conferences as a delegate. The Cumberland Church, far ahead of other denominations, gave women meaningful roles in its administration allowing them to study for the ministry as well as to lead congregations, and Nannie was never reluctant to take any role that would be helpful to Preacher's flock.

My older brothers and sisters, of course, all sang in the choir and were expected to be active in their schools' sports teams, the band, and drama and glee clubs as well, and Preacher and Nannie were very present in the parent teacher associations. We were all expected to be self-sufficient, and the older ones were trained to fill in for Nannie if

she was called away for any reason, so there wasn't much time for any of us to whine, "I'm sooo bored!"

No, there was no radio or TV or Internet, but we always had a cow that needed milking. And my brother Charlie and I discovered we could make a little spending money if we'd bottle the milk our family didn't need. We'd load up the wagon with that surplus and could make five cents a bottle selling milk to our neighbours. Of course, Mama wasn't at all sure that our first attempts at commerce were made out of the goodness of our hearts. We seemed to be leaning dangerously close to a decidedly unchristian greed to satisfy our appetite for sweet treats. "But," as she often said, "sometimes you just have to let the milk settle a little before the cream will rise to the top."

Mama kept us busy. In the unlikely event that any of us had any spare time, there were undoubtedly people in the congregation who could use our help. And, even as a very little girl, I was expected to help Papa at his revivals and camp meetings, so I learned to climb up on the stage to help him lead the gospel-singing.

Preacher may have been the disciplinarian, but my mother knew how to temper his rules by telling us stories and indulging our silly pranks and the playful tricks we played on one another. She always had faith that the cream would eventually rise and that sooner or later we'd all turn out just fine. I often wonder if she ever really knew what an important role model she was for all of us, particularly for the five girls in our family.

Women's liberation? It would never have crossed my mother's mind. She was free to do exactly as she chose, and she chose to be my father's partner in life and to lead God's work in the church.

Women's suffrage? Well, that was a contentious issue. Generally in the South of her youth, men and women both were reluctant to expose the gentler sex to the ugly political arena. But yes, she would support it if the female vote would help to make necessary change in public policy. She had seen what alcohol could do to good men. Too much of the trouble that many families had to suffer was caused

by strong drink. Prohibiting its manufacture and sale, she reasoned, could only be good for society as a whole and for individual well-being. She would support both female suffrage and Prohibition, as would my father.

In Oklahoma, the road to Prohibition had been pretty clearly paved by the women of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. They had established chapters in the little towns across the state to encourage women to lobby for the vote to ensure that the dry laws instituted in Indian Territory prior to 1907 remained. And, when they joined forces with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, they were a formidable force for wholesale reform. Singing "Lips that touch liquor will never touch mine," Oklahoma women mobilized. They pasted posters on farm wagons, they picketed in parades and shouted from soap boxes at county fairs and even at revival meetings. And they made it happen; in 1918, Oklahoma extended the vote to women.

Thanks to voters like Preacher and Nannie, Oklahoma did, indeed, stay dry, at least under the law. But ironically, the resulting boom in illegal moonshine caused plenty of upstanding citizens to support the bootleggers, who were at least bringing them good Canadian whiskey so they wouldn't have to drink homemade moonshine. As Will Rogers famously predicted, "Oklahomans will vote dry as long as they can stagger to the polls." And they did – until 1984.

Nannie and Preacher, however, were lifelong prohibitionists. They stayed in Hobart for eight years. Their church family was always welcome at the manse along with anyone else who happened by. Everyone was invited to take a place at the big oak table where the food was warm and ample, and, if they were asked to sing with the family after supper, it was a small price to pay for the hospitality offered to them.

Preacher was invited to give the commencement sermon at the Hobart High School seven of the eight years they were there and, after they moved away, he was called back to officiate at the funerals

of fifty people – those from that congregation and others who had simply been friends of the family.

In 1926, though, another congregation came calling. A new church needed building. I was to become a Texan.