

Susan B. Anthony Lives Again in Adams

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By Ryan Hutton, North Adams Transcript

ADAMS — Over 100 people packed the First Baptist Church of Adams on Sunday to see the reenactment of the trial of the Mother Town's favorite daughter, Susan B. Anthony, for illegal voting. What they didn't expect was that they would be part of the proceedings.



Sponsored by the Adams Historical Society and the Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Museum, Hank Fincken brought his "National Theatre Company of One" to Adams to commemorate Anthony's birthday, coming up on the 15th. Fincken has previously performed one man shows about historical figures such as Thomas Edison, Christopher Columbus and Johnny Appleseed, but this event was different. He chose random people from the crowd to be the different characters in the scene, gave them some background information on what actually happened during the 1873 trial and then let them improvise around him as he played the prosecutor.

"Everyone was very good, and I think the reason they were so good was because this was a subject they knew, so they were more knowledgeable than most people would have been," Fincken said afterward. "I don't do this very often, and it changes every time. This time I had pages of notes on things I didn't even touch because everyone was so good."

Lucy Cziaja — an Adams native and descendant of Anthony — played the famed suffragette. Eric Anthony — another Anthony decedent from Rhode Island — played one of her defenders, and Drew Gibson of Williamstown played the other. Marc Lewandowski of Rochester, N.Y., played the judge, Mack Spellecy of Waterloo, N.Y., played President Milliard Fillmore, and Adams' very own town administrator, William Ketcham, played Voting Inspector Beverly Jones.

Fincken said he likes to teach history through such reenactments because while historical accuracy can suffer during improvisation, personal interest soars, and the process becomes more important than the product.

Just as in the real trial, Anthony didn't say much until the end, and the judge was forced to find her guilty — but personal emotion on the topic was heavy with the crowd.

Fincken's character constantly played to the notion that women were too emotional to vote and that Anthony's father was to blame for educating her — that got the crowd of mostly women very riled up. Several people booed Fincken and cheered Anthony's defenders. Several people who came in period garb from New York interrupted the trial, carrying a large banner that read "Free Susan B." Lewandowski, acting as the judge, ordered them out of the room without breaking character, even though his wife played one of the protesters.

"I like the feeling of argument and the controversy because I imagine that's how it was at the time this really happened and was probably more intense," Eugene Michalenko of the Adams Historical Society said. "We've been trying to do something to honor Susan's contribution to society, and this was a great way."

Ketcham held his own in the improv game, arguing that he let Anthony vote without hassle because she had been registered to do so. When threatened with a trial of his own for letting a woman vote, he calmly responded that it was his boss who had officially let her do the deed.

Defenders Gibson and Anthony were very much on the ball, quoting amendments to the Constitution as well as verses of the Bible to argue their points, all to cheers from the audience. "I didn't have to lead as much I usually do," Fincken said. "People got emotionally involved, and I could play off of that. The defense counselors were very eloquent, and the judge remembered he had to be fair but had to find her guilty. I'm very pleased."

Eric Anthony is a descendant of John Anthony, who came to Rhode Island in 1643 on a ship called the Hercules. He said that branch of the Anthony family had been in Rhode Island going back probably five generations before Susan was taken to trial.

"It was very exciting," he said of the reenactment. "You could feel what it means to be denied rights and what it means as a citizen to retain those rights. I think the Supreme Court has said a right unasserted is a right presumed waived, and you have to assert your rights."

As a descendant of the woman who asserted her voting rights before she legally had them, Czajka said she was honored to play her, even if she had few lines.

"I was born and brought up here, and I'm very familiar with her, and it felt great to portray her," she said. "Women still have to fight for their place, and to imagine that she did this so many years ago is impressive. She really deserves this tribute to her and it truly was improvised. No one had any lines in advance."

As in real life, Anthony was found guilty by the judge, not the jury (the audience), and given a \$100 fine and jail time to be served once she paid the fine. Czajka vowed never to pay the fine — just as her ancestor did in 1873. Anthony never spent a day in jail, and the judge never enforced the sentence. Inspired by Anthony and other suffragettes, women finally won the right to vote with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified by Congress on Aug. 18, 1920. Anthony died on March 13, 1906.

Carol Crossed, acting director of the Susan B. Anthony birthplace museum, brought a busload of people in historical costumes to the performance from Rochester, where Anthony was arrested for voting and lived for much of her life.

"The positive reaction from this performance was great," Crossed said. "This was a different way to teach history, and people really got into it because it was a spontaneous and emotional reenactment. I'm thrilled at what this can do for the message and inspiration Susan brought."