

Life in the *Valley*

One Woman's Journey to Victory

S U S A N P H E L P S H A R V E Y



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CHAPTER 1

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“Too Bad It’s Another Girl”

Laura Jane Sicking was born on September 11, 1957. Her mother, Mary, reached out eagerly as the child was placed in her arms, even though her face showed the exertion and pain of the last few hours.

Holding her infant close, she murmured a devout prayer, and her fingers automatically reached for the rosary that was always present on her bedside table. Mary Sicking was a complex person, and the force that controlled her life was her absolute devotion to the Catholic Church. She wanted God’s blessing for this newest baby and vowed that the child would grow up to serve the church as a nun. Although Laura was the eighth child she had given birth to in the last eight years, Mary rejoiced in another new life.

Mary’s purpose in life was to raise as large a family as possible in the Catholic faith. She believed that this was her path to salvation. Emmett, Laura’s father, was less pleased about this child. He was a Texas dryland farmer, and he needed boys to help with the work around the place—not another female. He was a man of average height and weight, but somehow his presence filled the room as he strode through the door. He seemed to dwarf his wife and new baby as he looked at the two of them.

“Too bad it’s another girl” were his first words. Then he looked down at his daughter’s little face. He would love her, but the inner conflicts that drove him would make it difficult for her to know it.

Yet, Laura’s first six years were happy ones. Her earliest memories were mostly of the outdoors—the fields, woods, and streams that shaped the large ranch

where her family lived. By the time she was six, the family had grown to include three younger boys—Mark, Bryan, and Bill—for a total of eleven children, all born one year apart.

Bill, the newest baby, had been a month overdue. Mary's abdominal muscles were so weak and exhausted that normal labor and birth contractions were impossible, and her doctor had finally induced labor.

"Mrs. Sicking, having eleven children in as many years has taken a heavy toll on your health. If you get pregnant again, you could die," Dr. Kralick, the family doctor, told her when he saw her in the hospital after Bill was born. "You must let me tie your tubes."

"I can't do that!" Mary was shocked that her doctor suggested such a thing. He was Catholic, and he knew she was too. They both knew that birth control was a sin.

Dr. Kralick tried again. "If you don't allow me to do a tubal ligation, your next pregnancy will kill you and leave eleven children motherless! Is that what you want?"

Mary said nothing, refusing to meet his eyes. Mary left the hospital and visited her priest. She told him of her conversation with Dr. Kralick and requested the priest's permission to have her tubes tied.

"Mrs. Sicking, you know you can't get your tubes tied. If you get pregnant again and you die in childbirth, then that is God's will for you," the priest replied.

Mary Sicking left the priest's office in confusion. *I can't get pregnant again*, she thought. *I know I will die. Emmett can't raise eleven children*. It was an awful dilemma for a devout Catholic woman, but in the end, she had the tubal ligation.

Something in Mary changed after that. Always exceptionally pious, she became even more so, driven by the guilt about having her tubes tied. From then on, she went to Mass every day except Saturday and gave every spare penny to the church to make amends.

The family's ranch was a successful, thriving operation, at least in the drought-free years.

Emmett Sicking was a good farm manager and a hard taskmaster. He was proud of the 650-acre farm he owned, as well as the additional 1,200 acres of family land he managed. In time, he would rent the neighbor's 1,000-acre ranch.

Emmett and Mary were married in 1948, when Emmett was twenty-two and Mary was nineteen. When Emmett's dad died in 1950, Emmett received an inheritance of about ten thousand dollars, which he used to buy the farm. It had a small house on the property. So by most standards, they started out their marriage well-off. By the time Laura came along, the Sicking farm was prospering, and Emmett built a larger house to accommodate his growing family. It had four bedrooms and two bathrooms. One of the bathrooms was just for him, the father, and the other was shared by all of the children and their mother.

The first ten or so years of Emmett and Mary's marriage were good ones. As dryland farmers, the success of their farm was always dependent on the rains, but they had no debts, so life was generally good.

There was always a great deal of work to be done on the farm, and a big family was necessary to do it. The children worked hard milking the 150 cows; feeding and tending the 400 pigs, the 5,000 chickens, the 200 beef cattle, and the 2,850 acres of crops; along with helping to slaughter the animals; and working in the garden or in the machine shop—doing all of the hard, dirty tasks the big spread required. There were also other animals on the ranch, including three horses, a goat, a goose, a sheep, and a few rabbits. The children had fun playing with the animals while performing their chores. Laura named many of them, and they were her pets.

The older girls, Joan, Joyce, Debra, and Lois, milked the cows and toiled alongside their father in the fields. This process of milking the cows, even with machines, took three and a half hours each morning and evening—seven hours a day, seven days a week, rain or shine, school or no school. Virginia and Julie, who suffered from allergies to animals and hay, did the inside chores. One day Cliff, an older brother, accidentally ate some of the lye the family used for making soap. Fortunately, Grandmother Sicking walked in at just the right time and saved his life. It was several years before Cliff was able to work on the farm again.

When Laura finished her chores, she escaped to the outdoors with her three younger brothers whenever possible. She loved the land, and she loved her father and looked up to him. There were good times when he would come in from the fields after a long day, still wearing his overalls, and invite her to sit on his knee. She would crawl up into his lap, and he would tickle her and tell her stories.

"How old are you, Laura?" he would ask.

"Hix!" she would reply with pride. He would roar with laughter at her childish mispronunciation, then urged her to repeat it over and over again.

Everyone on the farm had to work from a very young age. Their father made sure of that. Only someone raised on a ranch or a farm can imagine the kind of farmwork the children did and how young they started. All of the Sicking children learned to drive trucks, combines, and other farm equipment at what most people would consider an extremely young age.

Laura was only six and a half years of age when her dad taught her to drive the family's old farm truck. It took two pillows to prop her up—one to sit on and one behind her. Even though she was tall for her age, she could barely see over the steering wheel and reach the pedals.

As soon as she could manage the truck, she was promoted to the task of driving out to the northern forty acres every morning to wake up the cows, with her younger brother Bill as her helper. This chore involved the two children running through the herd, shouting, "Wake up, wake up," urging the 150

sleepy cows to go to the milking barn. Laura was excited, both to drive the truck and be given this grown-up responsibility. Every morning they would get up at four o'clock and drive to the most remote part of the family's ranch.

Bill was only three and a half when he became Laura's cow-waking assistant. They remained paired as working partners on the farm throughout their childhood. Bill was also tall for his age, dark eyed and dark haired, like their mother. And he was Laura's best pal. He loved the outdoors even more than she did. He liked to fish for crawdads in the creek and run free in the fields and woodlands, which were filled with opossums, raccoons, bobcats, and other wild animals. Laura and her three younger brothers had a lot of fun fishing and building a log cabin.

But there were coyotes in the northern forty acres, and they made their dens in the open fields. Bill was too young to be afraid of coyotes. Laura knew they were dangerous, and she knew she needed to keep one eye on Bill while they did their work.

One morning Laura suddenly realized she hadn't seen Bill for several minutes. Where was he? She stopped shouting at the cows and strained her eyes in every direction, trying to spot her little brother in the dark fields. Suddenly, she saw him. Bill was standing calmly in the pasture, surrounded by a pack of coyotes who were stealthily moving closer to him. Bill was oblivious to what was happening.

Laura's mother had warned her about coyotes. She knew they hunted in packs, moving in a circle, and when they got close enough, they would attack together. The animals were not much bigger than Bill; but together in a pack, they could easily kill a creature of his size or something even larger. Laura's heart beat fast. She could feel the panic rising and thought, *I have to do something to save Bill!*

Suddenly, she remembered that her mother had told her that coyotes were afraid of light. She ran back to the truck and turned on the headlights. But the coyotes ignored the light. Now what should she do? She couldn't just run toward Bill. The coyotes might attack them both. She wasn't much bigger than he was.

Without another thought, she started up the truck and drove it right into the coyote pack. "Bill," she yelled. "Get in the truck! Quick!" Bill jumped in, and they drove away as the coyotes scattered in all directions. Laura never told a soul about their close call with the coyotes. She was sure she would lose her driving privileges if anybody knew, and she didn't want that to happen!

Laura's family was German Catholic. They lived just outside the small farming community of Muenster, Texas. Muenster is about twelve miles south of the Texas-Oklahoma border and only about eighty miles from Dallas. The town is one of several small communities founded by German Catholics in the late 1800s. These immigrants were awarded large land grants by the Texas government to establish colonies.

These small groups of families had lived close together in Germany, and they tended to keep to themselves in Texas, maintaining their ethnicity and religion, building their own churches and schools, and speaking mostly German until World War II. They formed distinct, proud, and vibrant pockets of Old World culture, Catholic piety, and hardworking German values in the New World. Laura's parents and grandparents were a part of this culture.

She had no idea that her town was different from any other. As a child, she thought the kids in nearby towns talked funny, but she had no idea why.

Young Laura was raised to be a devout Catholic. She admired her mother's piety and goodness and wanted to emulate and please her in everything. From infancy, the children were instilled with a love for God and the Catholic Church by their mother. She often told Laura that she was to become a nun. Laura was too young to know what that meant, but she basked in the warmth of her mother's words. Laura loved the church with all of her heart. In her young mind, it was a symbol of goodness. She vowed to always be good so that she could someday serve the church and go to heaven.

All week Laura looked forward to Sunday Mass in Muenster's large and imposing Sacred Heart Catholic Church, which seats more than a thousand people. (Although the town is small, almost all of its citizens are Catholic.) The thundering pipe organ; the spicy-sweet smell of incense; the melodic singing; the Latin chants; the magnificent stone building with its golden chalices, marble floors, paintings, statues, and flickering candles all appealed to Laura's senses and her heart.

Laura learned to love God dearly, and somehow, although she wasn't taught to do so, she began to talk to Him as a friend. Throughout the day, as she and Bill roamed through the fields and woods or did their daily chores, God was their Companion. Laura found peace, joy, and happiness in God's presence. She had a very happy life with God by her side. She naturally turned to God for help when she needed it.

Laura prayed a lot. She prayed for clothes—always a scarce commodity. She prayed for toys at Christmas. And always, she felt that God was listening and that He answered her prayers.

She was a contented, sunny child, and this sense of God's nearness gave her a positive view of life at a very young age. As she grew older, when anguish and adversity threatened to overwhelm her, she would question God's existence. But having known Him on an intimate level as a child, she could never deny Him. Later in life, this early experience with God would drive her to find Him again.

So life for six-year-old Laura consisted mostly of hard work, outdoor fun with her little brothers, and a sense of being close to God and chosen for a special work in the Catholic Church. Because she spent most of her time outdoors with her brothers, she wasn't aware that there were any problems in the family. For her, life was good and quite happy, but soon everything would change.