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INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

INDIANA'S THEATRE LAUREATE

In 1619, twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, aboard a Dutch ship. They were the first Blacks to be forcibly settled as involuntary laborers—slaves—in the North American British colonies.

Slavery has been a part of many cultures throughout history, including ancient Egypt, China, Greece, and Rome. In Africa, warring tribes enslaved each other. As Europeans began to colonize the Americas in the sixteenth century, sugar became a valuable product to trade across the Atlantic Ocean. Planting, harvesting, and processing sugar cane required a large labor force, and the work was exhausting; plantation owners preferred to use slaves, who could be forced to work long hours. Native Americans who were enslaved fell prey to many European diseases, so plantation owners began to import African slaves, who were somehow more immune. By 1860 there were four million slaves in the United States.

For the Africans who had been kidnapped from their homes or overpowered in tribal wars and sold into slavery, the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was a terrible one. Packed into decks so close they could not stand upright, they suffered as much as two months in a filthy ship with poor food and little water. Disease was everywhere; one out of six slaves died even before the ships reached their destination.

Those who survived the journey began a lifetime of forced labor. Slaves were considered property, not people. They could not make choices about where to live or what to do. While plantation owners lived in luxurious mansions, slaves lived in tiny cabins and worked long, hard hours in their masters' fields. Some worked as

Exploring A Woman Called TRUTH

by Sandra Fenichel Asher

the life and times of Sojourner Truth

January 26 - March 5, 2005 : Upperstage

Slavery in America

household slaves, cooking and cleaning. Some masters were kinder than others, but many beat and whipped their slaves to ensure their obedience. Slave families were often split apart as masters sold children or parents to other plantations. Slaves earned nothing for their labor; their masters owned everything, including the clothes the slaves wore and the food they ate—which, of course, the slaves themselves had grown and prepared.

In 1776 the Declaration of Independence stated that "all men are created equal," and the United States was founded on such fair-minded principles. Yet slavery continued to flourish in America, particularly in the South, where the economy was largely based on agriculture; sugar, tobacco, and cotton crops continued to require a large, cheap labor force. But in the early 1800s, the Abolitionist Movement—the desire to end slavery—began to grow. This conflict

eventually led to the American Civil War (1861-1865), during which southern states who wanted to keep their slaves withdrew from the Union. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves, and in 1865, shortly after the end of the war and the restoration of the Union, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was passed, outlawing slavery altogether. In 1868 and 1870 the 14th and 15th Amendments, respectively, were passed, making former slaves citizens and guaranteeing them the right to vote.

Unfortunately, prejudice against African Americans lingered, and many roadblocks were created on the way to civil rights. Even today, almost 140 years after the end of slavery, equality among the races is a divisive issue that challenges each of us every day. ★

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- Look for different attitudes toward slavery expressed by different characters.

FOR DISCUSSION

- How does being a slave affect different characters in the story?
- What are some of the lingering effects of slavery that still haunt our society?

TO LEARN MORE

Visit these websites:

- www.slaveryinamerica.org
- www.antislavery.org

Watch on television:

- "Slavery and the Making of America" on PBS beginning February 9

Or check out these books:

- *Africans in America* by Richard Worth
- *Slavery: The Struggle for Freedom* by James Meadows
- *They Came in Chains* by Milton Meltzer



Sojourner Truth

In a time when women had few of the rights of men and most African Americans were slaves, a black woman who called herself Sojourner Truth became famous for her work against slavery and for women's rights. Although she could not read, she was an influential champion of the oppressed and an eloquent spokesperson for the freedom and dignity of all people.

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery some time around 1797 in Hurley, a small town near the Hudson River about 90 miles north of New York City. (As happened with many slaves, her exact birth date was never recorded.) Her parents were slaves of Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh, a Dutch farmer with a gristmill for grinding grain. Families like the Hardenberghs, descendants of the Dutch settlers who had originally colonized New York, clung to their native language despite years of being British and now American citizens, and their slaves also spoke Dutch. Although slavery was not as common in the northern states as in the South, it did exist.

The new parents named their ninth child Isabella, or Belle; all their older children had been sold away from the family to other masters. Belle's father, James, had been so tall and strong in his youth that his nickname was Baumfree, from a Dutch word meaning tree. Belle's mother, Betsey, was called Mama Bett, and she worked hard to instill in Belle and her younger brother, Peter, a firm belief in God and a strong sense of honesty.

Johannes Hardenbergh died when Belle was about three years old, and she and her family became the property of his son Charles. When Belle was nine or ten,

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- Look for occasions when Sojourner refuses to accept what is commonly accepted. How does she find ways to overcome obstacles to achieve her goals?
- This production uses six actors to play some 23 characters. How do the actors transform themselves? Think about not only costumes, but also voices, dialects, gestures, and movement.
- There is much music in this production all produced live on stage. Look for the many small instruments the actors use. What kinds of effects do they create, not only to imitate realistic sounds but also to suggest mood and atmosphere?

Charles Hardenbergh died, and Belle was separated from her family and sold at auction along with horses, cattle, and other slaves. Her new masters, John Neely and his wife, spoke English, and Belle spoke only Dutch. Belle suffered many beatings because she could not understand the Neelys' commands. After a few months, the Neelys sold her to a local fisherman.

Martin Scriver and his wife farmed, fished, and ran a tavern. Belle lived a rough but not unpleasant life with them, working hard in the fields and in the tavern, and learning to speak English. It is here that she acquired her lifelong habit of smoking a pipe. After a year and a half she was sold yet again.

Belle was taken to the nearby town of New Paltz by her new master, John Dumont. She would remain there for the next 16 years. While Mr. Dumont treated her relatively well, his mean-spirited wife disliked her and encouraged her white maids to treat Belle badly. Belle always tried to please her masters, and some of the other slaves even teased her for being too obedient; but she remembered her mother's teachings and trusted that her hard work would eventually be rewarded.

At some time in her teens, Belle met a slave from another farm, Robert, and a romance developed. But Robert's master, an Englishman named Catlin, beat him severely when he caught Robert secretly visiting Belle. Shortly thereafter, Dumont married her to another of his slaves, Thomas. Although their relationship was never close, Belle and Thomas had five children together.

In 1824, the New York legislature passed an emancipation law: slaves born before July 4, 1799, would be freed on July 4, 1827, and younger slaves would be freed when they came of age. Dumont promised Belle he would release her a year early if she worked extra hard. She took him at his word and worked even longer hours than usual. But when the time came, Dumont refused to free her, and Belle decided to run away.

Early one morning, Belle made her escape, but soon realized she had no idea where to go. She appealed to a couple named Isaac and Maria Van Wagener, and when they heard her story they offered her a job and a place to live. Soon Dumont arrived, demanding that Belle return with him; when she refused, Van Wagener purchased Belle from Dumont.

The Van Wagens were Quakers, members of a Christian group, the Society of Friends, that stresses the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that rejects outward rites and an ordained ministry, and that has a long tradition of actively working for peace and opposing war. They did not believe in slavery, but told Belle that she was now a free woman.

Belle remained with the Van Wagens, who paid her for her work as a servant. She soon learned, however, that her son, Peter, named for her brother, had been sold to slave owners in Alabama, in defiance of New York state law. With the help of local Quakers, Belle found a lawyer to help her get her son returned. After many delays, Peter was finally returned, and Belle became one of the first black women in America to win a lawsuit.

Belle realized that if she were ever to fulfill her dream of a home for her and her children, she would need a better-paying job. In 1829 she and Peter moved down the Hudson River to New York City, where Belle found steady, well-paying jobs as a servant in the houses of New York merchants. She joined the Zion African Church and in her free time taught homeless young women at the Magdalene Asylum (an institution for the care of the destitute or sick) how to sew, cook, and clean so they could find jobs.

The director of the asylum was a charismatic self-proclaimed minister named Elijah Pierson. Belle fell under his spell and in 1831 became his full-time servant and a devout follower of his religious sect. The next year, Pierson and another preacher, Robert Matthews, founded Zion Hill, a religious community about 30 miles north of New York City. Belle gave her life savings to the cause and joined the

commune. Within two years, however, she found herself disillusioned by the group's strange religious practices. In 1834 she returned to New York City with a more critical eye for so-called religious leaders and a firmer belief in her own private relationship with God.

For the next eight years Belle worked in New York as a servant for the Whiting family, hoping to save enough money to create a home for her family. But when her daughters were freed from slavery, they set up their lives elsewhere; and her son, Peter, who had never quite recovered from the beatings he had received as a slave, took up with unsavory characters, and eventually joined the crew of a whaling vessel. After three letters, Belle never heard from her son again.

In 1843 Belle felt the call of God to become a preacher. She felt her experi-

ences as a slave, a mother, and a Christian gave her a unique perspective on human rights and spirituality, and she yearned to help the needy and the oppressed. She felt her new mission called for a new name, choosing Sojourner because she was now to be a traveler, like the ancient prophets. Sojourner Truth would be one of God's pilgrims.

In June 1843 Sojourner Truth

took the ferry from New York to Brooklyn and began to walk across Long Island, preaching in farms and villages along the way. She announced her sermons by shouting, "Children, I talk to God, and God talks to me." People who heard her stopped their work, enthralled by her powerful and inspiring words. Although she had never learned to read, she seemed to know the Bible intimately. She was often fed and sheltered by folks who had heard her speak, and she would repay them by washing their clothes or

scrubbing their floors. She traveled north across Connecticut and Massachusetts, drawing crowds wherever she went, eventually landing in the town of Northampton. There she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, a cooperative community that operated a silk business. Unlike Zion Hill, there was no religious fanaticism at Northampton. Sojourner was outspoken in her views, and often disagreed with other members of the commune. Still, she was respected for her intellect and her character.

In the late 1830s and 1840s, several autobiographies of former slaves were published, giving many readers their first exposure to the true horrors of slave life. In 1847, Sojourner, who still could not read or write, began to dictate her life story to Olive Gilbert, a friend from Northampton. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published in 1850, and Sojourner began to support herself through sales of her book.

Northampton was a center for debate and ideas, and Sojourner met many prominent public figures there, including leaders of the Abolitionist Movement who were trying to end slavery in the United States. At the same time, she heard speeches from those who wanted women to hold equal legal rights with men. In the 1840s, women were not allowed to vote or hold political office; they were paid less than men; they were rarely educated. When a woman married, all her property became her husband's; he could divorce her, but she could not divorce him. Just as black slaves were told they were inferior to white people, women were told they were inferior to men. After the Northampton Association disbanded in 1846, Sojourner began to devote more and more of her time and energy to the causes of abolition and women's rights.

Of course, just as slave owners did not want to give up their power over slaves, many men did not want to give up their power over women. And because both subjects were so controversial, abolitionists and feminists were reluctant to join forces. Sojourner Truth was one of the few figures prominent in both struggles. So when she arrived at a women's rights convention in 1852 in Akron, Ohio, many of the feminist leaders urged that she be forbidden to speak, for fear that her abolitionist stance would hurt their feminist cause.

FOR DISCUSSION

- How do the lessons taught by her mother serve Sojourner throughout her life?
- How does the law help Sojourner? In what ways does it hurt her?
- Sojourner Truth fought both for slaves' freedom and for women's rights. What cause today might benefit from joining their efforts together?
- Whom do you know in your own life who has overcome great obstacles? How has their struggle inspired you to better your own life?

For a day and a half, Sojourner sat silently on the steps below the podium, listening to others speak. Now in her fifties, dressed in a plain gray dress and an old bonnet, and wearing wire rimmed glasses, she did not seem to be a powerful figure. (Scientists today suspect that extremely poor vision may have been the reason Sojourner never learned to read or write.) When she finally rose to speak, many delegates urged the president of the convention to silence her. But Sojourner Truth could not be stopped. "Well, children," she said, "where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter."

Sojourner went on to surprise many of her listeners with the power of her voice and presence. She spoke of the natural connection between the fight for the rights of black slaves and the rights of women. She referred to one speaker who had said women were too weak for equal rights, they needed special treatment and protection. She noted how in her entire life she had received no special treatment, no protection. "And ain't I a woman?" she asked. The phrase "Ain't I a woman?" repeated throughout the speech, became forever associated with Sojourner Truth, and the powerful speech itself established her as an important figure in America.

Sojourner's speaking tours continued to expand. She would sing hymns to gather a crowd, then speak in her simple, yet powerful style. Many white people had never heard a black man speak in public, let alone a black woman, and her presence was electric. She sometimes found herself confronted by angry pro-slavery groups, but she was often able to silence her critics with humor. Northerners were often content to think of slavery as a southern problem, but she made it her mission to convince them it was a national problem. Wherever she went, she continued to sell

"Ain't I a woman?"

her book, saying "I sell the shadow to support the substance." She also carried her "Book of Life" in which she collected notes and autographs from the people she met, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the popular anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Frederick Douglass, the former slave who was now one of the leaders of the abolitionist cause.

In 1857, aged 60 or so, Sojourner decided to settle down in Battle Creek, Michigan, amongst many abolitionist friends and followers. Although she hoped the slave situation could be solved peacefully, the American Civil War broke out in April 1861.

In 1862 Sojourner undertook an exhausting tour of the Midwest to encourage support for the Union. She often spoke to hostile crowds and was arrested several times, but was always released when crowds of her supporters gathered to defend her.

Although Sojourner was cheered by the Emancipation Proclamation which officially freed all slaves on January 1, 1863, her ill health had led to financial difficulties. An abolitionist newspaper raised funds to buy her a house, and her book was published in a new, revised edition. In November of that year, Sojourner collected donations in order to feed a proper Thanksgiving dinner (which she helped cook) to 1,500 black soldiers in Detroit.

In September 1864, without telling anyone except the family for whom she was working as a laundress, Sojourner traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet President Abraham Lincoln. Along the route, she stopped several times to give speeches. At the White House, she thanked the President for all he had done for black people and encouraged him to keep faith. Enjoying the hustle and bustle of the capital, she decided to stay and support the war effort.

Conditions for freed slaves in Washington were awful. They lived in filthy refugee camps infested with disease, fearful of being kidnapped by Confederate bounty hunters who bribed the police who were supposed to be protecting the Blacks. Despite many threats, Sojourner spoke out against this corruption. She was soon appointed to the National Freedman's Relief Association,

where she worked first as a counselor and later as a health administrator. Her work gave her a new sense of purpose and energy.

With the end of the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Sojourner rejoiced that she had lived to see the end of slavery in

the United States. She stayed in Washington to continue her part in the fight against racism. On one occasion, when she refused to get off a public streetcar, the conductor shoved her and dislocated her shoulder. She

sued him for assault and battery and successfully had him removed from his job.

In 1868, Sojourner began to campaign Congress to grant land in the West to black settlers. Now in her seventies, she once again traveled across the country, speaking to cheering crowds and collecting petitions. In 1870, the day after Congress ratified the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing the right to vote to all races, Sojourner met with President Ulysses S. Grant to press for

her cause. Despite her continued work, however, her land-grant plan was never approved.

In 1877, when the newly elected President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew troops who had been protecting the civil rights of southern Blacks, Sojourner realized that the gains they had won would now be rolled back. She was too ill, however, nearly blind and deaf, to be able to speak publicly against this injustice. Later that year, her health seemed to mysteriously improve, but by 1882 she was gravely ill with ulcers. She died on November 26, 1883, at the age of about 86.

Sojourner Truth continually overcame a lifetime of hardships to become one of America's greatest heroes in the fight for the rights of women and Blacks. She traveled long journeys to hold up the truth, and more than a century later she still offers inspiration to all who struggle for justice and respect. ★

TO LEARN MORE

Find Sojourner Truth at these websites:

- www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/9840/sojourn.html

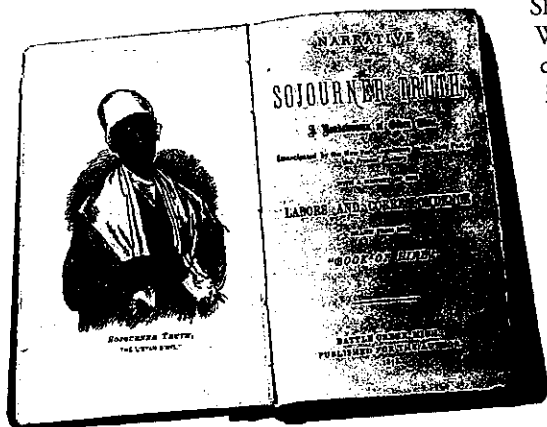
- www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/trut-soj.htm

Read *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* online:

- afroamhistory.about.com/library/bltruth_contents.htm

Or check out these books:

- *Sojourner Truth: A Voice for Freedom* by Patricia and Fredrick McKissack
- *Sojourner Truth: Antislavery Activist* by Peter Krass



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Edited & Designed by Richard J. Roberts

Outreach to underserved students has been made possible in part through grants from General Motors & The Indianapolis Foundation

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Feb. 16, 22, 23, 24, 25, Mar. 1, 2, 4, 8, 9

Painting Churches
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Tuesday-Friday, Mar. 23 – Apr. 15

Searching for Eden
May 10, 11