

Touched by an Angel



In the midst of a lifelong collection of championship buckles, trophies and other memorabilia, sits a little wooden angel that most would simply overlook in a room attributing the success of a 160,000-acre ranch. To family and friends, this toffee-colored angel worn as smooth as glass, wood grains running like waves across its surface, is a symbol of the unrelenting love and support Bette Cogdell freely gives.

Married in 1961 after only three months of dating, Bette immediately became the support to Texas ranching icon and successful cutting horse owner, Billy Cogdell. At age 20, Billy was diagnosed with polio, which left his body 98 percent paralyzed. Although he regained the ability to walk, Billy still encountered multiple physical challenges that required Bette's assistance until his passing in 2003.

"I watched how his mother helped him," Bette said. "All I did when we first got married was just lift him a little under his arms to help him get out of a chair."

Polio is a viral disease with no cure that affects nerves and often leads to partial or full paralysis. Although Billy was able to walk for 30 years, towards the end of his life, his symptoms increased, causing his range of mobility to decrease. As time passed, Bette began assisting with more daily activities but instead of viewing her role as a burden, she saw herself as the support system to her husband.

"For years," Bette said, "he could walk. But he would need just that little bit of security, so I would hold his hand. We were always holding hands."

Raised on a farm, Bette knew the meaning of hard work and translated that ethic into her role on the ranch. Not only was she responsible for a husband and four children, but Bette also cooked for the hired hands who assisted Billy on the ranch.

Sticking to the basics of what men liked to eat, meat, potatoes and bread, were key when it came to cooking for the crew. Depending on the season, anywhere from six to 15 men were helping Billy on the ranch. Bette said she would simply add more beans to the pot and cook a bigger roast, as long as there was enough to go around. Surprisingly, trial and error was how Bette described her journey to culinary success.

"It was right after we got married and I told him I didn't really know how to cook. And he told me that wouldn't keep me from learning," Bette said with a soft chuckle.

Life on the ranch is often on a different schedule than the rest of the world. Cattle do not always cooperate and things rarely go as planned. For Bette, that meant fixing lunch, hauling it down the rough canyon roads, and waiting for the men to take a break for food.

"You might get over there by 12-12:30 but they might not be done till 2, 3, maybe even 4 o'clock," Bette said with a shrug. "You just learned to 'hurry up and wait'."

Not only was Bette a constant support to her husband, she raised four children who all, in some capacity, still have a part in the Tule Ranch. A strong

work ethic was something both Billy and Bette wanted to instill in their children from a young age. The ranch, in all its glory, it still a lot of hard work and Bette said she is extremely

proud that her children have chosen to come back, and continue being a part of the legacy.

"People say, 'Oh you have all that land' and you say, 'Yeah, you know what it means? A whole lot of work!'", Bette said. "And it is hard, the hours they keep. But I think they like it."

To Bette, church and family go hand in hand, as it adds something to the home life. Part of her efforts to love and support her family show up in the way she prays for them.

"Just the other day I got a letter in the mail from Nana," Cooper Cogdell, Bette's oldest grandchild and Texas Tech graduate student said. "It's just her way of telling me she's thinking and praying for me. It's the best kind of pick-me-up."

Even if her day-to-day role has changed over the years, Bette is still pouring her time and energy into her relationships. Dinner every Sunday with her siblings, trips to Amarillo with her twin sister, travelling across the state for grandkids' functions and long phone conversations with old friends fill up Bette's free time.

Bess Reed went to school with Bette in Tulia, Texas, and remembers her as being fiercely loyal

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Bette and Billy Cogdell in Ft. Worth at the NCHA Futurity

to loved ones. Although they don't see one another often, Reed enjoys hearing about the family's many adventures and stories of the ranch.

"Even if we haven't spoken in months, she is just one of those friends where you pick up right where you left off," Reed said

Fifty-one years of living on the ranch has taught Bette not to worry but instead to put her trust in the Lord. By sticking closely to her faith, Bette said she has learned to appreciate life to the fullest, taking one day at a time.

"People just hurry, hurry, hurry all the time," Bette said. "Here it's peaceful, you just feel like you can breath better."

While raising her family, Bette hoped her children would learn to appreciate the opportunities they have been blessed with, life, land and each other. Although the entire family resides within 15 miles of one another, everyday life can pull a family of 20 members in many different directions, but Bette brings them back to their foundation.

"Nana is the link between us all," Cooper said. "She's the center of our family and brings us all back to what's important."

Alvin Davis, founder of the American Cowboy Culture Association, awarded Bette with the 2012 Pioneer Woman Award. Davis said nominations are based upon scope of the operation, family unity and

how the individual exhibits qualities associated with cowboy culture.

"The fact that the family is still all on the ranch and working together is what makes them so

remarkable," Davis said. "How Bette was able to carry on after Billy's death as basically the head over all the family is very admirable."

Sitting at her kitchen counter, surrounded by the aroma of warm roast and Ranch Style Beans, Bette reflects on the blessings that come with being

a mother and wife of a rancher. Even more, what assisting Billy meant on a daily basis and how her help and support was based not out of duty but entirely of love and admiration.

"To me it was just a way of life," Bette said. "I would still be doing it all today if I could."

To the Cogdell family, the awards, vast acres of land and success mean nothing without the woman who holds them all together. By special request from her husband Billy as a gift for Bette after he passed away, J Christopher White, famous for his wood sculpting and poetry, specifically crafted a little wooden angel out of Texas Juniper found on their ranch and wrote a poem in honor of Bette. **T**

For Bette

"Some angels watch and guard us, but I've been blessed with one that gives. And by her tireless giving, I can see my Savior lives."

by J. Christopher White

