

Walking with Lona

Inching ahead one deliberate step at a time, Lona Lewis hunches over the frame of a black metal walker and shuffles down Walnut Street in Archer City, Texas. Bone-thin hands grip the handles for balance. With each stiff stride, elastic bands of knee-high stockings peek in and out from the hem of her blue cotton dress.

A pebble breaks the pace. She slows down and maneuvers her clunky orthotic shoes around a crack in the asphalt, crunching gravel with each turn of the wheels.

At 102 years old, Lona's not in a hurry. A woman crossing the street motions to her with a cane. Lona's blue eyes remain fixed ahead. Men in western hats wave from pickups. They know better than to offer Lona a ride. She always turns them down.

Lona lives alone, so she's used to doing things by her self. Just six years old when her mother died, Lona cooked for her two brothers and plowed the hard clay field as her father hit the road hauling freight. She questioned her own self worth when her father refused to let her go to dances and whipped her when she disobeyed. When an overprotective husband bought her dresses and did her chores, she locked herself in her bedroom as she watched her self-reliance slip away. She fought back with prayers and continued to read the Bible with a magnifying glass when her eyesight began to fail. Lona had no choice but to be independent and she found a way to dance alone, in stocking feet, across her living room floor.

She has outlived her husband and two sons. Lona still bakes a cake on her husband's birthday and cuts a slice for herself. "The hard part about getting old is seeing

other people die,” she says. Pushing the walker with all her strength, she is accepting the harsh and harrowing physical limitations that come with old age.

Lona likes getting out when she can, like when she and her friend Donna Timmons took a trip to the Dairy Queen, a place she never went with her husband Newt.

“C’mon, Lona, it’s ready to dump on us,” says Donna, tapping the car horn and eyeing the dark clouds rolling in.

Her friend comes around the car and tries to grab Lona’s arm to give her support, only to be rebuffed. Lona lowers her own self into the passenger seat, gripping the top of the door for support and shooshing Donna away.

“I ain’t ready yet.” Lona says, fidgeting with the seatbelt. Donna revs the engine of her red Ford Escort.

Lona left her walker at home.

“Why aren’t you using your cane? You’re going to fall,” Donna says.

“I don’t need no cane. I’ve lived this long without one.”

“Take my grandmother’s cane. Maybe it’ll work better. It’s in the back seat. I don’t want to have to take you to the emergency room if you get hurt.”

Lona grows more silent as Donna’s car idles down Highway 79, blasts of air rustling wisps of Lona’s white hair.

“Are you too cold, Lona?”

Silence. She doesn’t always hear you the first time around.

They approach the drive-thru window.

“What do you want, Lona?”

She says nothing.

“Lona, you want a Sprite?”

Donna’s voice grows louder but not any harsher.

“Huh? Oh, no I have Sprite at home.”

“She’ll have a Sprite.”

“Here, let me fix your straw for you.”

Lona takes the cup and inserts her own straw.

“If you just let me drive my own car I could do for myself.”

After her husband died, her sons thought she was getting too old to fix leaking faucets in her aging house as she approached her 70s. In 1980, she packed her things in cardboard boxes and moved to Robin’s Garden, a senior apartment complex around the corner from the Archer City Community Center.

She didn’t want to move from her home on Cherry Street where she lived for almost 50 years. February in this West Texas cattle settlement is cold and she always relied on the gas heaters in her old house to warm her feet. She wasn’t used to central air in the apartments. Most of all, she hated giving up her little red Dachshund named Rachel.

“I was very unhappy for a while,” she says. Her voice is raspy and high with a hint of a twang. “My brother took my dog. One night I felt her jump up on the bed. She always slept on the foot of my bed. I sat up and I said ‘How’d you get in here, Rachel? Those doors are locked.’ It was just a dream. I sure do miss her.”

Donna brings Lona to her apartment from Dairy Queen and tells her goodbye. Ambling down the driveway to her door, Lona waves to a man and woman sitting on a porch next door. They don’t stop to visit.

Johnnie Jacobs, 91, used to come by everyday. “But she can't get down that hill without her walker running away from her,” Lona says. So Lona wheels up the hill to her house. When Lona first moved to the community, she would keep her apartment so tidy everyone wanted her to help them clean. Before she knew it, she was climbing ladders to paint, too.

Nothing ever stays the same in a senior community, though. Neighbors get sick or need help getting around. They move to nursing homes. Lona attends funerals for old friends as younger residents move in next door.

Another day, Lona and her friend Lena Kinsey, 95, catch a ride to meet the newest residents in town -- 90 majestic wind turbines settling into a 225-megawatt wind farm in the hills around Archer City.

Standing in silence on a prairie that hadn't changed much during the last century, Lona's eyes fixate on a steel windmill's giant whooshing propellers. A grasshopper flits through dried grass.

The ladies are puzzled about the turbines, not unlike the first time Lona saw the swirling wooden blades of a windmill her father made or the spinning tires of a car. “It’s a strange looking thing,” Lona says, her eyes still fixed on the new giant steel machines churning above. Her friend is more skeptical. “I don’t see any wires coming out of it. I don’t know how they get any electricity out of it.”

Lona remembers how her husband strung wires across wooden poles anchored in the clay to deliver the electrical spark that replaced the kerosene lamps.

She sees something familiar in the slow spinning blades. The high-tech windmills conjure up memories of the spinning of her mother’s loom or the black and white slits of

light flashing through wheels of her father's covered wagon. The strange newcomers on the prairie remind Lona of the first time she came to Archer City in March 1928.

Take Me Home

A new bride at the age of 17, Lona stepped from the idling Model T sedan on a hill overlooking the junction of State Highways 25 and 79. She was wearing a spring coat and light tan high heels. Her blue skirt fluttered in the wind. Lona's tall strapping husband with tan-leather skin pulled his new wife closer, pointing to the town below.

"This is our new home," Newt announced.

Rows of white clapboard farmhouses squatted under scraggly mesquite brush, a growing town that Jesse James once claimed as a hideout. Wooden windmills whirled and a white water tank on spindly legs towered over a town of 1,500 pioneers who migrated to Archer City from the hard-scrabbled farm fields of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri and other godforsaken places in between, searching for a better life. Oil pumps dotted the pastures. Banks and cafes lined the dirt streets, anchored on one end by the steeple of a white church. Newt grew up here, and to him it was paradise.

"I don't want to go down there," Lona recalls telling Newt. "I don't know anybody down there. Take me back home."

Lona didn't have much of a home to go back to after her mother died. Every time her father ran out of money, he put his children on the next train to another home.

In her apartment on Bois d'Arc Street, Lona slides open a closet door and pulls out a faded blue quilt her mother never finished. Rubbing the cloth between her fingers, she

talks about growing up in the rural pastures around Seymour, about 50 miles northwest of Archer City.

Her life was simple at first. The little girl with long brown pigtails shelled peas with her mother and grandmother in the shade of their farmhouse. She snacked on fried apples and played hide-and-seek with her brothers in the cornfields. At the end of the day, her father carried her back to the house in a gunnysack. Her grandfather rocked Lona on his lap to the song of crickets while her mother read the Bible on the front porch. “She would tell us about Jesus and his great love for us,” Lona says. “I didn’t understand much about it, but if she loved Jesus then I wanted to love him too.”

Lona was beginning to wonder, though, whether she deserved anyone’s love. Her father was a lanky man named Kelly Farris who had a ruddy complexion and a fiery temperament. He often spanked her. One time it was for tossing and bruising onions in the kitchen. She tried to make up for it by gathering firewood in her red wagon and asking for forgiveness. Her father’s anger only grew as Lona’s mother got sick and crops began to fail.

Learning Self-Reliance

Caressing her mother’s unfinished quilt, Lona stops talking and looks out the window.

Her walker is parked in the corner of her bedroom. Her bed is draped with a pink and blue scalloped quilt. Miniature dolls model fancy dresses atop a tall armoire. The doily on her dresser is just like the one that covered her mother’s nightstand.

Her feet scuff across the floor and Lona bends over a bookcase in her living room.

Photos of her five grandchildren, several great-grandchildren and their children are scattered on shelves. A bible is tucked between a western novel and a book about Billy Graham. A picture of Jesus stares across the room. The hands of a clock are frozen on 11:32. They haven't moved since she came to her apartment 30 years ago.

The centenarian pulls out a yellowed journal and opens its pages. A passage describes the self-reliance that Lona learned from her dying mother. Her mother's name was Love.

She was a slight woman with auburn hair that fell to her shoulders. Love wiped beads of sweat from her brow and slumped in the front seat of an open touring Model T sedan. Burning with fever, she was more concerned about her five-year-old daughter crying in the back seat. Love gave Lona a handkerchief to hold.

The road was bumpy and Lona held on to her hat with her mother's gift in her hand. It was Lona's first time in a car and she was seated between her brothers, seven-year-old Robert and Hal, 3. As they made a turn into town, the cold wind snatched the handkerchief from her hand.

Her mother's condition worsened. Refusing to give up, her father loaded his family in a farm wagon and set out to find another doctor in the pine forests of the Arbuckle Mountains in Oklahoma. The ride was long. Lona shivered. Her body rocked with each dip in the road. Dust flew under the wheels. She could hear her mother coughing with pneumonia under the canvas arch of the wagon.

Lona remembers her mother's hollow eyes in the glow of a kerosene lamp inside a tent. What she recalls most is the sadness on her father's face as he sat on a washtub wiping his eyes with a red bandana. "When my mother died," she wrote in her journal,

“part of my dad died too.” Just as the wind swept the handkerchief out of her hands, death ripped her mother from Lona’s life.

With no place to stay as her father left to find work, Lona moved from one relative's home to the next. When she was separated from her brothers, she clung to her doll in overalls she named Tom. She carried pots of water for her cousins when they were sick with the flu. When she complained, she was whipped so hard that her thighs throbbed with pain. Red handprints left their mark on her skin.

To escape the loneliness and cruelty, Lona went to Sunday school. She loved the singing at revivals but she couldn’t understand the prayers. “I thought if there was a God, they don’t have to talk to him so loud,” she says. She opened the Bible to a passage from Proverbs that her mother had underlined and read to her every night.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding.

She knew she was supposed to trust her God, but she didn’t understand how she could. She was mad at him, but she kept looking for answers until it was time to move again.

Lona was tired of living in other people’s homes, but the house in Mabelle she moved to with her father and brothers was not the place of Lona’s dreams.

The floors were dirt. Cardboard was nailed to the wall to keep the wind out. Her father was never there. Friends would send bread and hand-me-down dresses, but no one would come over to play.

Lona cooked and washed clothes. She picked cotton into October, missing the first few weeks of school. Her back ached. Her hands were cracked and bleeding. Lona wasn’t eating well and she had blisters in her mouth.

Grasshoppers ate the corn stalks. Sandstorms blew crops way and cut Lona's skin as she walked to school.

“My house was horrible,” Lona says. “I blamed God for taking mother away.”

Every time a train rumbled by her house, Lona wondered where it was going. Transients hopped off and Lona listened to their stories. She fed them baked biscuits and fried potatoes, watching in horror as they snatched her prized watermelon from her garden.

Since she couldn't afford to go anywhere, Lona went to places in her mind. She learned to play simple tunes on the piano in her classroom. She went home with armfuls of books.

Lona loved romance stories. Each week she raced to the post office to get the *Wichita Falls Times Record*. She couldn't wait to read “The Flapper Wife,” a series of stories about a young woman of the 1920s who refused to fit into the mold of a housewife. After a while, she began bringing a book home for her father, who didn't know how to read. She was so tired from doing chores around the house, she couldn't keep her eyelids open. Her father wouldn't let her sleep. He wanted to read Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*. “Let's finish,” he'd insist.

As he aged, her father became more possessive of Lona. When she stayed too long at a friend's house, he whipped her so hard she ran out the door.

Her father refused to let Lona go to dances, but that didn't stop her from sneaking out on Saturday night. It was the roaring 1920s, when everyone sang “Yes Sir, That's My Baby” and “Roll Out the Barrel.” Dancing the Charleston and wearing short dresses and high-heeled shoes were in vogue. “We played ring games. It was just the same as square

dancing, but I never told my father that,” she says.

Turning the page of a photo album, Lona comes across a photo of herself at a recent birthday party. She smiles from the printed page, earrings dangling and beads hanging from her neck. She dresses so impeccably now to make up for lost time, but it’s been hard for her to accept the wrinkles that have settled into her face. She prefers to think of herself as a young woman who caught the eye of almost every single man in town.

“Mr. Farris, you sure have a pretty little daughter,” they would say. When a cousin remarked about her unkempt hair, though, she looked in the mirror. “My hair was long and stringy,” she says. “I didn't take care of it and I am sure it looked awful.” Unable to afford a hairdresser, she did the next best thing. She asked a barber to cut it all off.

Lona missed not having a mother to tell her how to dress or take care of the house. One time she was pasting scrap wallpaper on her wall to make her room look better. Lona called out in frustration. “I said to myself, 'I wish I had someone to help me. I am always alone. I have to do everything myself.' All of a sudden I felt this most wonderful feeling that went all over my body and something seemed to tell me 'you are not alone.'” Lona thought her mother was talking to her.

Lona was a teenager when her father went to work building houses around Lake Kemp. He moved his family to a two-room house near Archer City. Newt Lewis, whose aunt lived next door, began coming to see Lona. He was six years older and he reminded her of her father. She loved Newt, and in a strange way, it was nice to have someone to help her around the house. She didn’t know how that was going to change her.

After Lona moved back to Mabelle, he asked her to marry him.

“I didn’t look that great, but it was the best day ever,” Lona says. “He gave me a ring. It was a small diamond but I loved it.” When Lona wore it to school, her teacher told her she was too young to marry. She pleaded with Lona to finish school. Lona decided she couldn’t wait.

She borrowed money to buy a wedding dress and she went to a salon to get her hair crimped with hot tongs. Wavy hair was the fashion of the day.

Newt picked up Lona and drove his Model T Ford to her grandmother’s house in Seymour, where they got married on March 11, 1928. No one from Newt’s family was there. After the wedding, they attended church. They left the next day for Archer City.

“I tried very hard to leave Lona Farris in the past,” she says.

The past never left her. Over the years, Lona struggled as a mother and a wife.

Finding a new life

Newt knew everyone in the town where he grew up. Lona felt left out.

The Great Depression gripped the nation in the late 1920s and the newlyweds lost their crops and sold their car. Bob, their first child, was born about a year after they married. They moved to be near Lona’s father in Seymour where their second son Jim was born in 1935. Banks were closing and the world was headed into World War II. Lona took care of the boys while Newt built a two-room house on Cherry Street in Archer City.

They still didn’t have enough money to buy stamps to write Lona’s family when they moved back to Archer City in the 1940s. Newt pumped water during the day and wired houses at night, working his way up to become city manager. On weekends, he

picked up a hammer to build more rooms and fix the house.

Preparing to leave her apartment, Lona picks up her house keys from the kitchen table. She grabs the handles of her walker and begins to push. It's a breezy March morning in Archer City. Lona is dressed to go out. A flower brooch is pinned to her blue dress. She places a pink and black leopard skin purse in her walker's basket and heads for the back door.

"You know, Newt and I, neither one of us..." She pauses, placing sunglasses on her eyes. "He was a guy who didn't go to Dairy Queen or somewhere to have coffee like most men. He just worked. I didn't get to go anywhere."

Newt wouldn't let Lona go to the grocery store. He did the shopping himself, saying it was his way of showing Lona how much he loved her. He wanted to make up for the hard times she had as a child. He always came home with a new dress or a box of candy for his wife. He cooked breakfast every morning, but Lona wouldn't get out of bed or comb her hair. She quit reading love stories. Record albums collected dust. Lona didn't listen to music anymore. The more Newt did for her, the more Lona despised him. The help that Lona begged for as a child was now her source of anger. She felt lost in her marriage and she didn't feel like she had a place in Archer City.

"He waited on me so much that his parents thought I imposed on him," Lona says of Newt. "I didn't like it because I wanted to be independent, you know, I wanted to do for myself."

Pulling her apartment door shut, Lona plods with her walker past grapefruit-colored apartment duplexes decorated with plastic flowers. She stops to marvel at a sparrow pecking at food scraps tossed in the dirt. Along the way Lona drops a plastic bag

of garbage in a dumpster. Her neighbor usually carries out her trash, but “he doesn’t walk much better than I do.”

A friend gives her a ride to see her old house. She used to drive past it everyday before her eyesight got so bad. The car rolls past the red dirt horse corrals of the outdoor rodeo arena and Archer City High School and heads down Cherry Street.

Like lines on an old woman’s face, long deep crevices split the wood that frames the tiny splotchy tan and white house, its two front windows watching over a big front yard as it has for more than half a century.

Lace curtains that once fluttered in the breeze are gone and the house now squints through tattered aluminum blinds. A chicken coop no longer chatters with hens. All that’s left is rubble of grey corrugated metal and twisted wire. A lonely rooster scratches and pecks through tangles of dried grass hunting for something to eat.

Two young peach saplings, struggling to take root in the dried split earth, bend and toss under the gathering dark clouds. A dog barks in the distance and Lona steps through a maze of cracks and holes. She has left her walker behind and she punches her cane in the hard ground to steady herself. The wind picks up and clouds begin to spit, moistening the concrete step. The bent woman brushes silver strands of hair from her brow. Pulling her frail body up on the front porch, she talks about her life with Newt, pausing at times to reach into her memory or brush away a thought boxed up years ago.

“Ohhhh, yes, Newt was a good father,” Lona says. “He was one of the best fathers there ever was.” He spent most Friday nights cheering for his sons on the football field. Bob, who had asthma, would pass out on the field and get right back up and play.

Lona went to some of the football games, but she stayed home most nights when

the two boys rode in the rodeo. She chose to listen to the announcer from the front porch. “I just couldn’t go see my boys hurt.”

She recalls hearing the man on the loudspeaker announce Bob coming out of the chute. The audience clapped and whooped as Lona imagined her son’s body writhing with each kick and stomp, his arms flailing in swirls of red dust and the smell of dirty manure. The crowd grew silent. “I thought, ‘Oh my goodness, he’s been killed.’ Then I realized I would have been better off if I had been there to see that he was alright.”

Since moving to her apartment decades ago, Lona has been watching new families move in and out of her old house, painting the walls different colors, planting new flowers. This time, Lona walks in. A man and woman are inside patching old sheetrock as their two young boys play in the next room. They are painting the walls yellow. Lona smiles. “Newt and I always wanted to paint our house yellow.”

She navigates with her cane around an extension cord and maneuvers into the kitchen where stew once bubbled on the stove. Her sons often brought friends home for lunch. Lona wanted to make sure her sons had a better home life than she did. To escape the sadness that followed her from childhood, she sewed shirts for the rodeo team. Sometimes she brushed her hair, put on makeup and forced herself to go to pep rallies.

“We told our boys that anytime they wanted to bring friends home they were welcome to bring them,” Lona says.

Lona was slowly beginning to find her place in Archer City. She began walking downtown with Newt’s sister to see a show at the Royal Theater, the playhouse featured in Larry McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*.

Her sons knew their mother worried, though. It wasn’t until she read the obit for

her youngest son Jim that she found out he flew airplanes. “I felt so bad,” Lona says. “He always wanted to fly but I would never sign for him to take lessons.” He died of liver cancer at the age of 69, four years after his brother Bob died of asthma. She’s glad Jim finally got the chance to fly. Lona was 99 years old when she flew on an airplane for the first time.

She stares out her front window and talks more about her life with Newt.

“He treated me like I was a daughter, instead of a wife,” she says of Newt. She stops and turns around with her cane, as if to walk away from a memory. What does she mean? The question is repeated again to bring her back.

She recalls a time she wanted to go dancing. Like her father, Newt didn’t care for it. “If you want to dance, I’ll take you,” Newt told Lona. Bob was a baby then and she was holding him in her arms when they walked into the American Legion Hall. When a cowboy came up to Lona and asked her to dance, she handed the baby to Newt. Her husband started yelling at her. Lona didn’t go out on the dance floor. She never asked to go to a dance hall again.

Her prayers turned more desperate.

My God, My God. Why have you abandoned me?

Lona recalls kneeling on her bedroom floor and watching her neighbor walk by her front window, holding her little boy’s hand. They were going to services at the First Baptist Church, about a half of a mile up the road. Lona decided to dress her boys and join her. “I knew all the time God loved me. I just wouldn’t admit it.”

Ever since that day, Lona cranks up the record player and dances. At times, she’ll grip her walker and dance with her grandchildren. One time she danced so much she got

dizzy and had to sit down. “Come on Granny,” her grandson said. “I want to dance.”

Newt sat in the back of church. He fell ill with kidney cancer when he was 73 and Lona cared for him at home before he was hospitalized. She talked with him the night before he died.

“Lona, where is that light a-coming from?” Newt asked Lona.

“I don’t know, Newt. I don’t see a light.”

“Oh, it’s the most beautiful light. Can’t you see it?” he persisted.

“No, I don’t see a light.”

Lona went home to rest and woke up at 4 a.m. Before the hospital called her, she knew he was gone. It was Easter morning in 1978, two weeks after their 50th wedding anniversary.

“It hurt me so to see him go,” Lona wrote in her journal. “But it was a new life for him and a new and different life for me. I did not think I could go on but with the Lord’s help I did.”

Letting Go

Lona’s not sure why she’s lived so long. She doesn’t take medicine except for the vitamin shots she gets from a nurse once a week.

Her secret may be an attitude of thankfulness despite a difficult life. Her plea for help has changed to grateful praise. Every night, Lona writes a prayer in her journal.

Thank you Father for loving me.

One Sunday morning, Lona opened her songbook and smiled as the congregation sang. She had a hard time reading the fine print, but she knew the words by heart.

Words of life, words of hope. Give us strength. Help us cope.

In this world where we roam, ancient words will guide us home.

Ancient words ever true, changing me, changing you.

Lona has found her strength in independence. She has coped by letting go of the past.

“God took care of me, even though I didn’t want Him to,” she says. “He’s keeping me here for some reason. I just don’t know what it is.”

Her weapon against loneliness is her daily stroll with her walker to the community center.

Car doors slam and locusts sing in the noontime heat as friends gather for lunch. Canes are propped against old metal tables in the faded redbrick building where silver-haired men and women stoop over lunch trays and shout “BINGO” with a lucky card. It’s where everyone comes to escape the boredom of old age. They complain about ailments and chat about funerals of friends. Weather is always a topic. Yesterday’s thundershower “wasn’t nearly enough to fill the potholes” in the drought. They talk about anything to pass time.

Lona trudges through the open glass door of the old center and rolls onto the linoleum floor. She’s brought her cane with her, dragging it along as she parks her walker in the corner of the room. “The walker’s so big. It just gets in the way,” she says, jabbing the floor with her cane. Lona lost her wedding ring long time ago. Her fingers got so thin it slipped off. A friend’s old ring now slides around her finger. Wearing pearls and sporting a monogrammed handkerchief in her front pocket, Lona almost looks racy among the crowd of septuagenarians dressed in colored polyester pants. The old-timers

don't care about what everyone is wearing, though. The lady across the table complains about an achy back. Another shares photos of grandchildren on her cell phone. Adjusting her hearing aid, Lona is happy to reminisce about the old days. First, she's going to eat lunch.

Lona's favorite is on the menu – ham, with onions and fried potatoes. Her neighbor Johnnie wheels over. She's the one who talked Lona into using a walker just before her last birthday. "You get around faster," Johnnie says. The younger woman picks up a knife and begins to cut Lona's ham. "I can do it myself," Lona interrupts with a smile, gently squeezing her friend's hand before patting it and brushing it away. She takes a knife and begins to saw at the ham. Lona's used to doing things by her self.