

CHARACTER ACTRESS VERNICE SIMMS JACKSON WEAVES HER LOVE OF HISTORY WITH HER REGARD FOR WOMEN WHO CARVED A PLACE IN AMERICA FOR THEMSELVES AND WOMEN TO FOLLOW.

BY WENDY A. HOKE

# PORTRAITURES OF HISTORY

As audience members find their seats, a woman in disheveled Civil War dress with unkempt hair glides

aimlessly through the aisles, gently picking lint off a woman's sweater, then dancing with a man. She's muttering gibberish to herself when Vernice Simms Jackson, portraying Mary Elizabeth Bowser, a Union spy in the Confederate White House, appears on stage. "Now Miss Bet, you leave these nice folks alone," she says, coaxing Ruth Pangrace, as Elizabeth Van Lew, toward her. Looking around, Ms. Jackson adds, "It's safe."

Ms. Pangrace makes all who meet her character, known as Crazy Bet, believe she's deranged. She is anything but and, along with Ms. Bowser, helped hasten the end of the Civil War by secretly relaying information about the Confederate army to Union forces.

Chances are you never learned about Mary Elizabeth Bowser or Crazy Bet. Women in History is striving to change that. The nonprofit organization is dedicated to sharing the important role of women in US history through dramatic re-creation of their lives.

Launched by Ms. Jackson (GRS '97, organizational behavior) and four other women in Lakewood, Ohio, the group saw the lack of documented recognition of women's contributions to the development of the nation, plus few educational outreach efforts to counteract this oversight. Women in History's eighty-five multicultural characters span 300 years, making it the largest group of its kind in the country, according to Ms. Jackson, current president and board chair.

She smiles when she recalls the first time Women in History was called upon in 1991. Founder Sophia Mastrandreas-Dadas, owner of a vintage clothing collection, was invited to do a vintage fashion show for a Girl Scout Mother-Daughter Tea. She had an idea: Rather than just show the fashions, why not match them with women in history who may have worn them? "She started canvassing all her friends to find out who would fit in the clothes," says Ms. Jackson. "You have to understand, when Sophia called, you just always said yes."

Clara Barton and Annie Oakley were two of the five characters performed. Selected subjects need to have had an impact on the country and must be dead, Ms. Jackson explains. Today's list includes the famous, infamous, and the obscure. "The list is in no way complete; everyone has their wish list of who they'd like to see added." The group's roster of women is making an impression on everyone from students seeking information for reports to armchair historians. "We average 30,000 hits a month on our Web site from every English-speaking place in the world. We even get inquiries from Russian and Arab countries," she says.

The now eleven-member troupe includes a comedienne, a teacher, and a college student, among others. Although not previously trained in the dramatic arts, members have honed their skills through voice coaching, staging, and practice. Ms. Jackson says half of the members use scripts, half use loose outlines. In either case, the performances are based on



information about the subject they've researched. Members primarily perform in small groups, particularly as characters who share a place in history. They also are mindful of a subject's dress and dialect and strive to use the language of the time. Authentic vintage clothing is worn; pieces in poor condition are used as patterns for reproduction. Hairdos are replicated using the presenter's natural hair or wigs, styled by a specialist in historic hair design.

Ms. Jackson's first enactment was Harriet Tubman, followed by Josephine Baker and Sally Hemings. Coming out of character for the question-and-answer session can be a difficult transition. "You know you've made an impact when an audience member says, 'When you performed in Paris...' as if I really was Josephine Baker," she says.

Audiences are generally senior citizens and children, mostly at schools and public libraries. Members have performed at Cleveland's MetroHealth Medical Center and the Western Reserve Historical Society. Several members also traveled three times to Wisconsin from 1995 to 1997, to portray early female lighthouse keepers at the launching of US Coast Guard cutters named for the keepers.

When possible, members visit the locales where the subject lived and worked, plus interview the subject's family, friends, and biographers. One of her newest characters, Stagecoach Mary Fields, had a long association with the Ursuline nuns. Ms. Jackson met with archivist Sister Mary Rose Krupp at the Ursuline convent in Toledo, Ohio, and went through two large boxes of documents.

Born a slave in 1832 in Tennessee, Stagecoach Mary was an African-American lay worker at an Ursuline convent after moving to Toledo. The nuns left to start a mission in Montana, and Stagecoach Mary came later after learning that Mother Amadeus had taken ill. As a favor for nursing the Mother Superior back to health, the nuns helped Mary become the proprietor of a cafe. When the business folded, Mary delivered mail by stagecoach. She lived her life in Cascade, Montana, and, in her latter years, baby-sat the children in town. No one would know of her, says Ms. Jackson, except that one of those children made a reference to her while reminiscing in an interview: actor Gary Cooper.

## Life Takes a Turn

Since 1976, Ms. Jackson had worked in corporate training development, moving to Lakewood from Los Angeles, when her husband, now deceased, accepted a position in Northeast Ohio with TRW. Ms. Jackson furthered her corporate work at Parker Hannifin Corporation. But after helping Ms. Mastrandreas-Dadas in the vintage fashion show, her interests changed. In 1996, the close friends set up a long-range plan for Women in History.

"I was in graduate school at Case Western Reserve for organizational development," recalls Ms. Jackson. "Sophie was going back to get her degree in counseling so that we could set up a practice together. We were both widows with children and

thought this would give us a way to support ourselves and allow flexibility to develop Women in History."

The duo agreed that Ms. Mastrandreas-Dadas would lead the organization while Ms. Jackson completed her degree, which she earned in May 1997. Ms. Mastrandreas-Dadas was to begin her studies the following January, but, in October 1997, she was killed in a car accident.

"When I went through the master's program at CWRU, I went to a weekend career workshop where we assessed our life goals, highs and lows of life, and accomplishments. I came away from the workshop feeling that I was not getting personal satisfaction from the corporate world." It wasn't until December 1999, however, with her three children grown, that Ms. Jackson was able to make good on her word to promote Women in History. She left



PAST PERFORMANCE: MS. JACKSON AS STAGECOACH MARY AT A LOCAL LIBRARY

Parker Hannifin to establish Match Method Solutions, a consulting business designed to get people and companies thinking creatively, giving them the tools to make positive changes at their organizations. She applies those skills to Women in History, and hopes one day to do it full time as its paid executive director.

Ultimately, Ms. Jackson would like the group to become part of the Smithsonian Institution's Discovery Theater in Washington, DC, which

supports educational road shows across the country. The theater emphasizes using materials from primary sources, such as diaries, letters, government documents, and speeches, as does Women in History.

In the meantime, the group continues to take on new projects. Members are identifying one hundred Ohio women in history for Ohio's bicentennial in 2003. Alonzo Smith, scholarly research specialist in the National Museum of American History Program in African-American Culture, has asked members to research blacks in the West for a symposium set for February 2001. Dr. Smith told Ms. Jackson that he planned to include a portrayal of Stagecoach Mary Fields, and has agreed to let Ms. Jackson review the script. Similarly, a man in Utah, who is producing a biography on Stagecoach Mary for the History Channel, called her for an on-camera interview. Her response? "Of course I said yes!"

History buff Wendy A. Hoke is a frequent contributor to CWRU Magazine.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MS. JACKSON AS STAGECOACH MARY FIELDS (PAGE 19) BY JOSEPH W. DARWAL; OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MS. JACKSON

FOR A COMPLETE ROSTER OF WOMEN IN HISTORY CHARACTERIZATIONS, VISIT THE WEB SITE AT [HTTP://WWW.LKWDPL.ORG/WIHOHIO/](http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/). FOR INFORMATION ON OTHER FAMOUS WOMEN IN HISTORY, VISIT BRITANNICA ONLINE AT [HTTP://BRITANNICA.COM/WOMEN/](http://BRITANNICA.COM/WOMEN/).

CAST OF CHARACTERS: VERNICE SIMMS JACKSON PORTRAYING (FROM TOP TO BOTTOM) HARRIET TUBMAN, JOSEPHINE BAKER, STAGECOACH MARY, AND JOSEPHINE WILSON BRUCE (FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN PRINCIPAL OF A CLEVELAND PUBLIC SCHOOL)