

Drama in WHBC history

This article is one in a bicentennial year series for The Link by WHBC Historian Bonnie Healy.

When we wonder what our ancestors were like, sometimes we need only look in the mirror. So it seems to be with at least one aspect of our bicentennial observance: the presentation last May of *Mama Emile's Readers' Theater*, the story of the late missionary to Africa and lifelong WHBC member, Emily Keyes.

In its planning and production, the readers' theater seemed like an original idea. But in the compiling of artifacts from prior anniversaries for display on Bicentennial Sunday on Sept. 20, it became clear our actions were more traditional than original, even though the bicentennial committee had been unaware of the pattern.

Records from four previous anniversary celebrations - the 100th, 120th, 150th, and 175th - have been found in clerks' writings and basement filing cabinets. Two of those four observances included a dramatic presentation, making our readers' theater the third anniversary production.

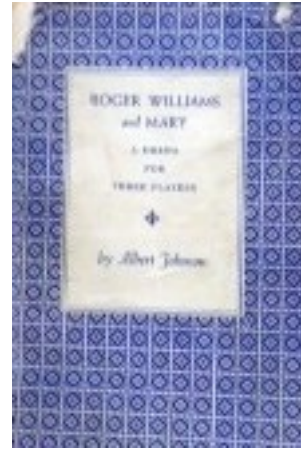
Men March with God in 1935 was an original script written by Mrs. Earl Goodman and George Caswell, the same man who a year later would build *The Book of Golden*



***Men March with God* was produced at WHBC for the church's 120th anniversary, *Roger Williams and Mary* for the 150th, and *Mama Emile's Readers' Theater* for the 200th.**

Memories cabinet now being used for our time capsule. Performed in the Fellowship Hall, it was a complicated production with sets that required forest and cabin scenes, special lighting, and period costumes. The pageant committee numbered 16 and pageant roles 76, although some actors appeared in more than one role.

Men March with God, which Emily would have watched when she was not quite 9, presents early settlers as men of God involved in the issues of their times. They argue over whether the Missouri Compromise will settle the slave question and are shown sneaking escaped slaves into cabins at night as part of the Underground Railroad. When Civil War comes, 135 townsmen go to fight,



and not all of them return. Women left at home raise \$10.64 for "moral and religious readings" for soldiers.

Next, the West Henrietta Baptists fight the evil of liquor as Good Templars. Technology changes: telephones (and eavesdropping on party lines), the Erie Railroad, and automobiles arrive.

The formation of Elizabeth McFarlane's class is noted. Then Rev. James Warner urges young men to fight "the war to end all wars." Disapproval of the message is conveyed by a spotlight on one mother alone as her boy goes and again as the men return without her son.

The 150th anniversary production of *Roger Williams and Mary* was a simpler five-chair, three-person



Mama Emile's Readers' Theater Presented Mother's Day, May 10, 2015 at West Henrietta Baptist Church

presentation of the play that had recently won the Freedom Foundation George Washington Medal of Honor. The play ends with Williams' banishment from Massachusetts for refusing to submit to civil rule on religious matters. He decides to form a new colony in Narragansett, which became Rhode Island. His homesick wife Mary agrees to follow him.

So the question is: did the 1965 WHBC congregation know how deep its own DNA ran in the Rhode Island fight for religious freedom and separation of church and state that followed the end of the play? Gortons, Weavers, Fenners, Shermans, Babcocks and Bly all came to New York and ultimately to Henrietta from Rhode Island. Did they know whose children they were or did they stumble across their tradition unaware?

God knows.