

HAUNTING VOICES SPEAK OF CIVIL WAR TIMES
IN MONTEREY DINNER THEATER

by Amy Davis



Gathering on the front porch of the historic Officer house — the site of a Civil War massacre in 1864 — are the actors of the “Haunting Voices of the Civil War” Dinner Theatre to be held Oct. 12 and Oct. 14 at Monterey Community Center. They are, sitting, Sierra and Haley Ray, and, standing, from left, Donna Choate, Drucilla Ray, Oplless and Kay Walker and Zaidee

Bohannon. Not pictured is Dale Bohannon. For ticket information, call the Monterey Depot Museum at 931-839-2111. Audrey Blaylock photo.

MONTEREY — The lights go down, the mood shifts... and suddenly it’s 1864 again.

A woman dressed in black is joined by her husband as they come before the Monterey Depot Historical Society’s dinner theater audience to share the story of the day they survived the unthinkable.

A massacre in their own home.

Adorned in her Victorian-era high neckline and long skirt, “Cynthia Holford Officer,” (portrayed by Monterey’s Kay Walker), along with “William Alexander Officer” (Op Walker), recount the terror of the morning of March 12, 1864, when 200 Union Army troops arrived by horseback to their two-story farm house in the Sinking Cane community of Overton County, three miles north of Monterey, and gunned down the six Confederate soldiers who had been overnight guests there.

Cynthia herself was accidentally shot in the incident — a shoulder wound which, ironically, saved both her husband and 19-year-old son John Holford Officer from the same fate as their grey-uniformed guests.

John, also a Confederate soldier, had been home on leave that weekend and — with help from the family’s trusted slave, “Uncle Abe” — escaped from the breakfast table just in time to climb into the attic while his unarmed comrades were executed.

But John wasn't in the clear just yet. From his hiding place, he heard the colonel's order to burn down the house.

But his father, William, put the fire out twice before appealing to the Union soldiers, pointing out that they had "murdered six unarmed men and painfully wounded his wife" and "heaped upon him as much sorrow as any human being could endure."

At that point, one of the colonel's men told William: "It was a shame your wife got shot" but that it was also a blessing in disguise "because we were going to kill you and burn your house. I am going to spare your life so you can take care of your wife."

So the Officers survived their ordeal. But the haunting voices from that day live on, as do many other stories from Monterey's Civil War history.

And dinner theater director Julie Bohannon intends to keep those stories alive.

"The Civil War was so dark, and the things that happened then are still affecting us," she said. "The memories come back to haunt us."

The dinner theater, appropriately themed "Haunting Voices of the Civil War," is Oct. 12 and Oct. 14 at the Monterey Community Center. While the Friday night show is sold out, tickets are still available for Sunday at \$35 each, \$50 per couple or \$150 per table of six and are available by calling the Monterey Depot Museum at 839-2111. The performance starts at 2 p.m. with seating at 1:30 p.m.

Not only will participants hear the harrowing story of the Officer house massacre, they'll learn of other tragic tales from Monterey's past portrayed by local residents.

"It's more of a storytelling," Bohannon said of the dinner theater. "They're in character, but they'll be addressing the audience."

Alcy Whittaker, portrayed by Zaidee Bohannon, will tell about the difficult chore of getting buckets of cold drinking water from the spring on a hot day — and about how much more fearful that task can be if a Yankee soldier stops by, asking for a drink. Does she give him a drink, knowing what he might do?

Another character from the past is Mahala Parrott (portrayed by Drucilla Ray), the wife of Sgt. James F. Parrott, who went off to fight the Yankees, leaving the burden of looking after the farm and raising their young children to her.

The audience will listen as Mahala reads the actual letters from her husband describing his injury and details of the war. But what about the farm and the animals and the children (portrayed by Sierra and Haley Ray)? What advice does he give her, and what will she do?

Taking the stage next is Donna Choate, who plays the part of a Confederate widow. How does she cope with everyday life? Will her husband come home from this terrible war? What about the strange sounds she hears at night?

The final act of the dinner theater comes from the year 1900. Confederate cook T. G. Walker (Dale Bohannon) has driven a wagon to Monterey from Walker Hollow to attend the Standing Stone Day parade. He proudly wears his Confederate uniform and shares some tall tales about his Civil War experiences. Are they true? Is he a prophet?

Also part of the show is Frances Eldridge, who will be singing songs from the Civil War era.

While the dinner theater stories may be disturbing, Bohannon is glad to be sharing them with the community.

“Monterey is rich in history, and with this being the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, we just want to remind people of what went on and what our role was during that time,” she said.

“These are real stories we have grown up with, and some of them are hard to shake. It’s very disturbing to think about what people had to live through during that time. That’s why it’s so important to remember it — the story of surviving it.”

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