

Sharing Alton's Great History: Annual Vintage Voices Features Actors /Actresses In Period Costumes

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ALTON - The 19th annual Vintage Voices Tour at the Alton Cemetery was held the weekends of Oct. 3-4 and Oct. 10-11 at the cemetery on 5th and Vine Street, with actors and actresses in vintage costumes of the periods telling the stories of the people who helped to shape and influence the history of Alton.

One of the stories told was that of jazz musician Cordelia Jones (1882-1930), portrayed by Marisa Puller, who formed a 12-piece jazz band that toured the area, providing music for company picnics and various private parties around the Riverbend area. Jones was even visited by Scott Joplin, the famed King of Ragtime and composer of such songs as The Entertainer and the Maple Leaf Rag. Joplin's music was featured in the 1973 Oscar-winning movie, The Sting, which starred Robert Redford, Paul Newman and Robert Shaw.

Beginning her performance with the song "There's No Place Like Home," Puller told the story of Jones' music career and how she got started in music.

"You know? I ain't never had a lesson in my life," Puller said in her character. "I give 'em though. Ain't much to it. Started playing as a girl, and soon, word caught up, and I was playing all over town as early as 16. And it wasn't just playing at society parties, and picnics and state fairs. I'll have you know in October, 1898, United Brothers of Friendship came calling. They'd come together to raise money to resist a policy of segregated public schools, and they were needing entertaining. You all are wondering why that even mattered. Well, let Miss Cordelia let you in on a little history of the times."

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On September 8, 1896, a few months after the landmark Plessy vs. Ferguson case, where the Supreme Court voted 7-1 to uphold the "separate but equal" policy that made segregation legal throughout the country, the Alton City Council, led by then-Mayor Henry Bergman, passed an ordinance allowing the Alton School Board to assign children to a particular school rather than allowing the child to attend the school in his or her neighborhood. The authority to assign children to the schools of the board's choice was given to the superintendent, Robert Hay, who immediately assigned the African-American children to both the Douglas and Lovejoy schools, while white children were allowed to stay at another school. Lincoln High School in Alton remained a segregated school.

"Life of coloreds wasn't any easy," Puller said in her character, "but Plessy vs. Ferguson wasn't in any way making things better. The number of lynchings, mob attacks, race riots - I ain't never seen the kind. And the violence! And then, the cops be sent on us. Couldn't be out on the streets at certain times, parks, hotels, restaurants, and schools

used to be open to all of us, were now closed to negroes? Well, we were determined to maintain some rights. We prayed to gain it. So we challenged these assaults."

Puller then told the story of Scott Bibb and his family, who challenged the separate but equal laws passed in Alton. His children were sent home the first day, then the next day, were greeted by police who escorted them out. Bibb took the matter to court, with fund-raisers for his legal fees held by Jones' band. The band performed at picnics, riverboat excursions, dances, concerts and dinners to help raise money for Bibb's defense. It helped mark the beginning of Jones' career as a musician.

Jones and her band played gigs all over Alton, including concerts at Western Military Academy, the Knights of Columbus hall, Sigma Phi, and other venues. Soon, Jones began touring the midwest, even writing her own play, "Jolly Octoroons." The play was received with very positive reactions, and was set to be performed in Jerseyville and across the midwest, but Jones' musical career was taking off. It caught the attention of Joplin, who came to visit Jones.

"The two of us had this town hootin' and hollerin' and carrying on," Puller said. "like the party was ever gonna stop!"

By that time, musical tastes began to change, and jazz began to become the music of choice for many people. Jones had a jazz orchestra that had between five to 12 pieces, depending on the venue she would be playing at. She regularly played on the Spreadeagle and Piasa steamboats in Alton, but then decided to join up with the Pantages theater circuit, who owned 70 Bonneville theaters on the west coast and Canada. Jones played all over the country, playing piano and singing. It was the first time that Jones had been away from her family, and missed both her mother and father, along with her brother, Connie. In July 1925, Jones planned a trip to see her family for a few weeks, with plans to reunite with the Bonneville circuit in Duluth, Minn. But when she arrived home, her brother had gotten sick, and because he was her only brother, Jones decided to stay home.

Connie died in November of that year, and it was hard on the entire family. It wasn't Jones' first loss, however.

"Show business makes it hard to keep men," Puller said, "and even harder to keep a baby. But I had one good year with my baby, John. He died in 1912."

With the loss of her brother, Jones decided to stay in Alton to help her parents.

"I thought I'd be able to pick up right where I left," Puller said. "But that sure wasn't the way of it. An artist never wants to admit time has passed her. I went from the Queen of

Jazz to back home, and being what was. Jazz had a whole new sound, and the Vaudeville circuit had moved to pictures, so why not come home to a shoe store in Alton, right?"

Jones and the Miller brothers opened 20th Century Shoe Repair in Alton, but Jones immediately ran into trouble when the brothers tried to squeeze her out of the business. One of the brothers struck Jones, which led to her filing assault charges against him. But he was only assessed a \$10 fine, and Jones soon left the business.

"Tired, frustrated, burnt out," Puller said. "I was somebody, time wasn't. Times change, and sometimes not for the better. And before you know it, you're in your final resting place. Here. No more than 50 years on this earth."

Puller then sang a final song in tribute to Jones to finish her performance, completing the story of a music and entertainment pioneer from Alton.

[Charles Thomas also contributed to this story.](#)