

Diane Pickett signs first book at Sundog

By DEBORAH WHEELER

Published: Thursday, May 15, 2014 at 12:38 PM.

Long-time Walton County resident Diane Pickett will sign copies of her first novel May 24 on the porch at Sundog Books in Seaside.

"Never Isn't Long Enough" should be required reading for all who aren't old enough to draw Social Security, believes Pickett, and the rest will enjoy looking back at a bygone era.

The era Pickett writes about in "Never Isn't Long Enough" is one where Blacks and Whites are kept separate; where the disabled must depend on someone to take care of them; and there is no welfare.

During this era, divorce is almost unheard of, and women who became pregnant out of wedlock were looked down on and shunned.

In "Never Isn't Long Enough," Pickett writes about the era she grew up in, and its hardships.

"Women today have no idea what women of my day went through when pregnant and having kids out of wedlock," she said.

Pickett is not a woman of color, she no disability, no children, and has never been on welfare. But she was raised in the small town of DeFuniak Springs by a single father.

Even though Pickett writes about hardships she did not experience firsthand, she feels a need to tell the stories of those who did experience it firsthand.

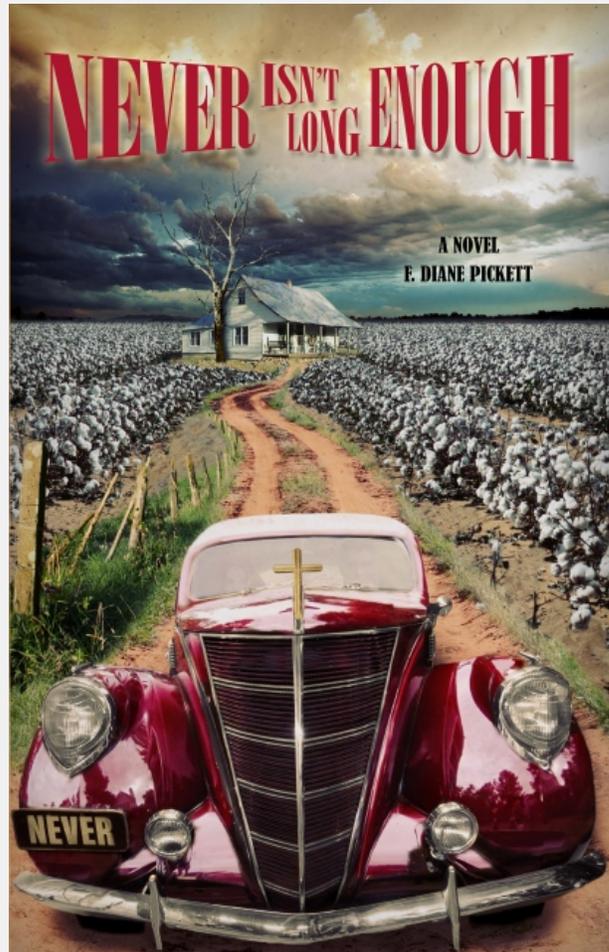
Pickett was moved to DeFuniak as a toddler and lived two miles outside town with her single dad and older brother.

"It was an interesting place to grow up," she said. "It was a safe environment. We weren't part of the community because we didn't have a mother. My father sent us both off to boarding school for a wider perspective. My brother went to military school. I went to Tallahassee when I was 16 and lived on the mill site of a company my father bought. It was definitely different from DeFuniak. Even though I was on my own, my father was from the Victorian era and restrictive. He was strict and kept a watchful eye."

The strategy paid off.

In a time when a large percentage of young women married the summer after high school, Pickett went to work managing an almost all-male organization of doctors in the early 1960s.

"It was unheard of at that time," she said.



The author has married twice, but she says with a laugh, neither took.

Pickett lived in Tallahassee from 1956 to 1983. When her father died, she moved back home to DeFuniak.

"I was 43, mature, and had lots of business experience when I returned. I looked around and said, if I am going to have to live here this place is going to have to get a lot more interesting," she recalls.

To make it more interesting, Pickett formed societies and tried to get economic development going.

She brought Elderhostel to the small town and ran that for 10 years, which brought in people from all over the country. She designed it around the town's Chautauqua heritage, which had been largely forgotten.

She then started a revival of the original Florida Chautauqua and remained involved with it until a few years ago when she sold her family homeplace and moved to Sandestin.

Pickett wrote her book last spring while recovering from lung cancer. This was her second cancer occurrence.

"It's life," she said. "I'm fine and optimistic and staying busy."

Pickett said when faced with a diagnosis like lung cancer, your mind turns to different things. Her mind went to her father and something he said.

"He said, 'Imagine an eagle that comes to Stone Mountain to sharpen its beak. And when it's worn down, that's eternity'," she recalls.

She said the phrase "never isn't long enough" kept coming back to her, but she wasn't sure what she could do with it.

So, she sat down at the computer and wrote that phrase and wondered what kind of story it could be.

"I made up a story about a young farm girl who lived through the era I grew up in and her life," she said. "It's historic fiction, and women who haven't lived it as I did will be surprised at the way things were."

All characters in the novel are fictional, but Pickett says there is always a grain of truth in any work of fiction.

One character is based on Pickett's grandfather, who fought in the civil war and was a famous Southern Baptist preacher in the mountains of north Georgia.

Another character is Alma.

"In the 1940s there were no ramps for wheelchairs, and without the Disabilities Act, no buses to take the disabled where they need to go, no lowered water fountains, no handrails, and no accessible bathrooms for the disabled," she said. "Alma was a true and beloved character in DeFuniak. I wanted to tell her story. She was an inspiration to me and she never complained."

The 283-page soft-cover book is also about the South and its peculiarities.

"It's written with humor and I've taken an irreverent look at Southern gentility, which is sometimes as gentle as a pit-bull on a leash, -- and about choices -- how one single mistake can effect a life forever and the life of others," said Pickett. "If you like to laugh, or chuckle, it's for you. It's an eye opener. One for the history buff."

The book is available at Sundog Books in Seaside, and Amazon.

Pickett said she is already planning to write two more.

"One has to do with red-eye gravy, a Southern comfort food that is dying. All the fat is being trimmed now from a hog. The ones who still make it, I want to know about their stories. And I probably am going to write an autobiography, but I don't know where to start. I have had an interesting life and tried to take advantage of it all," she said.

Looking to the future, Pickett said she hopes to live long enough to see DeFuniak come into its own with a revived downtown and arts and theater. I can see them doing programs for adults. They have a great hotel and restaurant. I envision it being vibrant with a lot of artists. What they need is forward-thinking investors to pick up vacant buildings and put in ice cream parlors, boutiques, etc. I spent the greater part of my adult life trying to do that until the bottom fell out in 2008," said Pickett.

Meet this vibrant trailblazer at her book signing from 6-8 p.m. on the porch at Sundog Books May 24.

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