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A Civil War memoir: A Woman in Battle

Sr. Rose Pacatte | May. 24, 2013

Loreta Janeta Velasquez, born in Cuba in 1842, was one of an estimated 1,000 women who disguised themselves as men to fight on both sides in the American Civil War. The ?politics of national memory? marginalized and challenged her story from the time she published it in 1875. The book, ?A Woman in Battle,? is still in print. This episode of ?Voces? a four-part series celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month each year, is a dramatized documentary that explores Velasquez?s story.

Loreta was a tomboy even as a little girl growing up in privilege in Cuba. In 1849 her parents sent her to live with her aunt in New Orleans to learn refinement, become a lady, and eventually make a good marriage. But she felt stifled and used to dress in her male cousin?s clothing and bemoaned being ?born a woman in a man?s world.? Joan of Arc was her hero who showed her ?what a woman may do if she dares and dares greatly.?

Race, bigotry and strict ideas of gender identity were part of Loreta?s life as they were for many Hispanics of other countries who found themselves in New Orleans at the end of the Mexican Revolution.

She was sent to the Sisters of Charity to learn ?ladyhood? and determined to marry a young man from Texas named William, though her parents in Cuba had already chosen a young man at home for her. She and William married secretly when Loreta was about 15 years old. By the time the Civil War began her husband and three children were dead. She was about 18 years old when she went from grief to being Harry T. Buford, soldier.

She was eventually wounded, caught, and instead of being punished, donned women?s attire once again and became a currency courier for the Confederacy. When she crossed into the North she began working for the Union as a double agent or spy. She also came to detest war and wrote that ?War corrupts and few are innocent.?

REBEL: Story of Cuban woman who fought in the Civil War
Voces series on PBS
http://www.pbs.org/program/voces [1]
Friday, May 24
10 p.m. eastern time (check local listings)

Though there is an aura of myth about Loreta Velasquez?s life, much of what she writes in *A Woman in Battle* can be corroborated now as the film demonstrates in its straightforward way. But in 1876, her memoir was denigrated and eventually erased from the Confederate memory, and the Union?s as well, through the efforts of General Jubal Early who was the self-appointed arbiter of how the war between the states from the Confederate perspective, would be remembered. Loreta?s first-hand accounts of how Confederate soldiers were ungentlemanly, brutal, gruff, and vulgar seemed to upset Early the most.

?REBEL? is an intriguing story that most of us probably are not aware. Through interviews and new evidence the film shows that Loreta was no liar or prostitute (as General Early judged her in public), but ?? an amazing Cuban American woman who was not afraid to defy expectations and blaze her own path.?

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Watch Rebel - Preview [2] on PBS. See more from VOCES. [3]

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