

Teacher's Guide
for
"SPY! The Story of Civil War Spy
Elizabeth Van Lew"

Program created and performed by
Lynn Ruehlmann
Storyteller

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Teacher's Guide for
"Spy! The Story of Civil War Spy Elizabeth Van Lew"

About the show:

Elizabeth Van Lew was a remarkable, daring woman. She lived in Richmond, Virginia, for most of her life. Although her father was a wealthy businessman who owned slaves, Elizabeth was passionately against the practice. Before the war broke out, she and her mother freed all the family slaves, and during the war her dedication to the cause of abolishing slavery led her to begin spying for the Union. General Ulysses S. Grant himself credited her with sending him extremely valuable information during the war.

This program is the story of how Elizabeth Van Lew became a spy. It is the story of how she smuggled messages into Libby Prison in a pot of food; how she saved her favorite horse, Chieftain, from soldiers; and how she hid escaped prisoners in her home and sent them to safety through her own underground railroad. Here also is the story of how she earned the nickname "Crazy Bet" when she began affecting dementia in order to avoid suspicion.

Much of the material in the show comes from the diary that Elizabeth kept all during the war and which she buried in her back yard when she feared it would be discovered.

She is buried in a family plot in Shockoe Hill Cemetery with a plaque reading

"Elizabeth Van Lew

1818-1900

She risked everything that is dear to man - friends, fortune
comfort, health, life itself, all for one absorbing desire of
her heart - that slavery might be abolished and the Union
preserved."

About Storyteller Lynn Ruehlmann:

Lynn has been a professional storyteller for over 15 years. She has taught storytelling at Old Dominion University, won a Folio Award for Best Actress in a Comedy, and Artist of the Year from Young Audiences of Virginia. Her recording of "Spy! The Story of Civil War Spy Elizabeth Van Lew" won two national awards.

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Activities:

1. Research the music of the Civil War. Create a medley of tunes.
Note whether the songs were battle songs, ballads, or songs used by slaves to communicate secretly.
2. There were many female spies during the Civil War. Elizabeth Van Lew spied for the Union. Research Belle Boyd or Rose O'Neal Greenhow, both of whom spied for the Confederacy. Write or share their story orally.
3. There are many letters written from the battlefield still in existence. One of them, from Lewis Douglass, a volunteer in the all black 54th Massachusetts Regiment, includes the lines, "The last fight was desperate....I escaped unhurt from amidst that perfect hail of shot and shell....Should I fall in the next fight killed or wounded I hope I fall with my face to the foe. My Dear girl I hope again to see you."

Choose a character from your study of the Civil War or from the show, "Spy!" (a few possibilities are Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union soldier imprisoned in Libby Prison, Lt. David Todd, a soldier confiscating horses, a member of Van Lew's spy ring, one of the slaves freed by the Van Lews) and write a letter as that character.

Bibliography for further study:

Southern Lady, Yankee Spy, by Elizabeth R. Varon. Oxford University Press, New York. 2003.

A Yankee Spy in Richmond: The Civil War Diary of "Crazy Bet" Van Lew, edited by David D. Ryan. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA. 1996.

My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk about Slavery: Twenty-one Oral Histories of Former North Carolina Slaves, edited by Belinda Hurmence. John Blair, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. 1984.

A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy, edited by Edward Campbell, Jr. and Kym Rice. Museum of the Confederacy and the University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 1996.

EVALUATION FOR PROGRAM BY
Lynn Ruehlmann, Storyteller

Lynn Ruehlmann came to your school recently. Could you please take a minute to fill out this evaluation and return it to her at: 621 New Hampshire Avenue

Norfolk, Virginia 23508

Thanks so much for your help!

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What program or workshop did you attend?

What did you or your students like best about the program and/or workshop?
Why?

Was there anything you or your students would have wanted changed?

Are there any particular stories or kinds of stories that you would like to hear in the future?

What material or skills would you like covered in the future in a workshop?

Do you have any other comments?

Optional signature

Thank you again for your help and opinions. They are so valuable and appreciated!