



---

**title:** In Search of Donna Reed  
**author:** Fultz, Jay.  
**publisher:** University of Iowa Press  
**isbn10 | asin:** 0877456259  
**print isbn13:** 9780877456254  
**ebook isbn13:** 9781587290763  
**language:** English  
**subject** Reed, Donna,--1921-1986, Motion picture actors and actresses--United States--Biography.  
**publication date:** 1998  
**lcc:** PN2287.R285F86 1998eb  
**ddc:** 791.43/028/092  
**subject:** Reed, Donna,--1921-1986, Motion picture actors and actresses--United States--Biography.

# In Search of Donna Reed



---

# In Search of Donna Reed

By Jay Fultz



University of Iowa Press   Iowa City

---

University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 52242. Copyright © 1998 by the University of Iowa Press. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Design by Richard Eckersley

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~uipress>

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without permission in writing from the publisher. All reasonable steps have been taken to contact copyright holders of material used in this book. The publisher would be pleased to make suitable arrangements with any whom it has not been possible to reach.

Printed on acid-free paper

98 99 00 01 02 c 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fultz, Jay In search of Donna Reed / by Jay Fultz

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87745-625-9

1. Reed, Donna, 1921-1986. 2. Motion picture actors and actresses—United States—Biography. I. Title.

PN2287.R285F86 1998 791.43'028'092-dc21 (B) 97-48310

*Dedicated to my mother,  
Dorothy Sawtelle Fultz,  
and to the memory of my father,  
James R. Fultz*

---

## Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
1. From Iowa	1
2. To California	29
3. Learning with Leo	43
4. A Wonderful Life	65
5. To <i>Eternity</i>	81
6. From <i>Eternity</i>	95
7. <i>The Donna Reed Show</i>	117
8. After the Show	157
Notes	203
Index	229

## Acknowledgments

A biographer is a detective, delineator, diplomat, a bit of a daredevil. And a debtor because beholden to many people. For the priceless gift of time and memory, I'm grateful to Donna Reed's family to her widower, Colonel Grover W. Asmus; to her children, Mary Owen, Timothy Owen, Penny Owen Stigers, and Tony Owen Junior; to her siblings, Keith Mullenger, Layone (Heidi) Flynn, Karen Moreland, and the late William L. Mullenger. And grateful to her relatives in Iowa and elsewhere to Donald and Roberta Yankey, Frederick and Opal Whiteing, Earl and Delphine Shives, Clyde Shives, the late Leona Rollins, Sandy Mullenger, Violet Mullenger, and the granddaughters of Aunt Mildred Van Kampen Hostler, Nanette Linden and Michela Grant.

I'm grateful to Donna's friends and associates everywhere to Doris Cole Abrahams, Steve Allen, the late Barbara Avedon, the late Professor Jerry Blunt, Ann McCrea Borden, Fred Briskin, U.S. Representative George E. Brown, the late Virginia Christine, Jeff Corey, the late Mary Lou (Mrs. Delmer) Daves, Rosemary DeCamp, Danny Desmond, Nancy Dillon, Kathleen Freeman, Jimmy Hawkins, Jeffrey Hayden, Claude Jarman Junior, Marian Drake Justice, Deborah Kerr, the late Alexander Knox, Harvey Korman, Angela Lansbury, John Philip Law, Carl and Friday Leonard, Alfr Levitt, the late Helen Levitt, Former Senator Eugene McCarthy, Andrew McCullough, Betty (Mrs. Charles) Massman, the late David Miller, Robert Ellis Miller, Patti Petersen Mirkovich, the late Nate Monaster, Anthony Moreno, Virginia Patton Moss, the late Gene Nelson, Gigi Perreau, William Roberts, Norma Connolly Rodman, Pat (Mrs. Randolph) Scott, the late Anna Schneller, the late Ann Straus, Jody (Mrs. Rex) Watkinson, Paul West, Esther Williams, Marie Windsor, Freddy Young.

---

I'm also grateful to Donna's high school classmates, including Arden Amman, Harold Auld, Margaret Anderson Carbee, Arlen Gemeroth, Dr. Thomas Hutcheson, Donald Jensen, Kenneth Langer, Ervin Mohr, Erma Jensen Monson, Joyce Ely Nebergall, Virginia Richard Powell, Vernetta (Mrs. Lilburn P. Taylor), Lucille Kepford Toney, Ila Bledsoe Wiebers; and to her college classmates, including Eugene Dow, Jane Fisher Engleman, Elberta Casey Hunter, Mary Huston Jaco, Mendie Koenig, Ardath Atkinson McLean, Helen Katz Mann, Sam Sebby, Harvey Tietzell.

And grateful to many archivists and librarians, among them Samuel Gill and Kristine Kreuger, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Ned Comstock, Cinema Library, University of Southern California; Audree Malkin, Theater Arts Library, University of California at Los Angeles; Bob Boyce at the Bennett Martin Library, Lincoln, Nebraska; and the women at the Norelius Community Library, Denison, Iowa. Also valuable to me in my research was *Donna Reed: A Bio-Bibliography* (1990) by Brenda Scott Royce. Individuals who provided specialized help were Adelaida Martinez and Christy Hargesheimer.

I'm especially indebted to a number of people who, perhaps without knowing, kept me going: Colonel Asmus first of all; Joyce Anderson Fisk, who saved and made available to me half a century's worth of Donna's letters; William Tuttle, the dean of Hollywood makeup artists and Donna's first husband, who was unfailingly helpful and fatherly; the late Moria Turner Bruck, who with her husband, Charles Bruck, welcomed me to their home in Los Angeles and gave affectionate support; Virginia Ricks Hill and Marie Legér (Kelly Quinn), who also befriended Donna at Los Angeles City College; the late Sarah (Sukie) Mergener, sister of Tony Owen, whose charm warms my memory; Betty Massman, who shared letters from Donna and straightened me out on some genealogy; the late William Graf, a former producer at Columbia Pictures, whose interest in my project testified to his habitual generosity in aiding others; Paul Petersen, who was every parent's dream son and has matured into a man who looks out for others, while retaining Jeff Stone's robust spirit; Shelley Fabares, kindness personified, who encouraged me to write my own book

---

when I was worried about pleasing everyone. I must also thank Lillian Burns Sidney, Donna's drama coach at MGM. Although she did not approve of every aspect of this book, I'm grateful to her for viv early glimpses of Donna in Hollywood. Other benefactors could be added to this list, and I'd like to mention again Mary Owen, who is a true aristocrat in her honesty, humility, and humanity.

So many dear personal friends sustained me over the months and years that I can only name a few: the Yankeys, Mickey Willroth, and Mearl and Lillian Luvaas in Denison; Patricia Murphy, a second sister, who was by my side at the beginning; Avis Burnett, also very special and a biographer of Gertrude Stein, who read the manuscript and made suggestions; Aileen Fisher, the doyenne of writers for children, who did the same; Kay Graber, a confidante and one of the world's great editors; Robert Nott, whose experience in writing a biography of actor John Garfield made him kinsman of a kind; Harry Decker, commiserator and author of a haunting movie script about Donna Reed; James Cavanaugh, who shared tidbits about Donna that popped up during his research for a book on Van Heflin; Ronald Nelson, a pal from graduate school days; James P. Ronda; Timothy Bryant; Pat Bayle; Nancy Rosen; Ann Bardens; the Rev. Rob Gadeken; Douglas Clayton; Dika Eckersley; Sandra Johnson; Clayton Bruster; and, not least, Elaine (Lainey) Jenkins, whose wisdom helped me gain perspective in some discouraging times.

Finally, many thanks to Bob Thomas for giving me access to his papers at UCLA and to Charles Maland for his valuable suggestions in revising the manuscript. Holly Carver, Sarah Walz, and others at the University of Iowa Press know how to treat a first-time author, and I thank them for their friendly professionalism.

I'm proud that *In Search of Donna Reed* has been designed by my good friend Richard Eckersley.

## Chapter One

### From Iowa

Donna Reed probably came closer than any other actress to being the archetypal sweetheart, wife, and mother. In January 1986, Dan Rather and his competitors interrupted their nightly intonation of mayhem, murder, and political muddling to announce her death. On *Cable Headline News* an hourly filmclip chronicled her country Cinderella story. For a week in midwinter the print media echoed *Time* magazine in noting that she "symbolized the heartland virtues of American womanhood."

I was stung by the news, having followed the career of Donna Reed since my pimply adolescence in rural Kansas. That glow of hers, those striking hazel eyes, first did me in when I saw *Saturday's Hero* in the early fifties. Soon I was borrowing the family car and driving thirteen miles to the Bijou whenever she played.

What was so special about an actress who, to my friends, was just another actress? There was that translucent face, subtly expressive, refined by sympathy the eyes reflecting intelligence and everything else. There was that voice in my hungry range of reference, it suggested deep-dish apple pie, sweet and crisp, and lightly dusted with hauteur, a new word from some book. My interest was piqued because Donna Reed seemed distinctly underrated, unpromoted. I thought no one else liked her so much. Seeing *From Here to Eternity* or *The Far Horizons* or *The Benny Goodman Story* for the tenth time, I looked at the movie patrons looking at her, for they *had* to grant her the space of those extraordinary close-ups.

Real life was intervening, but the variable image of Donna Reed assumed a mysterious permanent place in my psyche. By the time her television series began in 1958, I was in the army and seldom able to watch. Influenced by critics, I dismissed it as unworthy of her. Only in the

---

late eighties and early nineties, through daily reruns on Nickelodeon Network, did I really discover *The Donna Reed Show*.

Several decades earlier, at some sleepless hour in a fraternity house, I had caught snowy telecasts of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *They Were Expendable*. Now movie historians rated them classics, along with *Eternity* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Overnight, it seemed, Donna Reed was the leading lady in more classics, televised more often, than the vaunted Crawford and Stanwyck. One December I gave a *Wonderful Life* party, before reading in the *New Yorker* that friends everywhere were gathering by the TV to view, not for the first time, *Mary Hatch and George Bailey*, the otherworldly Clarence, and the despicable Potter.

Most dead actors live only in the flicker of an electronic eye. But years after her death Donna Reed is referred to as if she were still living, in contexts that go far beyond the movies and television episodes that made her famous. Fixed in time, oddly timeless, she is an icon of popular culture. Her name is bandied in movies, books, songs, poems, magazine articles, and comic strips.

For many, Donna Reed epitomizes the deeply domestic woman of another era to be revived or scorned. A journal reporting on the force of working women in the fall of 1995 carries the headline "Sorry, Boys Donna Reed Is Still Dead." Another magazine feature, describing a return to the fifties tradition of eating at home, is illustrated with her photo and claims that "women still want to be Donna Reed." A 1993 issue of the sophisticated *New York* magazine examines the revival of mid-twentieth-century furniture, with "the Donna Reed armchair" representing the fifties. After the sexual revolution, good Donna Reeds are back, bemoaned the feminists. They might be surprised to know where the real Donna stood with them. Years before the resurgence of the women's movement, she "had a feminist consciousness without the vocabulary to go with it," said her friend, the writer Barbara Avedon.

Like the typical fan, that Kansas farmboy of long ago felt he *knew* Donna Reed. Her uniqueness, as sensed from afar, has proved outbut, of course, the woman was more complex and richly interesting than her screen persona. The real story of Donna Reed has never been told. It is a

mystery because she was passionately, almost pathologically, private. The director David Miller found her "intriguingly covert," compared to those scandal-bitten actresses who were "overtly banal."

On one level, the story of Donna Reed is a gloss on the situation of many women stars during and after the studio period. On another, it is about strength of character, to use an unfashionable phrase. How she tried to keep her head while surrounded by corrupting influences; how she survived personally intact in a brutal profession, only to be humiliated at the last; how she grew, intellectually and politically, in a town devoted to the ephemeral and trivial—these are matters of consequence. Finally, this story is due, past due, because the life of Donna Reed continues to touch and inspire so many other lives, as the angel Clarence would say.

It begins in rural Iowa, somewhere between the bluffs of the Missouri River and the covered bridges of Madison County.

The population of Denison, Iowa, just under seven thousand, has nearly doubled since 1938, when Donna Mullenger left the family farm seven miles southeast of town. Nonetheless, there still exists, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a there there that any returning Mullenger spirit would recognize. The strip along Highway 30, formerly the historic Lincoln Highway, the first to link both coasts, has changed superficially. Signs along the street now proclaim "Denison: It's a Wonderful Life." Newfangled places have names like Cottonwood Square and Bredeaux French-Style Pizzeria. But Cronk's Cafe has been operating since 1929, and across from it the Park Motel rents out suites that were fit for a movie queen. To the south is the Northwestern Railroad depot, which is slightly smaller than it was when Donna boarded a streamliner for Los Angeles that Depression summer sixty years ago.

The prospect of a railroad line influenced Jesse W. Denison to found, in 1856, the town that bears his name. He was a Baptist minister and agent for the Providence Western Land Company, composed mainly of Rhode Islanders interested in Iowa property. Blessed with an aesthetic sense, Denison platted the town on the hills between the forks of the Boyer, a river that was already named in 1804 when Meriwether Lewis and William

---

Clark crossed it farther west. Donna Reed grew up among these nameless hills formed by ancient glaciers.

To go up the steep incline from Highway 30 up past blocks of trim houses with walled-in lawns is to return to the town Donna knew as a girl. Gone is Chris Otto's Cigar Store with its wooden Indian; but the Candy Kitchen, where Donna sometimes shared a soda with a beau, has been restored. The adjoining Ritz Theater, where she paid a dime to see Jimmy Cagney and Bette Davis, has been refurbished and renamed the Donna Reed Center for the Performing Arts. On Broadway the Crawford County Courthouse, constructed of Bedford limestone and sandstone and dedicated in 1906, suggests the kind of civic stability and permanence that wars are fought for. Catercorner stands the old real estate office of Donna's youngest brother, William L., always called Billy by relatives living nearby. He mainly won his long battle with alcoholism before dying in 1993.

A few blocks east and partway down a hill made for sledding is the Norelius Community Library, which was built in 1979 on the site of the house occupied by Donna's parents, Hazel and William R. Mullenger, after they left the farm in the mid-fifties. On the grounds are two red oaks that William planted on the centennial of his father's birthday. Across from the library is the First Methodist Church, worship place for generations of Mullengers. Several hundred old neighbors, friends, and cousins gathered there for a memorial to Donna in 1986. A simple stone bearing her name has been set between the graves of her parents in Oakland Cemetery, although burial was on the West Coast.

An overlooked monument to Donna's early years is the frame house on Sixteenth Street where she stayed with her Grandmother Mullenger while attending high school. Essentially unchanged, this modest but comfortable house in front of the water tower, or standpipe, symbolizes Donna's social background far removed from that of the McHenrys, Balles, Plimptons, Laubs, and Hestons, whose Victorian, Italianate, and Greek Revival mansions were, and are, hard by. Ironically, Donna's Academy Award is on display at a house whose interior she probably never saw while growing up. The Victorian structure, built in 1895 by the cattleman

---

W. A. McHenry and now a museum, boasts imported wood and a third floor that was originally a ballroom.

Denisonites have always found that strangers are more interested in hearing about the star of *The Donna Reed Show* than about corn and hogs and other local products. But they have taken Donna's fame in stride, partly because she discouraged fuss during her visits home and partly because they are too close to the earth and its uncertain bounty to be overly impressed by celebrity.

Besides, they had grown used to renown long before Donna was ever noticed. On June 4, 1927, Clarence Chamberlin, the son of a jeweler, left Roosevelt Field, New York, in his Bellanca monoplane, the *Columbia*, and forty-two hours later landed in Germany. A Denison boy had made the longest nonstop flight to date while introducing airmail service to Europe. Donna was six years old when several thousand Denisonites gave him a parade. Another native son, Bob Saggau, was a highly publicized halfback for the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame when she was still in high school.

Not that townspeople are indifferent to the attention brought by Donna's name. Mention of the cornfield beauty who was one of them is the beginning of a bond. The genuine sociability of Denisonites is an anachronism in a Midwest grown less friendly over time. Cronk's Cafe, which still serves the Belgian waffles Donna loved, and where coffee cups never reach empty, is only the most conspicuous haven of hospitality. Farmers still meet there every morning before the roosters crow.

Yet behind the relaxed and congenial exterior is a fear known to other Middle Americans. Denison's economy was hurting in the spring of 1990, after the closing of a meat-packing plant. Since then, developers have attracted some industry, but the young are still leaving Crawford County. The local opportunities for them are hardly better today than they were for Donnabelle Mullenger and her classmates in 1938.

Ironically, Donna, whose bright promise could not be realized in Denison, is now, after her death, the means by which hundreds of talented young people are brought to Denison every June. The Donna Reed Festival for the Performing Arts, supported proudly by the town, has ex-

panded since 1986 to offer substantial scholarships in her memory and workshops taught by Hollywood and Broadway veterans. Not Pioneer corn, not Poland China hogs, but that unique festival is putting Denison on the national map.

Western Iowa was barely on the map when Donna Reed's ancestors started coming to it in the 1860s. They were of English, German, and Irish stock.

Donna's great-grandfather, William Reform Mullenger, was a bricklayer and blacksmith in the Chiltern Hills near London. His dreams could hardly be hitched to low wages and high rents. Although he might eventually inherit land, there was none to be had in England at midcentury. In 1857, with the Crimean War ended, emigrant ships were crossing the Atlantic again. William Reform and his wife, Mary Tyler Mullenger, were among the more than 250,000 foreigners who arrived in the United States that year.

Their timing was not propitious. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the Mullengers settled, was experiencing an economic slump like the rest of the country. If local reports didn't cause them to look south to Iowa, letters from England surely did, for the new state was being advertised abroad. According to one guide, Iowa much resembled the "finest portions of south of England counties."

William Reform and Mary, along with several of the English Tylers, started for Audubon County, Iowa, in 1862. They were lured by the recent Homestead Act, promising 160 acres a quarter section to anyone who occupied and improved the land. Iowa was filling up quickly, except for the western part which was rumored to be prey to Indian raids and grasshopper plagues. Although the black soil was rich, homesteading was no cinch. The prairie grass grew as high as a horse's head and fires were dreaded, the wolves howled at night, and there were no herd laws or fences to protect and contain livestock.

William Reform and Mary Tyler Mullenger were the kind of sturdy pioneers described in Emerson Hough's novels but rarely in history books. She died in 1871, and he moved to other frontiers, always seeking a bend of river reminiscent of the Thames, exerting the enterprise that might cushion his old age. In 1918 he was buried in a pauper's grave in

Salem, Oregon. Donna Reed came to feel affection for the defeated adventurer who died three years before she was born. "He was always reaching for something unattainable, or unworkable if attainable," she wrote to a newly discovered English cousin.

The firstborn son of William Reform and Mary Tyler Mullenger, named William George, moved to Crawford County in 1877 at the age of nineteen. Finally he saved enough money to buy an isolated farm in Nishnabotny Township southeast of Denison. The future Donna Reed would grow up on that 120-acre farm, and it would remain in her family for nearly a century. William George brought to the place his bride, Mary Ann Johnston, the daughter of pioneers who had come to Iowa from Randolph County, Illinois, in 1869. A portrait of Mary Ann's mother, Elizabeth Herner Johnston, hangs today in the McHenry House in Denison. It is possible to see the lineaments of Donna Reed's beauty in Great-Grandmother Johnston's finely modeled brow and intelligent dark eyes.

If Mary Ann Mullenger's beauty was mainly spiritual, it served her well; she needed to be as steady as a saint to live with William George. He was hotheaded, dyspeptically restless, and devilishly handsome. The mismatched couple raised three children: Mildred, who would figure importantly in Donna's life; Ruby, who died violently and mysteriously in 1917, six months after her marriage to a Nebraskan named Earl Law; and William Richard.

Still another William in the family! William Reform begat William George who begat William Richard. Born on the Fourth of July in the Depression year of 1893, William Richard inherited his father's good looks and his mother's gentleness. He grew up on a farm near the one that his daughter Donna would call home. It was a country visited by severe blizzards and droughts, cut off by bad roads, beyond the reach of mail delivery until 1901 and the possibility of telephone service until 1903.

In spite of local diphtheria and scarlet fever epidemics and a certain bleakness that drove out some neighbors, it was an exciting time to be young. By 1899, after Edison's invention of the kinoscope, the first motion pictures were being shown at the Denison Opera House, and within a decade teams and wagons were sharing the streets with automobiles. No fifteen-year-old boy would have missed the Great New York to Paris Auto

---

Race, which passed through Denison in 1908. Then, as later, the Lincoln Highway and Northwestern Railroad brought circuses and celebrities to town.

Even if William Richard never saw President Theodore Roosevelt and other public men whose trains stopped at the depot, or heard the Chautauqua speakers in Washington Park, he developed an avid interest in current events. More than anything pitching horseshoes, playing mathematical and word games he loved to argue. Like his father, he devoured newspapers for topics, but unlike him he argued them goodnaturedly, probingly, often assuming the opposite point of view, like a good Republican being a better Democrat.

For William Richard Mullenger, the greatest pain and happiness came close together during and after World War I. The influenza epidemic of 1918 coincided with his army duty at Camp Dodge in Des Moines, where he helped care for hundreds of dying soldiers. That experience marked him permanently. His subsequent stint with the Coast Artillery in Florida was, by comparison, a winter sojourn. After returning home in March 1919 he took a job with a Denison seed company, the only time he was ever to work for someone else.

One day William Richard and his father went to the nearby farm of Charles Shires to borrow some item (no one remembers what). They came to the kitchen door just as a slight, dark-haired girl was fetching wood. On glimpsing them, she ducked her head into the deep woodbox, effectively hiding the top half of herself. "I thought she would never come back out," the younger William used to say, laughing. When she did, he faced his future wife.

Hazel Jane Shives would never lose her shyness. Small-boned, she weighed barely a hundred pounds. Her large brown eyes, pretty auburn hair, and delicate features reminded some of the actress Janet Gaynor. In middle age, even as illness began destroying her physical grace, she would look like a particularly patrician, though unpretentious, American Mom, the kind that World War II magazine photos showed in the kitchen baking chocolate cake for a soldier son. But at the moment Hazel met William R. Mullenger she was clerking at the Boys Department Store in

---

Denison and still comfortably obscured by three less retiring sisters and five live-wire brothers.

Hazel was born in 1899 to Charles and Mary Etta Petty Shires. Like the Mullengers, the Shiveses had farming in their blood; but they seem to have been somewhat more prosperous. Charles was an adolescent when he came with his father, Charles Alexander Shives, and three siblings from Montgomery County, Illinois, to Iowa in 1873. Shortly before, his mother, Eliza Coffin Shives, and teenage sister, Laura, had been killed when mules ran away with a wagon on a trail in Alabama near the Black Warrior River. They were taking a southern route in wintertime, traveling between home in Illinois and (probably) North Carolina, where relatives lived.

The Shives forebears of Donna Reed had followed a common hopscotch pattern of immigration, reaching Iowa by a circuitous route that began in 1733 when Martin and Anna Scheib left the Steinweiler-Rohrbach area of the Rhineland-Palz. Sailing on the ship *Samuel*, they disembarked at Philadelphia, the principal port of entry for Germans before the American Revolution. Their five children, including Jacob (whose line would produce Donna Reed), settled in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where many descendants still live. Among Jacob's issue migrating to North Carolina was Charles Alexander Shives, who would move to Illinois with his Quaker wife, Eliza Coffin, about 1857. Sixteen years later, newly widowed, he jumped to Iowa.

Charles Alexander Shives stands in the same relation to Donna Reed as William Reform Mullenger, and is another recognizable type. Her great-grandfather Charles bought a farm in Crawford County near the town of Boyer, where he helped build a Methodist Church. He voted Republican, supported the temperance movement, and generally exemplified the virtues of the Pennsylvania Dutch that would be passed on to Donna: thrift, industry, domesticity, and a love of land, which was to be kept in the family forever. His end was even sadder than William Reform Mullenger's. On a February morning in 1905, despondent because he could no longer work, Charles Alexander Shives positioned a shotgun so that the barrel was pointing toward his forehead and pulled a string at-

tached to the trigger. Although suicide was not uncommon among pioneers, and the *Denison Bulletin* spared no details in its account, the manner of his death was never mentioned in the family.

His youngest son, Charles, is remembered as short and balding, witty, and devoutly religious. The father of Hazel Jane was a nurturer, a trustee and steward of the Methodist Church, and organizer of the annual Old Settlers' Picnic. He developed some fine farms in Crawford County and, with Mary Etta Petty Shives, raised a large, close-knit family. The Bible was read aloud every night after supper and anyone who giggled got sent outside, no matter the temperature. During meals Charles might regale his brood with comic stories and poems. Just as often he was an irresistible target for the jokes of his five strapping sons, Raymond, Harvey, Ross, Jesse, and Leslie. As a child, Donna Mullenger listened to her grandfather and uncles hold forth on Sunday afternoons while the women washed dishes in the nearby kitchen, muffling their laughter as they worked. "My memory is that they were much funnier than most entertainments one sees today, purporting to be funny!" she wrote fifty years later.

After Charles's death in 1936, Mary Etta lived on another eleven years, long enough to see her granddaughter become a screen star. Like most of the Petty and Shives women, Mary Etta was quiet and strongly domestic. Donna retained an image of her standing at the cookstove frying potatoes. In her prime she was quite beautiful, the member of the family whom Donna would most resemble. Mary Etta was also the link to some delightful surprises Donna would find in her genealogical searches. After the role of Mary Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* had given her cinematic immortality, she discovered, in the Petty branch of her family tree, an Irishwoman named Mary Bailey, who lived in the Ohio River valley early in the nineteenth century. When the Petty bloodline turned up a forebear named John Reed, Donna finally felt comfortable with the name that had been hung on her by a Hollywood publicist.

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past," wrote Scott Fitzgerald. For Donna Reed, a dedicated genealogist, the truth of that was intensely personal. Two pioneer lines began to converge on the day the shy daughter of Charles and Mary Etta Shives, Hazel Jane, met young William Richard Mullenger, discharged from the

military. They were married in the summer of 1920 in the Methodist parsonage at Sac City. "The bride was charming in a gown of flesh-colored georgette, embroidered with beads, and a hat to match. Following the ceremony the young people departed for Lake View, where they are enjoying a honeymoon at the home of the bride's brother, Jesse Shives," reported the *Denison Review*.

The decade associated with jazz babies and high-steppers began depressingly for rural Iowans. Saddled with heavy mortgages incurred for overpriced land during the war years, many farmers felt pinched as crop surpluses and tariffs kept market prices low. As early as 1921 there were signs of the hard times ahead. Some stores in Denison closed; others did business on a cash-only basis. On February 9 a local newspaper editorialized that "many who used to eat sirloin steak are getting along very comfortably on corned beef." That same day the *Bulletin and Herald* announced on an inside page: "January 25 Born to Mr. and Mrs. William Mullenger, a girl."

Donna's very first press notice, like so many that would eventually follow, contained an error; in fact she had arrived on January 27. No kindly doctor had to plow through country roads during a blizzard, for she was born in Denison on a fair day. Leona Rollins, whose father was Mary Ann Mullenger's brother, recalled going to an apartment at 1725 Second Avenue North to see Baby Donna Belle. It is said that she got her middle name from Belle McCord, the midwife who assisted Dr. Carr at her birth. However that may be, the first child of Hazel and William Mullenger always answered to Donnabelle while growing up.

Donnabelle was barely a month old when Hazel and Bill moved to his boyhood home in Nishnabotny Township. The irascible William George and long-suffering Mary Ann had sold it at the bargain price reserved for an only son \$35 an acre and retired to Denison. On a March day the new Mullenger family carted their possessions over a dirt road southeast of town. Along with them went an antique organ and several volumes of poetry the bequests of William Reform to Bill's first-born, and gifts that Donna would treasure.

Today the route is named Donna Reed Drive and is paved to the north

corner of the old Mullenger farm. From there a gravel road leads south up a hill and past the site of the homestead, easily overlooked because all that remains is a ramshackle corncrib with a horseshoe over the door. The trees that Donnabelle's father planted still stand, and weeds among foundation stones suggest a forgotten cemetery. Cars raising dust on the road can't dispel the trespasser's sense of remoteness. It is easy to imagine that buffalo once wallowed on the dished-out hills to the west; hard to realize that a large, happy family lived here.

But more than seventy years ago the place was alive with the sounds of chickens and cows, children, and calls to dinner. Old photographs show several barns, a feedlot, and a two-story white farmhouse, boxy and (like so many in Iowa) built on a high foundation, incongruent with the horizontal lines of the landscape.

Except for the convenience of a Chandler car and later a Dodge, the Mullengers lived pretty much as their parents had. There was no electricity until the late thirties, about the time Donnabelle left home. Butter and cream were cooled in a cistern during the summer. Bill read the *Des Moines Register* and *Pathfinder*, a weekly magazine, by the light of a kerosene lamp. Hazel's chief link with the world was through a crank-up, battery-powered telephone. She carried water from the outside cistern into the kitchen and cooked three meals a day on a wood-burning Proctor stove. The only other heat in the house was supplied by a living-room furnace fired by corncobs, coal, and chopped branches; it was capable of sending warmth to an upstairs bedroom through a floor register. Comfort went only so far. The outdoor privy was no place for lingering in subzero weather.

Furnished with filmy white curtains at the long windows, overstuffed sofas backed by antimacassars, and solid oak tables and chairs made by prisoners at the state penitentiary, the farmhouse was intended for a sizable family. In time Donnabelle was joined by a brother, Keith, and a sister, Lavone. She was old enough to help care for her siblings when another brother, Billy, arrived. Very early, it seems, she began looking out for others; some relatives noticed and called her "Little Mother." In one memorable snapshot Donnabelle stands protectively among neighbor children who appear windblown and grimy. Her chubby face, slightly up-

turned and framed by blonde bangs like a little Dutch girl's, shines out of the general dinginess.

Donnabelle was no angel, of course, but her position as firstborn imbued her with a sense of responsibility and seriousness beyond her years. From the Mullenger side, William George excepted, she inherited a steady calmness and optimism. Many years later, she would realize how much of her father's upbeat attitude and emotional resilience she had drawn on for *The Donna Reed Show*. From the Shives side, she got her extraordinary sensitivity. The Shiveses were nervous and high-strung, inclined to worry about their own problems and everyone else's, and also apt to get their feelings hurt. Hazel, whose refinement concealed a certain grit, was a feminine model. She was, an adoring daughter recalled, "fearfully maternal." One day old neighbors would be reminded of Hazel, moving about quickly and efficiently in her kitchen, when they watched Donna's show.

By the time that window on family life opened to television viewers, Hazel and Bill were living in town and proudly recalling how hard their children had worked on the farm. Donnabelle rose early to milk the Holstein cows (a fact that Hollywood would exploit). She gathered eggs, collected corncobs, picked corn, pitched hay, fed the livestock, and took her turn operating the windmill, which pumped water from a well to the cistern by the house. On hot summer days she bent over rows of potato plants, knocking off bugs into a pail of kerosene. She was all over the place. While still a lass, Donnabelle felt proprietary toward the land in a way that those who merely reside on it never do. Inside, she helped Hazel prepare meals and can tomatoes and peaches in a kitchen without any modern facilities. She also played a part in the great Iowa tradition of cooking for thrashers, who consumed platters of crisp fried chicken, roasts with real brown gravy, mounds of mashed potatoes dripping with home-churned butter, succulent sweet corn, and mile-high apple and cherry pies.

During the school term Donnabelle escaped the grueling ritual of washing and ironing clothes, which took an entire day. Hazel began by fetching water, heating it on the stove, lugging it to a Cushman wooden tub powered by a gasoline engine and proceeded with washing, putting the clothes through a wringer, hanging them on a line to dry, and finally

pressing them with flatirons heated on the all-purpose kitchen stove. Lavone, who can still see her mother carrying in water and hear the click of her heels on the sidewalk, did her share of the chores. Although more of a tomboy than Donnabelle, she pulled house duty, scrubbing and oiling the hardwood floor every week. The boys were kept busy in the barns and fields, Keith developing the kind of know-how that would make him a 4-H champion and Billy playing catch-up.

When they weren't working, the Mullengers mixed mainly with scads of relatives who lived nearby. It hardly mattered that farmers didn't fit into Denison society. Hazel was happiest when surrounded by her family. Donna's need in later years to make and maintain family connections surely owed something to nostalgia for long-ago picnics and dinners with the Mullenger and Shives clans.

Donnabelle saw a lot of Aunt Mabel and Uncle John Yankey and her cousins, Opal, Donald, and Curtis. At the Yankey farm she could look forward to hand-cranked ice cream and Aunt Mabel's famous banana-nut cake. Grandmother and Grandfather Shives often hosted holiday dinners. Because space was limited, the men ate first, the children next, and the women last. That arrangement didn't hold for smaller Sunday dinners, after which the women talked and sewed while the men practiced target shooting with a Winchester .22 or played horseshoes. A winner of local tournaments, Bill Mullenger made ringers every chance he got.

If Sundays were for visiting relatives, Saturday night was for going to town. During the summers it was about the only time Donnabelle, Keith, Lavone, and Billy saw outsiders. The family would pile into the old Dodge and head for Denison to buy staples like sugar and flour. Occasionally they took in a double-feature at the Opera House; more often they chatted with neighbors on street corners or watched people from their parked car. Donnabelle would share a sack of candy with the younger ones and ice cream cones might be handed around, but dining out wasn't expected. Restaurants drew mainly workingmen, and fast Happy Meals were the arch of the far future.

The family's German shepherds Rex, Ace, and Phoebewere omnipresent and overfriendly. But Layone's Shetland pony, Daisy, disliked Donnabelle. The future actress who would ride in horse operas was al-

- [\*download That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us book\*](#)
- [\*\*The Galápagos: A Natural History pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Hope's Angel pdf, azw \(kindle\)\*\*](#)
- [On the Sensations of Tone \(Dover Books on Music\) book](#)
- [Beastly Things \(Commissario Brunetti, Book 21\) here](#)
  
- <http://redbuffalodesign.com/ebooks/Wittgenstein-in-Exile.pdf>
- <http://deltaphenomics.nl/?library/The-Gal--pagos--A-Natural-History.pdf>
- <http://redbuffalodesign.com/ebooks/A-Master-of-Deception.pdf>
- <http://toko-gumilar.com/books/Who-Was-Louis-Braille-.pdf>
- <http://reseauplatoparis.com/library/Beastly-Things--Commissario-Brunetti--Book-21-.pdf>