



# WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## HISTORICAL NOTES

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### “What's Bedeviling Wilton Manors”

By Mary Ulm

Wilton Manors Historical Society

Recently in reviewing our archives we came across an article about an incident in 1990 that originated over a play at the Wilton Manors Elementary School, written and produced by two teachers and the PTA President. Evidently, *In Quest of the Banjo Man*, which meant to teach geographic diversity and cultural inclusion, was construed by a particular set of parents as an attempt to turn the children of Wilton Manors to Satan!

Attempts to reassure parents of no such agenda and to rewrite “offending” portions did not quell objections. The play was put on hold until a review by the Broward County School Board granted approval to move forward. But, by then it was too late in the school-year to do so.

The incident garnered national and international attention and even name-calling from some local pulpits. Although having occurred over thirty years ago, there is a timeliness to the story.

We reached out to Kathleen “Poco” French, the then PTA President and amateur playwright, for permission to publish a June 15, 1990 article by *The Miami Herald*, which provides detailed coverage. We also asked permission to include Mrs. French’s 2018 comments on the article, which were in response to an inquiry by then Historical Society Secretary, Benjamin Little. Her comments follow the *Miami Herald* article.



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ANTONIO OLMOS / Miami Herald Staff

Children from Wilton Manors Elementary School show off their unused costumes for the play *The Banjo Man* at a playground near the school.

By **DEBBIE SONTAG**  
Herald Staff Writer

**I**t was the mother of the kangaroo who grew concerned that the Wilton Manors Elementary School play was really about something far more sinister than a globe-trotting starfish.

Something satanic.

According to Tiffany Bryan's mom, *In Quest of the Banjo Man* was not a dramatic exercise in "geography-continent awareness" and "ethnic awareness," as claimed by its authors, two teachers and the PTA president. Rather, it was a paean to: astrology, mind control, voodoo, witchcraft, paganism, sorcery and devil worship.

With an annotated script that found page after page of coded evil, Kevin and Renee Bryan, active members of the Fourth Avenue Church of God, visited Wilton Manors' principal. They pointed out that the play made reference to 33 countries in Europe. Thirty-three times two is 66 — and 666 is Satan's number, they said.

Furthermore, the couple noted, the lead starfish, who crawls the ocean floor from continent to continent, makes a stop in Tierra del Fuego: "What does this mean?" the Bryans wrote on their script. "Land of Fire? Hell?" Tierra del Fuego is an archipelago at the extreme tip of South America.

The Bryans demanded that the play, a musical extravaganza involving 100 students, be canceled.

And, to the shock of those involved — who say the play was inspired by Jimmy Buffett, Donovan and the World Book Encyclopedia — the principal concurred. The play was off.

"Looking back on it, I think we should have come across as rabid liberals if they were going to come across as rabid Christians," says teacher Heidi Melius, one of the authors. "We were much too polite."

#### PTA or cult?

It has been an ugly incident for the Broward municipality of Wilton Manors, a small town push-me-pull-you, complete with name-calling, rumor-mongering and confused debates about freedom of expression and freedom of assembly com-

# WHAT'S BEDEVILING WILTON MANORS?

What started out as child's play turned into a feud between adults. A school program is canceled in a struggle that was reduced to 'good versus evil.'

mittees.

On one side are the Bryans and a few other couples backed up by at least one pastor, enough to start making uninvolved parents feel uneasy about a play labeled un-Christian.

On the other are some of the school's most active teachers and parents, outraged to be accused of a cult-like conspiracy to pervert young minds.

"They were making out like we were skulking in our garages, cutting the throats of chickens and making our children drink the blood," said PTA president Poco French.

At the heart of the issue, principal Linda Marable says, is a debate about democracy in the public schools. Everyone shall be heard and heeded, every parent has equal rights, she said.

But many parents ask: At what expense? Is such democracy not tantamount to the tyranny of the few?

Can one couple, because of fundamental religious beliefs, block production of a school play intended to give students of diverse backgrounds pride in their heritage?

"The play's just make-believe," says James Liu, grade 5, whose family is from Taiwan. He was looking forward to playing The Chinese Artist in the Asia sequence.

#### In man we trust?

"Any Christian who reads that play, and can't see that it's the opposite of what the Bible says, doesn't know the Bible," says Dan Wren, pastor of the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Wilton Manors. "They've included all the pagan religions of all these so-called countries. Even a cursory reading shows clear implications of voodoo and witchcraft. I think there seems to have been a clear agenda."

The Bryans, in their formal recommendation that the Broward School Board banish the play, claim

that the agenda is: "To teach humanism to young children in preparation to help build the New Age Religion."

The New Age faith, a religious smorgasbord that preaches do-it-yourself spirituality and progressive politics, is seen as a serious threat by fundamentalist Christians like the Bryans. New Agers are pushing for a new kind of America, Renee Bryan says: "In man we trust, not in God we trust."

To research their critique of *The Banjo Man*, the Bryans relied heavily on two books: *Mystery Mark of the New Age: Satan's Design for World Domination and Ravaged by the New Age: Satan's Plan to Destroy Our Kids*.

"I think the whole thing's just kooky — if it's not scary. The play's a fantasy," said parent Sue Braden, whose freckle-faced son Mark expended considerable effort mem-



LAY, FROM 16B

izing his lines as the chief starfish. The idea was hatched in the Wilton Manors Elementary School cafeteria. The dining hall had been painted a drab mustard-yellow color, and to brighten it up, the faculty, ever geography-minded, proposed a mural of the seven continents.

When it came time to plan the all-school, end-of-the-year production, it seemed natural to carry on the theme. Uneager to pay royalties, they ruled out *Around the World in 80 Days* and decided to write their own play.

Teachers Frank Ciazso and Heidi Melius got together over Thanksgiving vacation, sat on a dock and, being '60s people, sang a Donovan tune.

"Come all ye starry starfish living in the deep blue sea . . . Would ye walk the North Sea floor from Belgium to England / Bring me word of a Banjo Man with a tattoo on his hand."

And they took it from there, enlisting French, an amateur playwright, to turn their story and songs into a whimsical script, albeit a little rough at the edges.

It went like this: Jamalla, an old Caribbean musician, has one last wish — to find her long-lost friend, The Banjo Man. But she's not up for the trip. What should she do? The Old Fisherman tells her to sleep on it; in her dreams, the stars dance and sing. That's it! the Fisherman says. Let the starfish do your walking!

So The Old Starfish, with the help

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DAN WREN,

pastor of the Covenant Presbyterian Church, Wilton Manors

of gulls and a bald eagle, travels the continents in search of The Banjo Man. To Europe — "a small, densely populated continent rich in history and arts" — where an Italian child says, more or less, "*Buon giorno*, The Banjo Man is nowhere in our boot-shaped country;" to Africa, where, past the Great Nile River and the Giant Pyramids, a village elder leads a game of Bones Toss; to Oceania and its Australian aborigines, Asia and the Temple of the Dragon, North America and a Hopi village, and South America, with its lost Incan ruins.

Finally, in Antarctica, the starfish, joined by Jamalla, discovers the treasure: Children of all races gathered together at what could become the first world park. Then, led by The Banjo Man, they join hands and sing, *I'd like to teach the world to sing*.

Four hundred of the 800 kids in the school tried out for *The Banjo Man*. The cast was chosen so that African-American kids played in the African sequence, Latin kids in the South America sequence, and so on. PTA president French borrowed a special effects machine, enlisted parents to make costumes and

teachers to design flats, and began daily rehearsals in late February.

#### Bones Toss

About six weeks later, Tiffany Bryan came home from rehearsal and told her mother the school play was strange "because they do chanting and ritualistic dances," her mother relates.

Renee Bryan called teacher Melius, saying she wanted to withdraw her daughter from the production. But, after a rumor made the rounds that the Bryans were "white supremacists," the couple went to see the principal. And they fought back, targeting Melius.

"This particular teacher is a fanatic," Bryan says. "She has been seen at her home doing ceremonial chants and dances."

Melius, 34, a speech therapist with a doctorate in early childhood teaching, is an adherent of the Baha'i World Faith. Ceremonial dances? A neighbor showed up at her house when Melius and friends

were learning an African dance — then apparently told the Bryans.

Baha'ism, founded in late 19th Century Persia, teaches harmony and unity: that all faiths are essentially one, all races one. Baha'is condemn prejudice and believe in the adoption of a universal language. Which, the Bryans say, is New Age.

According to the Bryans, Melius "planted" a theme of "one world-one people-one government" in *The Banjo Man* in order to win converts.

But, say French and other parents, the thirst for universal harmony is not exactly an extremist viewpoint. "It's not really radical," says French. "*I'd like to teach the world to sing* is used in Coke commercials."

Among the Bryans' objections:

■ That Jamalla dreams of stars. "This is astrology!"

■ That the starfish ask for a mirror in which to see their brilliant colors. "The New Age Religion believes crystals are an open window to spirit contacts."

■ That artists gather from China, India, the Soviet Union, Persia and Japan. "These are all Eastern-religious believing countries!"

The most disturbing scene for the Bryans was the one in which an African elder leads children in a game of Bones Toss, in which gourds are shaken and bones tossed on the ground and "read" to give the starfish "an important clue."

The Bryans, earnest people but imperfect spellers, wrote on their copy of the play: "Voodoo!"

"If you start teaching elementary school kids to throw bones, they'll think it's normal by the time they get into middle school," Renee Bryan says. "Then what? Hey, let's kill a chicken!"

#### Out with the mirror

In April, on the advice of her superiors, principal Marable called off rehearsals until the Bryans' official "request for reconsideration of materials" was heard.

"When I have children telling me they heard in church that we were doing Satan worship, I have no choice," Marable says. "You don't want to take the chance that you would do anything to harm any of the children. You don't want any kind of taint."

Marable and the two teachers revised *The Banjo Man*. French, who thought changing the play meant caving in to extremists, didn't cooperate. They took out the mirror, a totem pole and Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent god of pre-Hispanic Mexico. They changed the Temple of the Dragon to the Asian Temple and the Bones Toss game to a Stones Toss game.

But the Rev. Wren says the play wasn't really any different.

"You dance around rocks, you dance around bones, you're still dancing," he says.

Marable sent the revised play through two committees of the Broward school administration. In late May, the committees said: The play is fine. Go ahead and perform it.

But it was too late. The school year was almost over.

"I'm sorry for the children and parents who worked so hard," the principal says. "I hate for one play to tear a community apart."

#### Just a play

Several members of *The Banjo Man* cast and crew are gathered in the Wilton Manors city playground, near the municipal totem pole. Their principal wouldn't let them speak to a reporter at the school.

The kids, fast forgetting their lines and their stage cues, don't understand the fuss.

"It's stupid," says Andrew French, stage crew.

After all, the play is just a play.

"It's fiction," says Luke Allison, who played The Old Fisherman. "What kind of harm could fiction do?"

Luke and Andrew and their friends don't know anything about paganism and pantheism and the supposed evils that keep them from the stage. Theirs is a more basic interpretation.

"It's a play about making friends," says J.P. Flaherty, a member of the stage crew. "Could someone please tell me what's wrong with that?"



ANTONIO OLMOS / Miami Herald Staff

**A PLAY IS BORN:** Wilton Manors Elementary PTA president Poco French, an amateur playwright, wrote the script for *The Banjo Man*; teachers Frank Ciazso and Heidi Melius would not be photographed.

## Comments from Poco French

**Sat 12/30/2017 4:39 PM**

Well you certainly dug up a really bad time in our lives! We got calls and letters from around the world demanding that we stick to our guns and do the play. Unfortunately, the principal told the two teachers they would be fired if they continued, I went all the way to the Superintendent, but in the end gave it up - it wasn't worth tearing our school and town apart over it. We even got in the 11:00 am sermon at the big Presbyterian church up on Federal (name escapes me) by Dr. Kennedy - who called me, by name, a spawn of the devil. First Baptist got in on it too eventually. It was not a pretty time.

So, I wrote a letter of apology to the Bryants and asked Mrs. Bryant to serve on the PTA Board, she said yes, and we became friends. BTW my daughter was in Kindergarten at the time and her best friend was their daughter.

**Sat 12/30/2017 4:41 PM**

Also, we made the news all the way to England and maybe even further into Europe. And this was before the internet was hot! I only just recently burned my file on the whole mess - almost wish I had saved it.

And so the world goes around.

**Fri 1/5/2018 12:55 PM**

I know the Herald covered it not sure about Sentinel. I don't know if I said this already (forgive redundancy if so) but I just burned my file on this mess last year! I had all the clippings etc. i read thru the whole thing and wondered if I'd have done anything differently and with the wisdom of age & experience know I would not. As I said, the world goes on.

I don't know if any of those articles said how this particular "play" came about. The school year before was in sort of the beginning of large migration of peoples from the Caribbean, Central America, etc. Broward was heavy into busing in those days and our buses on kids came from the worst of the worst projects. Teachers worried about their students because many (most? All?) were being bullied about being "island people". We were looking for a way to build up self esteem in these kids, break down cultural & racial barriers. Jimmy Buffett had recently published a book with his daughter called Jolly Mon about island children so we wrote a take off on that story and did the first play. One of the teachers involved was a great musician - used music in his class all the time. So he wrote several songs for the play, my fave was I Read Ten Books. It was a delightful school play for all the right reasons. So second year, well, that didn't work out so well.

But ya know - I live in an even smaller town now and we sure have our share of weirdness. I'm making an effort to keep my name out of it tho. Lol. But in the end, Life is better wherever home is. All in all you have a good one in WM, as do we in YT.