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MAX IN FORT WORTH

By Jeff Guinn

Max in Fort Worth observed more and participated somewhat less than Max in Marshall, for the obvious reason. His part time Fort Worth residence was the result of his marriage in 1983 to Cissy Stewart, who'd established herself as that city's pre-eminent journalist and a formidable social presence. Just as Max could have been justifiably labeled "Mr. Marshall," and was on more than one occasion, Cissy was "Lady Fort Worth."

This could have placed a more insecure man than Max in an untenable position. He was used to leading, and doing a fine job of it. He'd grown comfortable in the spotlight he never sought but always thrived in. When he and Cissy stayed in Marshall, nothing in his public role changed. In Fort Worth, he often stood by Cissy's side as she presided over meetings or delivered keynote addresses – and he beamed with pride as she did so.

Prior to that wedding in 1983, I believe I'd met Max twice, just for brief handshakes at some meetings or other. I had this in common with almost everyone else who became his Fort Worth friend, with exceptions like Ben Procter who was already well acquainted through historical association events. Cissy, of course, I knew very well. Along with author/Travel Editor Jerry Flemmons, she'd been my mentor at the *Star-Telegram*. The Stewart-Lale nuptials were headline-making stuff in Fort Worth. Who could possibly be worthy of Cissy?

Not that long afterward Cissy left the *Star-Telegram*, ostensibly to enjoy early retirement but clearly because she felt mass media was already careening out of control with *People* magazine-like tendencies. Accordingly, I saw little of her for several years and virtually nothing of Max. They would be glimpsed together at social functions. Max, it seemed to me, embodied the physical and vocal tendencies of an Old Testament prophet. He was rangy and pleasantly weathered-looking, clearly someone who'd survived a lot in life and come out the better for it, and his voice had the sort of gravelly resonance that would have been perfect for proclaiming gospel in the days before microphones and sound systems.

The Stewart-Lales (as some privately called them; after all, we'd been referring to Cissy *Stewart* for so long it was tough to make the adjustment) settled in for some happy times. Max found his way onto the TCU Press editorial board, where his literary expertise made him immediately indispensable. Cissy began work on a book about the life of Sweetie Ladd, an artist whose original reputation had been reduced to local rumor. I heard about the project in 1999 and gave Cissy a call. I was about to become books editor of the *Star-Telegram*, and in that role I'd be presiding over author programs on behalf of the library. Would Cissy be the first author I ever introduced at one? It seemed so appropriate: in her own words, during the early years of my own writing career she "raised me." We agreed to make it happen, and as soon as my appointment was official I scheduled an author program, then called Cissy to

confirm she'd open the event. Other authors to speak that day would include Elmer Kelton and Larry L. King (the real writer, not the TV hack). Distinguished men of letters, both, but in Fort Worth Cissy Stewart Lale was the unquestioned headliner.

Which is why, the day before the program, I thought I knew why Max Lale called me. "It's my understanding you intend for my wife to be the initial speaker," Max rumbled. "I know she deserves to be headliner and speak last, Mr. Lale," I said. "But it means a lot to me that she's the first author I ever introduce at a public event where I'm books editor. I don't mean any disrespect to Cissy at all."

"That's *not* my point," Max declared. "If she's happy with speaking first, it's fine with me. But some of her friends are less than punctual, so if in fact she is speaking first I want to know so I can call them and make sure they arrive at the program on time." That, I learned, was typical of Max's regard for Cissy. Secure in himself, it didn't bother him a bit to sometimes serve in a supporting role to his equally famous wife.

At the cocktail reception before that program, I had my first extended conversation with Max – about the changing nature of journalism, mostly, and his involvement with Bill Moyers on a TV project about World War II veterans.

"I'm actually in the process of writing my memoirs," he told me. "It's an interesting exercise for me, but not one that will in any way be of much interest to a wide audience."

I'd been hanging on every word of the stories he'd just been telling me. Impulsively, I invited Max to speak at my next author event.

"You haven't even seen the book yet," he protested. "You may not find it suitable."

"I'm sure I will," I said. And, of course, I did. Max spoke at an author program including Tony Hillerman, Richard Paul Evans, Peter Straub, and Dan Jenkins, bestselling authors all. His speech was the best, combining humor and historical insights. Every copy of *Max's Memoirs* on hand was sold that day. And Max and I became fast friends.

Knowing Max better, I got a more accurate sense of his accomplishments and professional standing. When I began researching *Our Land Before We Die*, a book about the Seminole Negro tribe, Max not only recommended distinguished historians I should contact, he called ahead to urge them to cooperate. Max was high on my list of hoped-for interviews, and he spent hours with me talking about Indian history in Oklahoma and Texas, leaning back and storytelling with remarkable detail and rhythm. But what amazed me most was that Max didn't just tell whatever he knew. He constantly badgered me about what I'd learned from others, hoping to add to his own knowledge of the subject. That was a unique Max Lale trait. He had great confidence in his own abilities and intellect. He was fascinated by the details of his own life, but he was equally interested in everybody else's. Self-interest does not have to mean self-

absorption or even self-obsession. Max liked to tell his stories, but he liked to hear yours, too. When Max was blurb-ed on the cover of *Our Land Before We Die*, he made a point of noting he'd learned new things while reading the book – high praise indeed.

Perhaps my favorite Max anecdote stems from this project. My editor at Putnam/Penguin in New York City was a young woman very much from the East, a Bennington graduate who in an unintended but still offensive way truly believed no historians from Texas probably had IQs in double digits. When I delivered the draft of my manuscript, as a matter of course she called everyone quoted to be certain they felt their remarks were transcribed accurately. Right after she spoke to Max, she called me. “Mr. Lale is amazing!” she blurted. I told her I already knew that.

“Do you know what he said to me? In this wonderful deep voice he said, ‘Young woman, you of course realize that you hold in your hands a work of considerable historic import.’”

“That sounds like Max,” I said.

“I think when God talks, he must sound like Mr. Lale!” she said. And she just might be right.

My wife and I began socializing regularly with Max and Cissy. They complemented each other wonderfully well. Lunch or dinner was served up with stories. Max always wanted to know about my writing projects or books I'd read. He began reviewing nonfiction for me, taking lots of time because he wanted to get everything just right. When I began a series of evening author programs in 2002 at Bass Performance Hall in Fort Worth, Max attended every one, often helping me greet and entertain the featured writers backstage or at dinner. He did this with tremendous élan, exuding warmth and respect without fawning. He liked writers, and talking about writing. And from Tom Clancy to Doris Kearns Goodwin, they all liked him tremendously.

Around 2003, Max's health problems became more pronounced. He began having what he called “episodes” of heart flutters, shortness of breath and dizziness. I'm not sure he mentioned them all to Cissy. Max was a man of the old school. You bore your afflictions privately and with dignity. Sympathy from friends was not always encouraged. He certainly did not give up cigarettes and cocktails. When *Our Land Before We Die* won the 2003 Texas Book Award, Max and Cissy called from a meeting they were attending in far West Texas to congratulate me. “When we heard, Max had three drinks and got quite silly,” Cissy said. “Man's allowed to celebrate an auspicious occasion,” Max retorted. He appreciated everyone else's successes just as much as he enjoyed his own.

By 2005, Max's movements were increasingly restricted. He walked very slowly with the aid of a cane. He couldn't get backstage for our author programs anymore. But he came to them all because he liked them and refused to give in to infirmity. When David McCullough came to town, Max called me for tickets. He never had to ask; I always had them for him, but he was not a

man who assumed such things. I told Max I'd just spoken with Cissy, who'd informed me Max's doctor thought he should stay home and rest rather than exert himself coming to see McCullough.

"He's my *doctor*, not my *keeper*," Max declared, and that settled that. He came to see McCullough and stayed to the end.

By late 2005, Max was talking openly about dying. He didn't like feeling weak; he hated needing people to help him get up and down from chairs. He told me and other friends that he'd made all his funeral arrangements. His big challenge, he said, was the disposition of his beloved books. He was trying to make lists of who would receive which individual titles, and it sort of galled him because after his passing the books wouldn't be his anymore. Max was quite matter-of-fact about death. It didn't frighten him in the least. In life, he'd done his best. That was all a man could accomplish with the time he'd been given. He said Cissy had so many friends and her own good, full life that he knew she'd be fine without him.

On Wednesday, March 8, 2006, I took Max and Cissy out to lunch. By this point Max had to be pretty much lifted into the car. We went to a Mexican restaurant near their apartment. Max ordered enchiladas and a margarita, and he didn't touch the enchiladas. When I asked how he felt, he ignored the question and peppered me with inquiries and comments about my current writing projects. I asked what the doctor had to say during his latest checkup. Max said Cissy might have a new book in mind.

After half an hour, Max started to sag. We cut the meal short. Cissy went to get the car. I began helping Max walk slowly out to the parking lot, but he didn't last a half dozen steps. I had to pull up a chair so he could sit down. Softly, grudgingly, Max said to me, "Now you see why I'm praying God will take me out of this."

Ten days later, Max entered a hospice program. He lay back in a hospital bed in his apartment and received visitors in a near-regal way, because he was at peace with the process and, I think, relieved that it was almost over. An Episcopal priest was part of the hospice team, and he and Max had spirited debates about obscure points of theology. Out-of-town visitors arrived regularly. I'd come often, bringing books. Max never stopped reading, ever. Worn out as he was, he'd finish a book in a day and want to talk about it afterward.

Cissy called on a Saturday night. Max was gone, quite peacefully. He'd been taken to the funeral home by the time my wife and I arrived at the apartment. One of Max's nieces and her husband had been there earlier in the day for a visit, and returned after getting the news. We sat around telling Max Lale stories for hours. Three days later, Cissy told me a box of new books had arrived in the mail for Max. Terminally ill, with not long to live, he'd seen the books in a catalog, thought they seemed interesting, and ordered them on the chance he still might be around to read them when they arrived. For Max Lale, death paled beside the terrible possibility he wouldn't have a new book to read.