

AN EXTRAVAGANZA IN ARLINGTON

By

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In August, 1939, an exciting event took place in Arlington -- a patriotic pageant, "The Birth of the Flag", was staged here, with a cast of one thousand!

In our archives we have a collection of material pertaining to the production of this heroic spectacle. Two charter members of the Arlington Historical Society, Ruby and Julian Simpson, were involved in the pageant's production. The Simpsons were very active in civic affairs in Arlington for many years. Mrs. Simpson was the first woman to serve on the Arlington School Board, and also was Arlington County Deputy Treasurer for twelve years. After her death in 1960, Mr. Simpson gave some of her papers and effects to the Arlington Historical Society archives, including material about "The Birth of the Flag".

The pageant was held at the old Ballston athletic field and stadium at Wilson Boulevard and North Stafford Street. This site was used by the Washington Redskins as a training field for some years, until the middle 1940's. Earlier, it had been a meeting place for the Ku Klux Klan, and "Many a fiery cross had been burned there", according to Mr. Simpson.

Funds raised from the pageant were intended to be used to establish a recreation center for the youth of Arlington County. Tickets were fifty cents for bleacher seats and seventy-five cents for reserved seats, and one dollar for the box seats.

The scenario for the extravaganza was written by Ray Thompson, a Washington newspaper man. It was produced and directed by William Baker, representing an Ohio theatrical producing company. In Arlington at that time there were no overnight accommodations for tourists, other than in private homes where occasional paying guests were welcomed. Before coming to Arlington for rehearsals, Mr. Baker wrote to Mrs. Simpson: "I have been told that Arlington Hall, a swanky school at Lee Boulevard and Glebe Road rents rooms during the summer vacation time. I'd like a room with private bath if possible."

Many civic organizations participated in staging the pageant, including the Arlington Civic Federation, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and others. Some groups did not choose to be involved in "The Birth of the Flag", among them the Girl Scouts, and the Arlington Chamber of Commerce.

Some of Arlington's leading citizens served on the committees to plan for and produce the pageant. To muster enough players for such a large cast, flyers calling for volunteers were distributed to all Arlington public school students, by authority of Fletcher Kemp, Superintendent of Schools. The Virginia Public Service Company urged all of its employees to "give your time to this very worthy undertaking".

The weeks before the opening of the pageant were busy ones, with afternoon and evening rehearsals. Beauty and popularity contests were held, and Miss Mildred Bolen was chosen as "Queen of the Flag". Several princesses were selected, plus a court of twelve attendants to the queen.

Accumulating the props for this ambitious production was no small task. Among the papers are several scrawled lists of items to be obtained -- pig, little pig, oxen, ox cart, animal pelt stretched on frame, paper or punk, day bed, two pillows, incense, wire screening for incense, one Indian basket, papoose case, wine decanter, candle holders, wooden bucket, bicycle, fireworks, wax fruit, one low goblet.

Some desired props could not be located. A letter from the Sinclair Refining Company to Charles R. Fenwick indicates that he had written to them inquiring about the rubber dinosaurs the company had used extensively in its ads in previous years. The letter stated that the dinosaurs had all worn out, and were not available. (Charles Fenwick served as a Virginia State Senator from 1941 until his death in 1969.)

Virginia Governor James H. Price was invited to attend a performance. At first he declined the invitation, because he planned to vacation at that time, but a week later accepted, "rather than disappoint my friends in Arlington".

On Monday, August 14, a procession of the pageant's queen and princesses rode through Arlington County, each in her special automobile, which had been decorated by Arlington merchants and donated for the parade. Venerable properties acquired for the pageant were drawn in the parade. They included a replica of the Baltimore & Ohio train 207, (the first train to reach the Ohio River, on January 1, 1853), a 125-year old covered wagon, a tally-ho, two surreys, and a stagecoach.

After the parade, the pageant opened with fireworks, band music, and the crowning of the "Queen of the Flag" by the Honorable Harry F. Byrd, United States Senator from Virginia.

The scope of the pageant was amazing. It was divided into twelve episodes, some of which consisted of more than one scene. The first episode was "Men without Banners", set in the Stone Age. The scenario for that scene read as follows:

"The hardly human men of this remote time had no ideals, no cultures, and hence no reason for a flag or banner to symbolize their feelings. They had no apparent purpose in life except to manage to keep alive by struggling with other men, the monster beasts, and the forces and elements of Nature. We see a family group gathered around a flickering fire. The father and other adult males take the best portions of the food and the most comfortable places, while the women and children are left to squabble and fight for the remnants that are left. Other men, not so fortunate in the hunt, skulk by and attempt to take by force what this family has. Being driven off, they succeeded in capturing a girl-child who had wandered away from the fireside. The loss of a daughter does not mean so much to the father as the loss of a future burden bearer and worker for his comfort. But at the sudden appearance of a dinosaur, all the men, women and children grab clubs, stones, and sticks, and unite in an effort to drive off their common enemy."

Other episodes were: "Banners of Power", "Banners of Faith" (the children's crusade), "Adventurous Banners in the Western World", "The English Flag in Early Virginia", "Pocahontas at the Court of St. James", "The Birth of our Flag", "The Star Spangled Banner", "Brave Pioneer Banners", "The Flag Flies over the Public School", "The Ballet of the Colors", "The Flag Survives a Division of the Union", "A Gala Fourth of July", and "America the Beautiful".

Mr. Simpson, in a note transmitting the pageant material to the Arlington

Historical Society, remarked, "The finale was truly awe-inspiring, with Kate Smith's special recording of 'God Bless America' being played".

The performances continued nightly through Sunday, August 20. Governor Price attended on Saturday evening, and crowned Miss Dorothy Simpson as "Miss Virginia". A banquet in his honor was held that night at the Washington Golf and Country Club.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of so many diligent workers, the pageant was not a financial success. The expected large audiences did not materialize. The weather was most uncooperative. It rained, or threatened to rain, every day that week, and on Saturday and Sunday evenings, when the largest crowds were anticipated, there were very heavy rainstorms.