

The Oregonian

Forebear's diary a springboard for search for the truth

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They say every human life contributes to history, but along the way most of those stories are lost.

Portlander Susan Banyas, for example, grew up in the southern Ohio county her family settled in the 1830s . . . and never realized her great-great grandparents, on a farm just a few miles from Susan's childhood home, had sheltered former slaves escaping from the South on the Underground Railroad.

This weekend in Portland, Susan brings that history back to life, in a performance piece called "No Strangers Here Today," based on her great-great-grandmother's diary accounts of life on that hardscrabble farm, a link on the fugitive escape route over 140 years ago.

Like her ancestors, Susan is collaborating with an African American, Los Angeles musician David Ornette Cherry, to bring to life the story of those who worked and traveled on the Underground Railroad.

They've been working on the collaboration for a year. Susan wrote the script and created the movement. David wrote the music, based on his jazz and world music roots.

"It's chilling when it's evolving right before your eyes," David said this week while in Portland for rehearsals. "When you're listening and focusing and working together.

"It's dangerous, too. A lot of people don't want to talk about" the difficult era of slavery in America. "But you have to deal with those things, the painful parts and the happy parts. And when we come together like this, in this mix of things, the possibilities are infinite, like art is infinite."

Twenty five years ago, Susan Banyas was a graduate student in San Francisco when she became interested in her family history. She was studying originality, "and I felt like it had to do with origins. So I went back to Ohio."

Susan remembers riding with her mother in 1982 in a silver Cadillac on Ohio back roads. "She said, 'You have to meet my second cousin,' " the keeper of family artifacts. The cousin handed Susan a small book. "She said, 'This was your great-great-grandmother's diary.' And it blew me away, holding it in my hands."

In 1864, at the height of the Civil War, Elizabeth Conard Edwards had written brief, sometimes cryptic entries.

"Clear and hot as I ever felt it. Baked pies and done 50 other things. I sowed some turnips. Robert took the wool to Samantha. Strangers are here today."

Who were the "strangers," Susan wondered. Her mother's cousin explained: The diary was full of coded entries, referring to people on the Underground Railroad. Elizabeth and her husband, Robert Edwards, had defied federal law to help slaves escape to Canada.

On a daily basis, Elizabeth had recorded the arrival of "strangers" she had fed or sheltered from bounty hunters who crisscrossed southern Ohio looking for escaped slaves.

Susan visited the nearby farmhouse Elizabeth and Robert had built, which was for sale. "We went over to the farm," Susan says. "She showed us where the hidden room was, where they'd hidden the fugitives. It was down in a cistern."

Susan copied every word Elizabeth had written in the diary. It was her family history, "but I was also starting to see it was American history. I could take this little document, and if I studied it, I could learn a whole lot about America."

The study would have to wait. Susan let the story of her family's anti-slavery work percolate for 23 years. Two years ago, she returned to it.

She decided to create a performance piece based on the diary entries that would encompass more than the story of her family.

"The heart of storytelling," Susan says, "is finding the truth." She spent a year doing research. "I knew nothing about the Underground Railroad. My American history was sketchy at best. Who was Harriet Tubman, who was Sojourner Truth? What about Frederick Douglass? What were the Quakers doing?"

Elizabeth and Robert Edwards were Quakers; the Society of Friends in America had opposed slavery, and many members had assisted slaves.

Susan learned that although the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued by Lincoln, slavery and slave trading still were legal in the border states in 1864. "And the U.S. Congress had passed fugitive slave laws. If you harbored a fugitive there were severe fines, incarceration, confiscation of property.

"The Underground Railroad was a huge network of blacks and whites." In southern Ohio, near slave-holding states, "it was clandestine" and controversial. "So people were coming through a lot."

Susan put together what she calls a "collage" of vignettes about the movement and presented it at historical conferences. Someone suggested David Cherry should add music; David felt an immediate connection to the piece and agreed.

David has been writing music in L.A. for a year. "When I read the script, seeing it from the Caucasian side, I was astounded," he says. He, too, researched the Quakers, "and when I talked to some African American elders, they talked about the Quakers, too."

It opened his eyes, he says. And it reinforced his basic optimism about the future of relations between blacks and whites in America. "We have so many beautiful people who

know what's right and wrong. There are very few people who know what's wrong and do it for reasons of greed."

There are political aspects to this piece, for both Susan -- who opposes any kind of war or enslavement -- and for David. But more than anything, they see it as a story about real people who made real changes that should never be forgotten.

The premiere of their celebration of American history and personal memory, in music and words, will be this weekend in Portland. (For information and reservations, go to strangers.scatter.com) There will be a matinee and an evening performance today, Feb. 18.

"It changed my brain when I found this diary," Susan says. She and David hope people who come to see "No Strangers Here Today" will feel the same kind of personal connection to history. "We can't be afraid of these issues," David Cherry says. "We have to deal with them and move on."