

Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History

By Jan Collins

Published July 18, 2014

Columbia ★ Star

“History is written by the victors,” Winston Churchill once said. He also could have said that history is written mainly by men.

This fact plays out in unsurprising ways. Women, for example, account for only 1 in 10 figures represented in U.S. history textbooks, while only 13 of the more than 200 statues in the U.S. Capitol are female figures.

Americans “only know half of our history,” says Joan Wages, who is President and CEO of the National Women’s History Museum, an entity that currently exists only online. Founded in 1996, the NWHM is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to “educating the public about the diverse historic contribution of women.” It also wants to build a “world-class, permanent museum” in the Washington, D.C., area to “herald and display the collective history of American women.”

The actress Meryl Streep is one of the best-known backers of such a museum.

Two months ago -- 18 years after the online NWHM was founded -- the U.S. House of Representatives finally approved bipartisan legislation to form a Congressional Commission on the potential creation of a brick-and-mortar National Women’s History Museum in the nation’s capital. The current Congress is nearly 20 percent female, the largest proportion ever; apparently, a critical mass of female legislators was needed in order for the idea to be taken seriously. Numbers matter.

A similar bill has been introduced in the U.S. Senate and is awaiting action. Since both political parties are working to attract female voters in this mid-term election year, 2014 may be the magic year for NWHM legislation.

If it is approved, the Congressional Commission would have 18 months to produce a feasible plan for the museum, to include governance, estimated cost, location, and organizational structure. One big question to be decided: should the NWHM join the Smithsonian?

Current thinking is that the museum would be paid for entirely by private donations.

Why not a museum dedicated to what women have contributed to this country's history? There is a National Museum of the American Indian (which opened in 2004), the National Museum of African American History and Culture (set to open in 2015), and the National Museum of the American Latino, now in the planning stages. Women deserve an actual venue to display our considerable contributions, too, particularly since we have been short-changed in the history books for hundreds of years.

The idea of a women's museum has caused some controversy. Most recently, there has been a battle between the museum executives and its historians (an 18-member Advisory Council). That council was dissolved in March by Ms. Wages. If a Commission becomes a reality, however, it will include eight historians and museum experts.

Historians have helped build the online exhibits that one can view today at www.nwhm.org. The photographic and editorial exhibits include Women's Sports, Entrepreneurial Women, Women in Wartime, Women in Early Film, Girls Changing History, Women in Journalism, African American Women, Women in the Olympics, Rights for Women, Women Who Ran for President, and many more.

Perusing the site, you'll learn, among other things, that the first intercollegiate women's basketball game was played in Berkeley, California, between the University of California and Stanford on April 4, 1896 – and that male spectators were banned; that since Title IX of the Education Amendments was approved in 1972, high-school girls' participation in organized sports has increased 10-fold, and in collegiate sports, 6-fold; that civilian female pilots in the 1940s, who flew military aircraft from the factories where they were manufactured to the bases where they were needed, were vital to the war effort; that Sojourner Truth, the famed African-American crusader, gave her most famous speech, "Ain't I A Woman?" in 1851 at a women's rights conference in Akron, Ohio, where all of the other speakers were men; that chef Julia Child was a spy during World War II for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA; that at least 35 women have run for President of the United States.

Our girls need role models, and they can be found by the thousands on the NWHM website. American poet and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes is one of those

role models. Says Estes: “If you have ever been called defiant, incorrigible, forward, cunning, insurgent, unruly, rebellious, you’re on the right track!” Yes, indeed.

In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, as a female reporter in a mostly male newsroom, I wore a button that declared: “Uppity Women Unite”. (I still have it in my jewelry box.) Today, the bumper sticker on my car reads: “Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History.”

It will be fun, and oh so rewarding, to take my four granddaughters one day on a field trip to Washington, D.C., where a visit to the National Women’s History Museum will be at the top of our list.

#####

Jan Collins is a Columbia-based freelance writer, editor, and journalist. She is the co-author of *Next Steps: A Practical Guide to Planning for the Best Half of Your Life* (Quill Driver Books, 2009).