Celebrating

WOMEN’S HISTORY

MOLLY POSTLEWAIT

Women’s History Month in March provides a special opportunity for interpreters to teach about “women’s tenacity, courage, and creativity throughout the centuries.”

Sometimes considered the weaker sex, women have long endured social prejudices and enjoyed fewer career opportunities and legal rights. Too often, traditional versions of history minimize or ignore the contributions of women.

In 2005, at the National Association for Interpretation Region 6 Conference in Blue Springs, Missouri, a group of interpreters convened to present the first Women’s History Project workshop. Since then, the project, now known as the Women’s History Celebration, has evolved into an annual program. In conjunction with Women’s History Month, staff of the Johnson County (Kansas) Park and Recreation District and local storytellers in costume present the voices of women from the past.

In addition, Sharon Lockhart, host of the long-running show “EveryWoman” on local Kansas City community radio 90.1 KKFI, was enlisted to create a radio program montage based on the live performance.

This is how we put it together. Although we follow a script, each presentation has been unique, depending upon the women we choose to portray. All year, we recruit volunteers and some professional actors to reenact women from history.

A story line is developed to weave together the voices from the past. The staging is simple, with a set that can easily be adapted to individual performances. The script is fast paced, and songs performed between the characters provide an authentic musical transition. As the narrator sets the scene, performers take the stage on cue in chronological order. In each short piece, the audience gets a realistic, first-person snippet of that woman’s life.

The entire program is 75 minutes long, usually with about a dozen characters taking the stage. Some actors play more than one part,
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Interpret Barbara Upton-Garvin portrays freed slave and activist Sojourner Truth’s famous 1851 ‘Ain’t I a woman, too?’ speech.

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The entire program is 75 minutes long, usually with about a dozen characters taking the stage. Some actors play more than one part, but each performer is responsible for her individual lines, props, and costumes. We have never needed a dress rehearsal.

The celebration ends with music: “Respect” by Aretha Franklin, the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and Amy Carol Webb’s “I Come From Women.” Audience members are invited to dance with the performers.

Some of the characters are quite famous, while others may have been lost in the shadows of time. It has been an amazing experience to bring all these women into the light.

Johnson County park naturalist Sheila Fowk’s connection to her ancestor was her motivation to share the story of Anne Hutchinson:

I am in awe of the courage of my ninth great grandmother, Anne Hutchinson. She was a Puritan in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Anne strongly disagreed with the doctrine preached by the clergy of the colony and she was outspoken about her Christian beliefs. She had quite a following. Anne’s behavior was considered extremely offensive for a Puritan woman in 1636. She and her family were banished and had to leave the protection of the colony.

Some of the more famous characters that were in past scripts include Rachel Carson, Carry Nation, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, dancer Isadora Duncan, aviator Amelia Earhart, and Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the American Girl Scouts. Elaine Giesels, park naturalist at Ernie Miller Park, had this to say about the women she portrays:

Although born a century apart, Ellen Goodnow and Rachel Carson, the two women I am honored to present, share an absolute commitment to their respective passions. Ellen was a staunch abolitionist who emigrated with her husband to Manhattan, Kansas. She gave up a civilized life in the East for the hard reality of frontier living to ensure that Kansas would enter the Union as a state free of slavery. Rachel Carson, a marine scientist, as I am, gave up the comfort of being a popular natural history writer to disclose to the public the ecological dangers of post-World War II pesticide and herbicide applicant practices. Published just before her death from cancer, her book Silent Spring brought upon her the wrath of the chemical industry and launched the modern environmental movement.
Lesser-known but equally fascinating women that have been portrayed are Boudicca of the ancient Iceni people; pirate Grace O’Malley; Mary Jemison of the Seneca Indians; Alligator Annie, naturalist from the Louisiana Bayou; freed slave Clara Brown; and Dr. Mary Walker, who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor after the Civil War.

Lisa Lacombe, manager of Burr Oak Woods Nature Center with the Missouri Department of Conservation, portrays geologist Luella Agnes Owen. Lisa explains:

In our modern world, we often forget the difficulty women endured to obtain the freedom we enjoy today. Luella Agnes Owen was certainly a woman with her own mind. She passionately studied geology, especially caves and loess soils, much to the chagrin of her parents and members of high society in St. Joseph, Missouri. Genteel ladies of the 1800s were not encouraged to study geology. They were supposed to get married, attend balls, and raise a family, not climb around in divided skirts, exploring wild caves. Luella’s appetite for adventure and knowledge could not be subdued even though it did not coincide with societal norms. As a contemporary naturalist, caver, and interpreter, I reveal Luella’s story to an audience to challenge others to reach for their own dreams.

Juliette Gordon Low, presented here by Molly Postlewait, loved nature, had a menagerie of pets, and in 1912 started Girl Scouts in the United States.

After the live performance, audience members are invited to participate in activity stations celebrating women and to meet some accomplished women of today.

At one station, participants are invited to dance barefoot in memory of Isadora Duncan and her contribution to modern dance. A professional dancer demonstrates examples of the Duncan style. Music combined with movement and colorful scarves energizes and provides an opportunity for a brief discussion of fashion changes. Some audience members were not familiar with the restrictive garments (e.g., corsets) women wore. This information provokes a lively conversation.

At a station decorated with posters of women, participants are encouraged to design their own art honoring a woman who has inspired them. It could be someone well known, a family member, or perhaps
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At a station dedicated with posters of women, participants are encouraged to design their own art honoring a woman who has inspired them. It could be someone well known, a family member, or perhaps a teacher or a feared friend. The poster can be displayed or taken home as a salute to a woman who has impacted their life.

A third activity is interviewing women of today, who discuss opportunities to work in non-traditional careers. Meeting women of just a generation ago provides us insights into a time when women endured social prejudices. In 2009, a special guest was Marjorie Ellfeldt Rees, Ph.D., who has since passed away. A Women’s Airforce Service Pilot (WASP) during World War II, Rees was one of a select group of young women pilots who became pioneers, heroes, and role models as they tested repaired planes for flight worthiness.

As the event draws to a close, refreshments are served and participants visit with presenters. Tables with historic pictures are displayed for viewing, including a “Rosie the Riveter” World War II poster, 1910 photos of marching suffragettes, and a “Crazy Nation” promotion.

Amelia Earhart memorabilia has been provided by reenactor Leidy Lewadowski, who portrays the famous Kansas aviator. Leidy says:

I was drawn to Amelia when I was in fifth grade. She was a tomboy, and I was a tomboy. She pushed the envelope for women. She was a model for women of her day. One of my favorite quotes from Amelia is, “Courage is the price life exacts from granting peace. The soul that knows it not, knows no release from little things.”

Organizing and performing for the Women’s History Celebration has given me a chance to portray women I have admired. Learning about Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the Girl Scouts, has been a delight and sharing her story with Girl Scout audiences a joy. Called Daisy by family, she loved nature and thought girls should go camping. Her dream that girls would have opportunities has enriched millions over the last 180 years.

Another fascinating woman I love to introduce to audiences is Mary Harris Jones, also known as Mother Jones. (And, yes, I discovered the magazine Mother Jones is named in her honor.) In the late 1800s, the powerful owners of coal mines called Mother Jones, at age 80, “the most dangerous woman in America” for her work organizing unions. Digging deeper, I was surprised to learn the words, “She’ll be coming around the mountain when she cometh” are thought to be sung in her honor.

These diverse women, whether famous or unknown, have in common their commitment to helping others in the face of hardship and difficulty. Their personal passions changed the world forever and affect the lives of young women today.

As one Women’s History Celebration attendee commented, “History is boring in school because it is always about battles and what the men did. The stories make me proud to be a girl.”

In 2012 the Women’s History Celebration will be performed March 11 at the Alexander Majors House Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Legends from the past appearing in 2012 will include Sybil Ludington sometimes referred as the female Paul Revere; Lyda Conley, Native American lawyer; Dr. E.G. Anderson, the first woman in England to receive a medical degree; and beloved author Laura Ingalls Wilder.

A self-described “wild woman” and risk manager’s nightmare, Molly Pestlewait is the senior park naturalist for the Johnson County Kansas Park and Recreation District. In 2010, Molly was honored with the NAI’s Master Front-Line Interpreter award and served as the artist in residence for the International School of Frankfurt, Germany. Contact her at molly.pestlewait@jcparks.org. Thanks to retired naturalist and 2010 Kansas City Woman of Worth award winner Elaine Guido who contributed to this article. Learn more about Women’s History Month at www.womenshistorymonth.org.

Meaningful Interpretation: How to Connect Hearts and Minds to Places, Objects, and Other Resources is a training and learning tool for interpreters. Using a personal journaling format, this volume includes questions, text, exercises, and the insights of colleagues. This book is pertinent to all interpreters—brand new, experienced, volunteer, or paid professional.

David Larsen’s rich career as an interpreter, historian, environmental educator, planner, trainer, and manager helped craft a vision and direction for interpretation for generations to come. His life passion was facilitating better public engagement with the meanings of the resources and stories that we preserve and protect as interpreters.

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