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By Rosemarie Dowell, Correspondent

Entertainer Connie Gay to portray Betsy Ross on Flag Day at Mount Dora's Windsor Rose Tea Room



Connie Gay of Dreamland Productions, poses for a portrait on Tuesday, June 4, 2013. Gay will perform as Betsy Ross, who sewed the first American flag, during a Flag Day luncheon at the Windsor Rose Tea Room in Mount Dora.

Tom Benitez, Orlando Sentinel

MOUNT DORA — Connie Gay's portrayal of American icon Betsy Ross, whom folklore credits with making the first Stars and Stripes, never fails to surprise her audience.

Her hourlong program, laced with little-known facts about the famous Colonial seamstress, always elicits a gasp or two from the audience.

"When I tell them I'm a Quaker, that I've outlived three husbands and that I was one of 17 children, I always get a 'wow' response from everyone," said Gay, a five-year resident of Tavares who's been portraying Ross, in period costume, bonnet and all, for the past six years. "Most people don't know anything about her other than she made the first American flag....Ross was a fascinating woman but she had a hard and sometimes very sad life."

In honor of Friday's observance of Flag Day, Gay will perform as Ross at a 1 p.m. luncheon at the Windsor Rose Tea Room

Gay said the program, offered through the interactive entertainment company she and her husband, Jeff, operate — Eustis-based Dreamland Productions — is interspersed with lighthearted jokes. But she said Ross' life before, during and after the Revolutionary War was no laughing matter.

"She was tough — she had to be. She had seven children, two that each died at nine months old," said Gay, a Massachusetts native and resident of Florida for roughly 20 years. "She was a widow and a working mother who supported her family long before it became the norm."

According to legend, Ross created the flag after three members of the first Continental Congress — George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross, her first husband's uncle — secretly visited her upholstery shop in June 1776 and asked her to make the flag.

Although historians and scholars alike agree she was a flag-maker, they have widely discounted the account of that day, citing a lack of credible documentation to prove it.

Gay and others, however, cite circumstantial evidence as signs that Ross more than likely did.

"It's a fact, she and George Washington both attended Christ Church and their family pews were next to each other, so they knew one another and were friends," said Gay, who visited Philadelphia and toured the church and Ross' former home, a popular tourist attraction and museum, to get perspective on playing the famous patriot.

"Another fact, she was Washington's seamstress and often sewed for him. So it's highly plausible that Washington would turn to her to sew the first flag. He would have trusted her to keep the secret."

And, too, Gay noted that after her death three family members, including a daughter, gave oral testimonies detailing Ross' often-repeated saga of her involvement in creating the first American flag.

"I believe she did, but I leave it up to my audience members to decide for themselves whether she did or didn't," Gay said.

Cost of the luncheon is \$14. The Windsor Rose is at 144 W Fourth Ave.

For reservations, call 352-735-2551

•Betsy Ross: a 'true patriot,' XX