



“Film tells story of black soldier”

By Lauren Maclane, Sentinel Reporter | Posted: Saturday, April 16, 2011

When Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers on April 14, 1861, one of the men who signed up was Henry W. Spradley.

Spradley was 31 and black. Born into slavery near Winchester, Va., in 1829 or 1830, he and his family had fled north. When he enlisted in the 24th United States Colored Troops in 1864, the Civil War was still raging, and although Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves through his Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the Southern states refused to recognize the act.

Spradley took up arms - and risked a return to slavery if he were to be captured - to fight for a country that did not fully recognize him as a citizen.



Henry W. Spradley

In the documentary "Henry W. Spradley, Citizen," which premiered Friday night at the Carlisle Theatre, Dickinson College junior Colin Macfarlane traces the journey of this man and his incredible ties to the college.

More than 100 people crowded into the Carlisle Theatre to watch Macfarlane's documentary, as well as those by Dickinson College senior Dave Gillespie and John Osborne, associate professor of history at the college.

The trio of films, created as part of the House Divided Project the college has initiated for the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, told the stories of three very different men with very different backgrounds and their very different experiences during the Civil War.

Macfarlane, a double major in history and sociology, began his research into Spradley's life as part of the course requirements for a 300-level history class. The assignment was to tell the story of a local Carlisle resident during the Civil War. Intrigued by the former Lincoln Cemetery (which is now Memorial Park), Macfarlane began an epic voyage of discovery into the history of one man whose name is inscribed on the plaque at the park.



His story

"I really wanted to tell that story. This started as a 304 project and kind of became an independent study. I hope this film can really pay tribute to the Lincoln Cemetery and the soldiers buried there," Macfarlane said.

The 11-minute documentary chronicles Macfarlane's journey to find Spradley's history as well as Spradley's journey from slave to soldier to stone mason to beloved community member.

Unlike the other two documentaries, which draw their information from letters written back and forth between family members, Spradley's story is told through census records, newspaper clippings and other historical documents.

Prior to the Civil War, Spradley was a stone mason, likely a trade he learned in slavery. After the war ended and he returned to Carlisle, he became a janitor at Dickinson College, a post he held until his death.

When he died, on April 9, 1897 -- 32 years to the day after the war which earned him his freedom -- his funeral services had to be moved from the West Street A.M.E. Zion Church to Bosler Hall, on Dickinson's campus, because the expected crowd of people could not fit into the church's hall.

Classes at the college were cancelled for the day and half the attendees at Spradley's funeral service were professors or students at the college.

Part of the funeral services included a rendition of "Safe In the Arms of the Lord," by the college quartet and the A.M.E. Zion choir. Osborne, who acted as emcee of Friday night's films, said that it was touching to read that the white, privileged students would sing with an all-black choir.

Real historian

Professor Matthew Pinsker, chair of the college's history department and Macfarlane's project advisor, said that he told Macfarlane he had "become a real historian" through the course of this project.

"What separated this from the usual work is that they became passionate about a school project," Pinsker said, referring to both Macfarlane and Gillespie.

"They're sharing these stories with the world," he added.



Watching the final projects and seeing the audience's reactions was his favorite part, Pinsker said. "I feel proud to have them sharing their enthusiasm, to have students find inspiration in history. It's exciting because they're introducing ordinary people who did extraordinary things."

Truth and fallacy

Wars are often said to be started by rich men but fought by poor ones. The other two documentaries shown Friday night revealed both the truth and the fallacy of that statement. Osborne's documentary told the story of John Taylor Cuddy, a 16-year-old farm boy who lied about his age to be able to enlist in the army. In his letters home -- often badly spelled but painfully honest -- the boy revealed how the war had forced him to grow up.

He was blunt in disagreeing with Lincoln's decision to free the slaves, telling his mother that doing so had changed the reasons for the war. He wrote hopefully of his upcoming leave in June 1864. He had one final battle, he wrote, then he could come home.

He was captured in that battle and sent to Andersonville Prison in South Carolina. After five months in captivity, just 18 days before his 20th birthday, Cuddy, weakened by disease and malnutrition, died.

Gillespie's film profiled Cuddy's company commander, James Colwell, who had died during the Battle of Antietam. Colwell, who was 48 when he enlisted in 1861, was a wealthy Carlisle lawyer. He could have avoided the fight, but chose to take up arms in defense of what he believed to be right.

Original Link – http://www.cumberlink.com/news/local/article_ba9bb90a-67d8-11e0-a26c-001cc4c002e0.html