

LARRY SLABODA LOCAL HISTORY ENTHUSIAST

'Round Trip' cast find a special dimension in history-based play

By **DONNA SMITH**

Special to the Herald-Citizen



Cookeville of the 1940s comes to life through the eyes of the characters in Round Trip: **Cookeville Goes to War**, an original play by Cookevillian **Larry Slaboda** opening Sept. 19 for a four-evening run at the Depot Museum.

"Some of our characters or their families will actually be in the audience, so the sense of history and community is an integral part of the play," says Josh Winscott, who plays both a soldier on the train and Fred the Railroader.

While Slaboda's play does not claim to be historically accurate, some of the real men and women who lived in Cookeville are a part of the story, and other characters are fictional persons who fit right into the time and place, according to Judy Duke, director.

Bringing characters like these to life is one reason to love the stage, according to Winscott, who has acted most of his life and is now active in his church's drama program.

"Most people see theater and enjoy it but with this play the audience can relate on a deeper level. This realization that the characters and the place and the time are a part of life is the way I have always felt about the stage, and it is great to share this view with others."

"History classes were never this real," adds actress Shannon Frazier. "I love learning about life during World War II as well as being a part of theater with old and new friends."

Beth Ann Johnson agrees that the stories from the past are a major part of the play's attraction and says that getting into the mind of a character from the 1940s is fascinating.

"In my mind I keep seeing all the movie stars of the era," says Beth Ann, whose roles in the play include the sweetheart and one of the singing 'Andrews Sisters.' A Sparta native, she has experience at Cumberland County Playhouse in Crossville as well as with Cookeville Children's Theater.

"I think more and more of my grandparents who actually owned a movie theater and the lives they lived during the war and the Depression years leading up to that time."

"This play helps me understand why I fell in love with the South," adds Beth Thompson whose role as Dottie, the waitress, is the anchor character for Round Trip.

Dottie, on her way to Georgia during the Depression years, had a few minutes while the train stopped for a small repair at the Cookeville Depot.

She entered the TPI Cafe (named for Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, now Tennessee Technological University) and stayed on as waitress for the next 10 years. The TPI Cafe with Dottie behind the counter and the Depot in the background form the setting for Judy Duke's production.

Parallels between the actress and her character have been fun for Thompson. Both Beth and her character, Dottie, had read loads of books by Southern writers and had dreamed of the South for years before packing up and heading this direction.

"I can feel the warmth of the play, just as I felt the warmth and acceptance of Cookeville from my first days here.

"Dottie felt the same sense of family here. She stayed here just as I did," says Thompson, who traveled here from her native Minnesota, married a "good old Southern boy," began a family and put down roots.

"Along with the nostalgia about Cookeville and a time gone by, the play gives you some train history as well," says Judy Duke.

For example, there is Steve Gwilt's character, Harvey the Railroad Engineer. While not an actual person, Harvey could have been an engineer on the Tennessee Central Railroad in its heyday.

Gwilt, veteran actor and director familiar to Cookeville theater-goers, applauds playwright Slaboda for the color he has created in his characters and the historical bits intertwined throughout his script.

"I am glad to be a part of a project like this that conveys the rich history of this area," says Gwilt.

Looking into what Cookeville was like in the 1940s is also a big part of the experience for Sam Spurlock in his role as Bryan Wiggins. Wiggins's father, the real-life station agent at the Depot, also appears in the story and is played by Bob Anspach.

"I am learning answers to questions like how Cookeville made a difference in the war and why it is important to keep the Depot here," says Spurlock, who is active in a drama at Cookeville High School and in his church youth group.

Another of the historical characters is director Judy Duke's own grandfather, who appears briefly in the play. Officer Phy Gibson, played by Michael Shemwell, walked a beat on Cookeville westside in the 1930s, 40s and 50s as a member of the police force. Shemwell is another experienced Cookeville actor and is just finishing his part in *Broadway Sings* at the Thomas House in Red Boiling Springs.

Chris Malone plays another Cookevillian, T C Huddleston, who was named for the Tennessee Central Railroad.

Working with the person who actually wrote the play is another highlight for Malone, who is acting in his 18th stage production. "How often does an actor wonder just exactly what the playwright meant and how often does an actor get a chance to ask the writer himself! Just imagine being able to walk up to Neil Simon and ask him about a passage. Now I have a similar opportunity while we are working with Larry," says Malone.

Joe Hargis says he has learned an important lesson for his own life from his role.

Hargis says his real-life character, Bennett Travis, has taught him the importance of following your dream, no matter what happens.

Part of Hargis's dream is being on stage, and he is enthusiastic about outdoor theater as well as about working with and learning from the director and his fellow actors. "Working with such a talented group of people raises the level of theater," says Hargis.

"I love theater, so just being here as a part of this play is enough."

Another actor who is a part of the cast because of her love of theater as well as her support of the community is Heather Burgess who portrays a girl in the cafe.

Heather, who has appeared often on stage in Cookeville and is just finishing a role in the Drama Center Backstage production of *Headset: A View from the Light Booth*, loves the attitude of the cast and the expertise of the director, which is what all the actors say about working on this particular play.

They are full of enthusiasm for the play, for the cast and for the chance to work with Judy Duke, a widely experienced actress in serious amateur roles as well as a professional performer as "Aunt Mattie Gooch," the country bumpkin comedienne.

'Round Trip: Cookeville Goes To War' opens on Wednesday, Sept. 19, and continues through Sept. 22 on an outdoor stage with special seating accommodations erected at the west-end of the Depot Museum on Cookeville's downtown westside business district. A dinner-theater production, each evening will begin with a meal of yeast rolls and ham, pinto beans, corn-on-the-cob, fried-apple pies and lemonade served by Grade-A Catering, 6:30 until 7:30; and curtain time will be at 7:30. Tickets go on sale tomorrow, Sept. 10, at the Cookeville Drama Center box office or phone (931) 528-1313; the \$15 price includes dinner and the play.

*** Donna B. Smith has written and arranged publicity for numerous theatrical productions in Cookeville.**

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Larry Slaboda: poet, artist, singer... Playwright

Jill Thomas
Herald-Citizen Staff

It has taken **Larry Slaboda** 67 years to get his first play produced.

"For me, words are fun ... beautiful things," said the assistant director and exhibit specialist at Cookeville's Depot Museum and the city's History Museum.

"I have written poetry before for my own amusement, but a play is not a poem.

"And I've contributed to small business publications. I wrote a secretarial and a supervisory manual. But those were more business than creative," he said.

Next week Slaboda's two-act play, **Round Trip**, will take center stage as an outdoor dinner-theater production at the Depot Museum on Cookeville's westside business district.

Including actual names and personalities from Cookeville's history, the play is really a series of vignettes about life in Cookeville during the 1940s. Scenes are set at the Depot and catty-corner across the street at the old TPI Cafe (which was located where Crawdaddy's is now).

"TPI stands for the old name for Tennessee Tech, the Tennessee Polytechnic Institute," Slaboda said. "The cafe was a real place and was a social center in town, as was the depot. You'd get train people and travelers, soldiers and college students all eating there.

"The play moves in and out of time from 1941 to the present," he said. "But most of the action takes place between 1941 and 1948. It mixes real people with imaginary characters."

Slaboda's writing skills were pulled into action this summer when plans for a different play fell through.

"I was pretty much a last resort," he laughed.

"I told Judy (Judy Duke, the director of museums in Cookeville and the director of Round Trip) some of my ideas. She said to go ahead and do it, and two days later I had a draft. She thought it was good enough for us to go forward with it.

"But even now, I consider it to be almost a 'throw away.' If I had more time, it could have been much better," Slaboda said wistfully.

When Slaboda had some friends read the play, they all came back with the same criticism.

"They all said, 'It's too short,'" he said. "Not being a playwright, I kept asking, 'How do I do more?' I added dialogue, but it was still too short."

The solution was to add music.

"We filled it with music," Slaboda said. "It's not integrated into the story, like a Broadway musical, as much as it is embellishing the story."

Judy and music director Rebecca Winscott added nine vintage songs to be sung by an 'Andrews Sisters'-type trio, a crooner, a male/female duet and a torch singer.

Slaboda, who belongs to the Mastersingers ("I once got to sing a 17-bar solo,"), will be performing one of the songs.

Graphic artist

But theater has never before been part of Larry Slaboda's life. He was always interested in a different kind of art -- graphic art.

He began dreaming of becoming a graphic artist when in grade school, but it took a long time for him to fulfill that dream.

In fact, for a while it looked like he might end up with a career as a professional golfer -- not a player, but a teaching pro.

"I was a caddy at 10, and a caddy master at 16," he said. At 18, he joined the PGA and was offered an assistant teaching position at Yardley, Penn.

But after a year, Slaboda enlisted in the US Army in the hope of getting some training in photography and the graphic arts.

"I joined the Army in 1953 to escape the draft," he said. "I thought I could pick any job if I joined up. The Army offered the best chance to pick what you wanted, but it didn't have photography. Instead, it offered photo-lithography."

The Army sent the 20-year-old enlistee to Japan to oversee a large printing plant there.

"Here I was, a 20-year-old put in charge of 30 - 40 Japanese experts," Slaboda said.

How did they treat the youngster who was their boss?

"They loved me, and I don't know why," he laughed. "Maybe it was because I latched on to the Japanese soul early. I became a Japanophile."

After a while, a job opened up in the art department where Slaboda supervised printing preparations for propaganda publications for the Army at the Adjutant General Printing Center.

"We did all the documentation including decorative documents and flight manuals as well as propaganda," he said.

Slaboda loved Japan so much he hoped to go to Sophia University, a Jesuit school in Tokyo, after his Army tour was through.

But even though he would have been able to attend the university on the GI Bill, he couldn't find a financial guarantor and had to give up the idea of staying in Japan.

Teaching golf

So he came back to what he knew, and became an assistant teaching pro at Greenacres in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, for the next two years.

Why didn't he make a career teaching golf?

"I never thought about a career in golf," he said. "It didn't seem like a serious enough occupation. To a young idealist, it seemed trivial.

"Of course, now I look at it differently. But trust me, it's a very different world today. Having a job related to golf was unique back then. Everybody has a golf connection today."

Slaboda quit his golf job and went back to school as an English major at Regis College in Denver.

"It was a Jesuit school which stressed the arts. We certainly got our fill of poetry. I loved it," he said.

But another kind of love cut into his education, and he left college to get married and raise a family. And he actually worked for a while as a graphic artist for Martin Marietta.

"But people (and bosses) kept telling me I ought to be in sales," he said. And he eventually did end up in sales, first selling 'western footwear' and then settling into computer sales. He and his family made their home in California.

Daughter moved here

And then -- one of his three daughters married a man whose parents were from Putnam County, Tenn. When that couple retired and moved back to Cookeville, Slaboda's daughter and son-in-law moved here to be with them, giving Slaboda a Cookeville connection.

When Larry subsequently retired five years ago, the quality of life here plus the presence of his daughter drew him to Cookeville.

"California is not a good place to retire," he said. "Here, I could take what I'd saved and manage to have a good life.

"Today, people are as close to anyplace they want to visit as the nearest airport. I can visit my other daughters any time I want."

Slaboda also visits his beloved 31-foot Hunter sailboat when he goes to the coast.

"I lived on that boat for six years," he said. "When you live on a boat, you don't collect a lot of stuff."

To his surprise, he has found a sailing connection here in the landlocked foothills of Tennessee.

"There are a surprising number of people here who love to sail," he said.

Loves local history

When he retired to Cookeville, his love of history resulted in his taking a job at the Depot. Now he splits his time between the Depot and the Cookeville History Museum.

"If anyone is steeped in local history, it's got to be me," Slaboda said. "We hear about local history all the time from visitors. We get contributions from all over."

To add authenticity to his play, Slaboda has studied the museum's 30 editions of 'Highballer,' a publication of the Friends of the Depot which has been coming out since 1985.

"It has railroad lore, nostalgic stories, poetry -- and a lot of information that was useful for the play," he said.

Slaboda talked about seeing his play differently when he saw it performed rather than just reading it.

"I don't think it's particularly good," he said. "But I have to say that, when watching the characters come to life, it just knocked me out."

'Beyond the words'

"They bring a dimension that goes beyond the words [of the script]."

Slaboda thought for a minute, then said: "I wanted to communicate important local history in a way others might not have thought of."

"When you get old like me, you begin to find creative juices. This is sort of an adventure for me."

* **Round Trip** will be performed next Thursday through Saturday, Sept. 19-22, on an outdoor stage. Rain dates have been scheduled for Sunday and Monday, Sept. 23 and 24. All proceeds will go to the Depot Museum.

The ticket price of \$15 includes an authentic 1940s 'sack' dinner catered by Grade A Catering which will include two rolls with ham, pinto beans, corn-on-the-cob, fried-apple pie and lemonade.

Dinner will start at 6:30 , and the play at 7:30.

Call the Cookeville Drama Center box office at (931) 528-1313 to make a reservation.

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A walk through Cookeville history

Lindsay Pride

Herald-Citizen Staff

"A little stroll through a little history." That's how **Larry Slaboda**, one of the writers for the seven dramatic segments to be performed at the 'Candlelight Cemetery Walk,' describes the history-based theatrical event slated for next Saturday, Sept. 21, at the Cookeville City Cemetery on East Spring St.

During the performance directed by Cookeville Depot and History Museums director Judy Duke, tour guides will lead the audience to seven grave sites of prominent and as well as everyday people who lived in Cookeville between the mid-1800s and the end of the 20th century.

Cookeville-area actors will portray the historical characters of those buried at each site from scripts by Cookeville writers Marge Hargrove, Cindy Putman, Opless Walker, Slaboda and Charles Denning.

But however unusual the idea of a cemetery walk may seem, the idea is not unique.

"I had heard of cemetery walks before," said Judy Duke, an experienced actress, director and comedienne nationally known as 'Aunt Mattie Gooch.' "But when I first started the job at the Depot, Judy Roberson told me I needed to do a cemetery walk.

"I have to credit her with planting the idea. It's a great way to share Cookeville history in a way that hasn't been done here before."

Duke and Cookeville Leisure Services Director Rick Woods visited a cemetery walk in Sumner County and decided that they could do one in Cookeville.

There the work began.

"I wanted it to be an educational, respectful way of sharing Cookeville/Putnam County history," Duke said about the Cemetery Walk.

But choosing which grave sites to visit in the Cookeville City Cemetery proved as difficult a task as developing the characters.

"I began reading early history books of Cookeville and Putnam County, and names began to stick out," said Duke, who soon had a lengthy list of big names in Putnam County history.

She narrowed the list down with the help of several local historians beginning with Putnam County cemetery expert Maurine Patton, Tennessee Tech history professors Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, longtime TTU librarian Christine Jones and Cookeville High School history teacher Hal Denton.

"By that time, people were coming up to me and telling me interesting stories about people they had known," Duke said.

"What it really boiled down to, in the end, is logistics," she said. "We can't have them (grave sites) closer to each other than 400 feet because of overlapping in the sound that night."

"That had a lot to do with determining which sites to visit," she said.

Seventeen performers will be involved in the Cemetery Walk in addition to master of ceremonies Woods and Tennessee Tech professors Graham and Bettye Kash.

Prior to the tour, the Kashes will entertain the audience with music and singing, setting the stage for the performances.

Characters/actors

Many personalities such as Joan Derryberry, Luke Medley and O. K. Holladay will need no introduction, but Duke said she wanted several of the characters represented to be everyday people.

"Everybody has their story to tell," she said. "I wanted to get ordinary citizens like you and me. Everybody makes a contribution whether his name is in the paper or not."

Actress Joyce Tatum, who directs Prescott Pups at the First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, will play the part of Mahaley Shaw. Shaw and her husband, Thomas Jefferson Shaw, were among the earliest settlers of the area. They opened the Shaw House, a hotel and restaurant near the Courthouse Square.

According to Duke, there is not an actual grave site for Shaw but a plaque at the cemetery indicates her importance in forming the city-owned City Cemetery.

"Mahaley Shaw will be the first character the audience will see," Duke said. "Her family donated the land to start the cemetery."

Putnam County teacher Cindy Putman will portray Letitia Pearl Arnold Wilson, and her husband, Burton Putman, will play Luke Medley.

Pearl was married to Clarence Wilson who helped found the Granite and Marble Works which is still located across from the cemetery.

"She was selected to be part of this Cemetery Walk because she lived a life that was very typical of the times ... times when parents, because of disease and the state of medical practice, too often outlived their children," Duke said.

Many are familiar with the accomplishments of Luke Medley who began Cookeville's first radio station, WHUB, in 1940, and served as Cookeville's mayor in the 1960s.

He also served as a county judge and magistrate instrumental in building roads and schools and in getting Interstate 40 routed near Cookeville.

But unlike Medley, other characters represented in the Cemetery Walk may not be as easily recognizable.

"There's names like James P. Barnett and Mary Lee Barnett that aren't going to ring a bell with anyone but the descendants," Duke said.

Professional nanny and local actress Shannon Frazier will play the part of Mary Lee Barnett, and veterinary technician Josh Winscott will play the part of James P. Barnett.

The Barnett family lived in Cookeville until the early 1930s during the days of the Great Depression when James accepted a much-coveted position as a mail carrier in Nashville.

The couple will share their dramatic event, explaining their connection to Cookeville.

Amy Guidry will portray Emma Hensley. "Her story is very interesting," Duke said.

Hensley worked for Albert Gore Sr. while he was Tennessee Commissioner of Labor and later when he was elected to the US Senate.

She later moved on to the Legal Division of the Reconstruction Finance Committee under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Her government career peaked when she became one of the two stenographers selected under Secretary of State Edward R. Stetinius to transcribe the original United Nations Charter documents at the founding event of the UN in San Francisco in 1945.

TTU English professor Homer Kemp will play Thomas Grishom Smith, a Civil War veteran who was seriously injured as a member of Gen. Dibrell's 13th Tennessee Cavalry and became a Presbyterian preacher.

Other actors have a personal connection to the people they're portraying. WCTE-TV station manager Becky Magura will be Joan Derryberry, wife of longtime TTU President Everett Derryberry and a driving force in support of the arts in the Upper Cumberland and Tennessee.

"They were good friends," Duke said. "Becky Magura has her own memories of Joan Derryberry."

Other actors are direct descendants of the people they're portraying.

Matt Bassett is the great-grandson of Judge O. K. Holladay whom he will be portraying. Actress Janey Bassett is his granddaughter.

"Janey is portraying a character that the scriptwriter wrote in," Duke said. "Many of these people didn't like to talk about themselves, so we created a character who admired him."

Holladay was a lawyer, circuit judge, state senator and president of Citizens Bank who was active in several civic organizations.

But even the actors who have no connection to the roles they're playing have developed their characters by talking to people who knew them.

"Many have taken it on themselves to talk to family members of the characters," she said.

Tour Guides

Seven tour guides will lead the audience through the eight-minute monologue segments at the seven grave sites, and while they don't portray "real" characters, their roles are based on several types of people important to Cookeville history.

"These tour guides will tell the audience about the eras they're from," Duke said. "They have to be able to talk and think on their feet and be in control of 30 people."

"Julie Lane is portraying a member of the Women's Air Corps," she said. "Don Fenlon is portraying a reporter from the Cookeville Press."

Cookeville High School student Kyle Farley will play a man who has just gotten a job at the railroad. Farley has been a volunteer apprentice at the Depot Museum for the past two years.

"He's well-versed in railroad," Duke said.

Actress Marcia Reel will portray a Civil War widow, and Cookeville High School student Billy George will be one of the tour guides portraying a World War II soldier.

Peggy Fragopolous and Don Prince are the other two tour guides for the Cemetery Walk.

Chad McDonald is the technical director, and Mary Daniels -- both of the Leisure Services Dept. staff -- is the site coordinator.

Performance information

The two evening performances of the Cemetery Walk on Saturday, Sept. 21, will be candlelit, and some hay-bale seating will be available at most grave sites.

The early show will begin at 6:30 p.m., and the later show will begin at 9.

Tickets are \$10 each and are available by calling the Cookeville Drama Center at (931) 528-1313. Proceeds will benefit the Cookeville Depot and History Museums.

Parking will be available at First Baptist Church on Spring Street, and shuttles will run from parking lot to the Cemetery Walk. Ticket holders will meet at the cemetery office on South Walnut Ave. and gather at the wagon.

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Larry Slaboda, local history enthusiast, dies

Jill Thomas

Herald-Citizen Staff

Larry Slaboda was a "Renaissance Man" in Cookeville.

Last Thursday night the man who was instrumental in promoting Cookeville-area history and full of enthusiasms and talents that encompassed his love of the Upper Cumberland died unexpectedly in his sleep.

An memorial service for Lawrence (Larry) Peter Slaboda, 69, will be held tomorrow, Wednesday, July 14, at 6 p.m. at the Cookeville History Museum at 134 South Lowe Ave.

His friends at the Dept. of Leisure Services and Public Facilities will speak at the service. The Mastersingers Ensemble, directed by Joy Rachor, will perform a memorial tribute in music.

During his lifetime, Mr. Slaboda worked as a graphic artist, a chief executive in business, an administrator and salesman in the computer industry, a soldier, a golf professional and a museum curator. He was also a budding playwright, a poet, a singer, a sailor, a craftsman and a Japanophile.

A number of years ago, after moving to Cookeville upon his retirement, he became the cultural arts assistant and interim museum curator of the City of Cookeville's Depot Museum. When Museum Administrator Judy Duke was hired in 1999, Mr. Slaboda worked with her in creating the Cookeville History Museum on Lowe Ave.

"The more we planned and worked on museum exhibit, the more I realized that he was the most multi-talented person I had ever met," Duke said.

During his time at the museum, he became the exhibit specialist and was curator of numerous exhibits, including the present one celebrating the photography of Cookeville photographers Richard and Alard Harding.

Mr. Slaboda was born Sept. 6, 1934, in Trenton, N. J., to the late Peter J. and Mary Firko Slaboda.

He always wanted to be a graphic artist, enrolling in the fine arts program of the School of Industrial Arts in Trenton. But as a teenager his main enthusiasm was golf. He joined the PGA and became a teaching assistant in Yardley, Pa.

When he was 19 he joined the US Army and was sent to school to learn photo-lithography. The 20-year-old was then put in charge of a printing plant in Japan. Later he supervised printing preparations for propaganda publications for the Army at the Adjutant General Printing Center.

Mr. Slaboda loved Japan and hoped to go to Sophia University, a Jesuit school in Tokyo, but was unable to find a financial guarantor and, instead, returned to New Jersey where he taught golf for the next two years.

Later he graduated with a BA in English from Regis College, a Jesuit school in Denver, Colo. Attending college opened up a love of poetry that stayed with him the rest of his life.

He married Beverly Joyce Bell Slaboda and the couple moved to California to raise their children. Mr. Slaboda worked for seven years as a commercial artist/illustrator at Martin Marietta and was a technical writer. He then worked 30 years in industry at various levels of management from supervisor to chief executive.

His private passion was sailing, and during one period he lived for six years on one of his sailboats.

Throughout his life he continued to love golf and stayed active, and last year he won first place in the district Senior Olympics competition in the 100-yard dash.

He moved to Cookeville to be near one of his daughters and to develop his artistic interests. His favorite art medium was block printing for which he won many awards. He also worked in watercolors and oils.

Three years ago he wrote the two act play, Round Trip, that was presented at the Depot Museum. A series of vignettes about life in Cookeville during the 1940s, centering upon the Tennessee Central Railroad, it won wide popularity in the community.

"Cookeville has lost a great friend and a great talent," Judy Duke said.

"He will be missed, but his art and his poems and writings will always be with us."

He family includes his wife of more than 44 years, Beverly Joyce Bell Slaboda; three daughters and two sons-in-law: Lorraine and Paul Burch of Redondo Beach, Calif.; Jennifer and Bruce Williams of Aptos, Calif.; and Lara Brossoit of Cookeville; a brother, Dennis Slaboda, of Trenton, N. J.; two sisters: Mariann Kokotajlo of Bellvue, Neb., and Claire Salewski, of Trenton; eight grandchildren: Peter Crawford, Chelby Speakman, Christopher Burch, Katelan Burch, Rachel Williams, Aaron Williams, Blake Brossoit and Madison Brossoit; and two great-grandchildren: Braedon and Sage Speakman.

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