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ABSTRACT

As a historic interpreter, individuals have the opportunity to educate the public about the complex lives of Appalachian women during the Civil War. This paper provides a voice for women who left very few documents in their own voice. It is part of ongoing research and education focusing on the roles of Appalachian women and the struggle to portray them appropriately. It considers the difference between historical interpreters, who concentrate on providing an educational focus, and re-enactors, whose focus is primarily to portray the past and to entertain. To create a presentation that will be historically accurate and stimulating, an effective historic interpreter must employ the skills of a historian and a teacher. The historian must conduct research that includes reading period letters, listening to family stories, and analyzing fading photographs. As a volunteer historic interpreter, one has many venues for interacting with the general public, such as at elementary schools, museums, parks, and other similar public places. Students of all ages can see what a woman from this era and geographic region would have looked like while understanding the unique hardships and troubles faced by Appalachian women who had to defend their homes and families against enemy soldiers and the elements. (Contains 18 suggested readings.) (BT)

The Voice of the Past: Historic Interpretation as a Validation of Appalachian Women's History during the War between the States.

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THE VOICE OF THE PAST:
HISTORIC INTERPRETATION AS A VALIDATION OF APPALACHIAN
WOMEN'S HISTORY DURING THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

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Abstract

As an historic interpreter, I have the opportunity to educate the public about the complex lives of Appalachian women during the War Between the States. The following piece demonstrates one of the most rewarding aspects of this work: providing a voice for women who left very few documents in their own voices. This is part of on-going research and education into the roles of Mountain women and the struggle to portray them in the most appropriate way possible, so that their stories can truly be heard.

It is eighty-nine degrees, and the humidity is nearly one hundred percent. I am dressed in clothing carefully copied from the styles worn by women in western North Carolina during the 1860s. This ensemble includes a bonnet tied over my tightly braided and pinned hair and a long-sleeved, full-skirted dress worn over petticoats, corset, chemise, drawers, stockings, and boots. In front of me, a museum visitor, dressed in shorts, a tank top, and flip-flops, blithely sips her cold soft drink and asks, "Aren't you hot?" With a smile, I explain the finer points of nineteenth-century clothing and provide information on women from my region and the particular struggles they faced during the War Between the States. After our brief conversation, the museum guest may still be uninterested in exchanging clothing with me, but she now is better informed about a facet of history that is frequently neglected, since women in the Mountain South left historians few primary documents chronicling their wartime experience. In addition, this region has traditionally been overlooked by Civil War scholars, most of whom have focused on the large Eastern Theatre battles. In recent years, more historians have become interested in the everyday life of 1860s people, even those in Appalachia. However, the fact remains that there is still relatively little information on the Civil War lives of women in the Mountain South. What information there is, unfortunately, is often inaccessible to the general public. Historic Interpretation helps to fill this void in Appalachian women's history. By bringing these women to life for the general public, historic interpreters are able to give them the voice they have been denied for so long.

Historic interpretation is an often misunderstood branch of scholarship. Unfortunately, historic interpreters are frequently lumped in with re-enactors, members of the Society for Creative Anachronism, and other individuals who dress in historic clothing and conduct re-enactments for the public. These people primarily dabble in the past to entertain themselves and others. However, while historic interpreters may be very entertaining, they are primarily focused on education rather than on entertainment. For

historic interpreters, having a good time or putting on a good show is secondary to providing an educational experience for themselves and others. For example, historic interpreters generally create their own period clothing, carefully copied from photographs and period descriptions of fabrics, regardless of whether it meets modern standards of style and comfort. They do this so that they may give an accurate portrayal of historic appearance that observers may touch and examine closely. In addition, while historic interpreters may take part in re-enactments, they are far more active at museums, parks, and schools where, rather than putting on a performance for the public, they interact one on one with visitors and students.

Interpretive programs may be presented in first person, so that the interpreter takes on the role of a specific person from the past and responds as that person would. Some Civil War first person interpreters take on the identity of famous individuals, such as Jefferson Davis or General Grant; while others depict lesser known people, such as a specific soldier or civilian. This style of portrayal is effective at historic homes and other sites linked to particular individuals. Still other first-person interpreters portray an invented persona, based on fact. Such an interpreter, for example, might portray a private in the 47th Kentucky Infantry (US), rather than a particular historical figure. Interpretation can also be third person. This form of interpretation allows the interpreter to interact more freely with others, answering questions and making connections with twenty-first-century life. Such an interpreter may depict a person from a particular area or background, but not “stay in character” as that individual. This format is often the most effective with elementary age children, allowing the interpreter to answer questions more effectively and within the students’ frame of reference. A first person interpreter, being asked what he or she thinks of the war, can provide only the insight that particular individual would have had at that particular time, while a third person interpreter can explain what the person he or she is portraying would have thought, and place it within a wider historical context. Both are effective strategies in their appropriate circumstances. Historic interpreters may be professionals, such as those employed by the National Park Service and privately owned parks like Pamplin Park near Petersburg, Virginia. Others are teachers or park rangers who also serve as living historians as the need arises. However, many historic interpreters are volunteers who conduct their own extensive research, purchase their own equipment and display items, and give of their time to make their presentations to the public. Because they are self-directed, such interpreters are more free to explore areas of personal interest in their research.

As a volunteer historic interpreter for over seven years, I have chosen to research and depict an Appalachian woman in Northwest North Carolina. Since I do not usually portray a specific individual, I have the freedom to adapt my interpretation. However, I have conducted careful research, so that the woman I portray is based on many actual women from Northwest North Carolina, where I primarily volunteer. As a volunteer interpreter, I have had the opportunity to provide interpretation in settings ranging from elementary school classrooms to historic sites. Because I do not depict a specific person, I can modify my interpretation. For example, when I am working at the Yancey County Historical Museum, my portrayal is indicative of one of the women who actually lived in the house that is now the museum. When I am at the Fort Defiance Historical site in

Caldwell County, I take on an identity based on the women of the Lenoir family who lived in that historic home during the war. On some occasions, I do first person interpretation, but generally, I prefer third person for its accessibility and the opportunity to address misconceptions often held by the public. I have often been able to explain the historical inaccuracies in films such as *Gone with the Wind*. If I were in first person, I could not acknowledge that I had ever heard of movies, much less detail the ways in which they have contributed to incorrect notions about the war. In addition, in third person I am able to make connections with the world my listeners understand. I often compare wartime Appalachia to Kosovo, in order to help the public understand the cruelty and misery experienced by so many mountain people, frequently at the hands of their neighbors and even family members. I am also able answer questions more honestly, rather than pretending as though I do not know how the war ended or what happened during Reconstruction. As an historic interpreter, I can educate the public, but I can also provide thousands of forgotten Appalachian women with the voices they have been denied for over 135 years.

In order to create a presentation that will be both historically accurate and stimulating to a culture with an incredibly short attention span, an effective historic interpreter must employ the skills of both a historian and a teacher. As the historian, I conduct research that includes reading period letters, listening to family stories, and analyzing fading photographs of somber-looking women with severely parted hair. As the teacher, I must take that information and shape it into a the real human story that is behind the history; for as a teacher, I know that the reason students say they hate history is because they have been taught that history is dates and dry facts, rather than the very real experiences of flesh and blood people who loved, hurt, cried, worried, and laughed (The photographs are misleading; the people only look somber because they had to hold still for the early cameras to capture the image, which took several minutes.) History is then the real-life, everyday experiences of ordinary people, rather than just the sweeping actions of a few great men and women. Several steps are involved in creating an accurate presentation that will be educational, interesting, correct, and an portrayal of real people. Before conducting a program, a historic interpreter must first understand its context. Since historic interpretation often takes place at actual historic sites, the interpreter must understand the history of the site. If the site is a home, an interpreter will need to know when the home was constructed, modified, and inhabited. The interpreter must learn why the house was built and for whom. Was it made of native materials or imported items? This information will then allow the interpreter to learn about the people who were present at the site. If the site was a home constructed of materials, for example, marble, that must have come from some great distance, it is immediately clear that the residents belonged to the upper echelons of society. It is important to learn who the people were, how many people lived there, and their social class. Finally, the interpreter will need to know what material items people at that site would have possessed. If there is no information about the specific former inhabitants, the interpreter may analyze similar sites in the same geographical area. Once this information is assembled, an interpreter can give an accurate impression of life at that site. For interpretation not confined to a certain locale, the interpreter will need to cast a wider net, including a whole community or region, rather than one specific location. This is frequently the case with my own

interpretative programs, demanding more extensive research, but also providing the opportunity to showcase the experiences of women from widely divergent backgrounds and lifestyles, from mansions to cabins, and many places in between.

Creating such a interpretive background is crucial to the process of interpreting Appalachian women during the 1860s, because there is seldom much in the way of primary documents written by these women. Contrary to the common stereotype, literacy was actually quite high among mountain women of this era. The lack of material is not because women could not write, but because most of their energies would have been concentrated on activities other than creating journals or other personal documents. In fact, most of the journals written by any women during this time period were composed by wealthy women who had extensive leisure time, Mary Chesnut being the most famous. There were women of this class in the mountains, particularly the Lenoir women, who did, in fact, chronicle their experiences, and these documents are wonderful resources. According to the census records, however, the vast majority of women in this region were part of households supported by small scale farming and their labor was necessary to the survival of the family. Even the Lenoir women, with their fine home and servants, were engaged in labor ranging from weaving to poultry management, supplementing the estate's income and diversifying its produce. Their writing is frequently concerned with their work and its products. Women who had to perform extensive chores that included food preservation and preparation, child care, household maintenance, and all duties relating to birth, death, and care of the sick, had little time to chronicle their experiences, especially after a husband or father's enlistment necessitated their taking on the duties normally performed by males, including heavy farm labor. What little time these women did have to devote to writing was generally reserved for writing letters. The letters composed by these women were actually a crucial part of the war effort, providing moral support and inspiration for husbands, fathers, and sons in distant camps. Unfortunately, few of these letters survive. Only if a man returned home whole, healthy, and with his personal possessions, might the letters be retained, and even then, the family had to have saved the letters for over 130 years for present scholars to have access to them. Obviously, such treasures are rare. Far more often, those who wish to learn about the daily lives of mountain women during the war must look to other sources of information. While letters from women were seldom preserved, letters these women received from loved ones were frequently treasured heirlooms, passed down for generations. These letters can provide insight into the worlds in which these women lived, and their responses to it. For example, several letters written to women include lists of items soldiers wished to have sent to them. These lists reveal the types of food and clothing to which the women would have had access. Other letters detail plans for improving or maintaining the farm, indicating the great confidence men had in the abilities of wives or daughters to carry out their goals, ranging from livestock purchase to the clearing of new ground. Though not written in the voices of the women themselves, these letters can serve as valuable resources, like photographs of some long destroyed vista.

Additional sources of information include census and other public records that reveal information such as wealth, household size, and occupation, since women are often listed

as “farmers,” particularly after the war, when they were left to carry on their husbands’ roles. From these separate and often lifeless documents come the elements needed to resurrect a woman from the 1860s. For, while there is enough information available to construct a reasonable image of one of these women, very few members of the general public will go to the effort of digging up the information, provided they even know it exists. As far as the general public is concerned, most of what they know about the Civil War comes through the media of television, books, and films, many of which are wildly inaccurate and ignore the entire Appalachian region. If Hollywood filmmakers are to be believed, all Confederate soldiers lived in mansions in either Virginia or Georgia, drank mint juleps on the veranda, and had dozens of slaves. In order to present the true history, and to empower the long-silenced voices of 1860s women, I cannot simply do research and collect interesting facts; I must take what I learn and make it relevant and real to the public.

As a volunteer historic interpreter, I have many venues where I can interact with members of the general public, some of whom may not even have had a previous interest in the war at all. In elementary schools, at museums, in parks, and at other venues I am able to give students of all ages an image of what a woman from this area would have looked like, while I explain the unique hardships and troubles faced by Appalachian women, who had to defend their homes, resources, and families against enemy soldiers, criminals, and the elements. My physical person encourages students and visitors to ponder ideas and ask questions ranging from the mundane (“How do you go to the restroom?”) to the profound (“How did these women respond to the remarkably high mortality rates for their children?”). In answering these questions, I provide the long-dead women of this region with a sympathetic audience. For example, when I relate to schoolchildren the story of Malinda Blaylock, one of the only women from any region to successfully pass herself off as a male soldier, the children can actually see how difficult it would be to take this 1860s woman from Watauga County and transform her into an 1860s man. Once they have seen (and often touched) my hair and clothing, they have a deeper appreciation for Malinda’s disguise and immense struggle it must have been for her to cut her hair and discard traditional clothing. I often recount one of my favorite stories, of Eliza Baird, a tiny little woman who brought her wounded cousin home on the only horse available for miles, right at the end of the war, as the woods were swarming with bushwhackers and soldiers. Eliza’s journey is much more real to people when they see a woman, of about her height, dressed as she would have been. Then, they can understand perhaps something of her ordeal. Eliza never wrote a book or left extensive journals of her experience, but her story was passed down in her family, and now can be experienced by the public, through my presentation.

In addition to educating the public, historic interpretation provides me and other other interpreters with a unique challenge: to ever improve our impressions and answer the questions for which we do not have immediate answers. Although I am one of only a small number of interpreters to focus on Appalachian women, I cannot, by any definition, claim to know everything about the subject. Like those who come to my presentation, I am a learner. I am always delighted to be asked a question which requires additional scholarship to answer. With the birth of my son, I have been privileged to explore a

whole new region of scholarship: motherhood. While I would be an anomaly in the 1860s at my age, to have only one child, I am now able to include my son in my presentations, bringing to life the struggles mountain women faced in raising their children. As I wrestle with everyday concerns, from feeding to keeping an infant warm, I am able to examine the ways these women dealt with the same concerns, and share these insights with the public, many of whom never considered the fact that all infants wore dresses, both to aid in changing, and to make the best use of limited resources: hand-me-downs could be used regardless of the younger sibling's gender. When I talk about cholera or other epidemics wiping out a whole family, including small children, listeners can see my son, in his nineteenth century dress and bonnet, and realize that those children were no less real than this child, that the tiny little stones lined up in cemeteries represent real babies, dressed like this one, who laughed and wiggled just as he does. In this way, we provide a voice for the children of this region, as well as their mothers. In my presentation, I usually describe him as being "pert as a cricket," a phrase used in a rare letter written by a Yancey County woman, telling her husband of their child's spirits after an illness. In a few programs, her delightful turn of phrase can be shared with far more people than the handful who have read her letter, or even the few dozen people she knew in her community. In those few words, her voice and spirit live.

My research, like that of the growing number of other interpreters who have taken up the goal of bringing to life the long-silent voices of these women, will never truly be completed. Rather, it will continue to expand as I seek to discover more of their history and, in turn, share it with the historians of the future. It is my hope that these women will be both remembered and honored, and that their unique sacrifices will never be forgotten.

Suggested Reading

While the preceding paper is based largely on experience, rather than on secondary materials, the following texts provide some insight into the lives of Civil War women in Appalachia, and have been helpful in research I have conducted for my interpretive programs.

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1850 Census, Watauga County, North Carolina.

1860 Census, Watauga County, North Carolina.

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Trotter, William R. *Bushwhackers: The Civil War in North Carolina, The Mountains*. Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F Blair, 1988.

Van Noppen, Ina Woestemeyer. *Western North Carolina Since the Civil War*. Boone, N.C.: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1973.

York, Maurice C. *The Many Faces of Fort Defiance: A Report Submitted to Fort Defiance, Incorporated*. Chapel Hill, 1979.

Unpublished materials

The Barefoot Letter Collection, privately owned.

The Bennet Smith Letters, Privately owned.

Farthing, Lena Kate Ward. Biography of Ermine Farthing.

Hardy, Michael. Biographical Roster of Watauga County's Confederate and Union Soldiers.

The J.D. Councill Letters, Duke University Manuscript Collection Oral History Project. W.R.

Eury Appalachian Collection. Appalachian State University.

A detailed examination of the various roles fulfilled by Western North Carolina Women during the war can be seen in "'You Must Do The Best You Can While I am Gone': Northwestern North Carolina Women and the War Between the States." by Elizabeth Baird Hardy, published in the 2000 Conference Proceedings for The Second Annual Conference on the Women of Appalachia.

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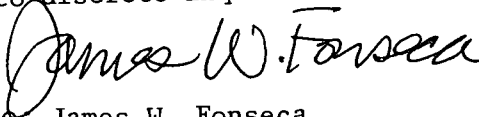
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