


2023

If Men Can Do It, Then So Can a Woman: Inspiring Determination through Service-Learning and Silent Movies

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Recommended Citation

Vasilko, Kayla (2023) "If Men Can Do It, Then So Can a Woman: Inspiring Determination through Service-Learning and Silent Movies," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284317689>

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol10/iss1/5>

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If Men Can Do It, Then So Can a Woman: Inspiring Determination through Service-Learning and Silent Movies

Cover Page Footnote

To everyone who has shown strength in the face of doubt. Against difficult odds, Anita King believed that she could accomplish all she dreamed of achieving. Similarly, there were so many people who believed in this project, even when completion seemed impossible. Every artifact, every component of the exhibit, and every success was the result of someone who decided to take an incredible leap of faith and who believed that this story needed to be shared with the community. Dr. Jerry Holt, Dr. Kim Scipes, Matt Fritz, Bruce Johnson, Lynn and Jeanne Kissel, and many others helped take this project to new heights in so many ways. Christine and Kaitlyn Vasilko, Veronica Peters, Michelle Ketcham, Dr. Mary Beth Connolly, Heather Augustyn, Dr. Karen Bishop Morris, Dr. Deepa Majumdar, Dianna Vaughn, Deb Pratt, and many other incredibly strong female mentors reminded me throughout the project why this work was so important. I am thankful every day for everyone involved and grateful to have been impacted by the remarkable determination of Anita King.



IF MEN CAN DO IT, THEN SO CAN A WOMAN

Inspiring Determination through Service-Learning and Silent Movies

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Kayla M. Vasilko is in her final year of the Master's in Communication program at Purdue University Northwest (PNW). Kayla works as a graduate teaching assistant for the Purdue Office of Engagement and for the PNW Department of Communication and Creative Arts. In her courses, she has learned that we all have the power to construct meaning in society; thus, the world is still in the process of being built. She is inspired to lead, teach, research, and be engaged because every day is a new opportunity to expand, modify, or change the meanings that have been set before us and create a place where all are supported. Kayla recently organized a virtual Global Collective Action Seminar with the PNW Center for Global Studies to try to break down barriers to positive change.

INTRODUCTION

In the American silent movie era, women were not associated with the ability to perform stunt work, drive an automobile without a man present, or be much more than a supporting face in a film (Boardman, 2015; Drew, 2003; Zurkski, 2019) despite the fact that there were more female than male film associates in that era (Tangcay, 2023). Theories of "automotive citizenship" (or ideology of freedom tied to the operation of cars) were first rooted in women's studies (Clarke, 2007), and there was the added difficulty of women's stunt work (women performed high-risk stunts but had to do it in gowns, bikinis, and so on). This lack of recognition has transcended further into a lack of representation; today, women and minorities are highly underrepresented in boardrooms, director's chairs, and a startling number of fields across the country (Gupta & Fisher, 2021; Tangcay, 2023; United Nations, 2022), impacting everything from human rights (without diverse representation,

equality for all is threatened) and mental health to the percentage of a dollar earned. Community programs that demonstrate that *anyone* is capable of achieving their goals in the fields of their choice are imperative and can spark important conversations about structural barriers that hinder those capabilities.

For two semesters, I worked with multiple community and national partners such as the LaPorte County Historical Society (Indiana), the Barker Mansion (Indiana), the Henry Ford and the Wisconsin Auto Museums (Michigan), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (California), and more to learn about the need for representation, research the life of silent movie actress Anita King, uncover artifacts connected to her, and bring her to life in LaPorte County, Indiana, her hometown. In addition to creating a museum exhibit, I also placed a historical monument, started a traveling exhibit, restored original Anita King silent films, and initiated public learning activities. I completed this work through

multiple courses: two semesters of an ENGL 39600 independent study titled “Anita King” and a semester of HONR 39100, “Backyard Adventures: Seminar in Local History.” Both courses allowed for a deep dive into historical research and hands-on work with outside organizations to directly fulfill a societal need. The work that I did to organize the annual S.T.A.R walk (Staff, 2020) in 2019, an event meant to recognize local heroes, helped pave the way for this project. Dr. Jerry Holt, a professor of English, gave the keynote address at the 2019 event and spoke about King’s pioneering acts, highlighting that little information was known about her and that her story was in need of a willing researcher. Dr. Holt launched the start of my work and provided incredible mentorship in the early parts of the project.

More than just earning course credit, I wanted to complete this project to shed light on King’s story and promote ideas of confidence, strength, and endurance for all people. Before embarking on the service portion of this project, I undertook extensive textual research in several areas pertinent to this topic.

Indiana History

After the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, settlers were enticed to Michigan City, Indiana, by a variety of game wildlife, windswept dunes, and a large lumber market. The arrival of the Michigan Central Railroad attracted laborers from Europe (Mueller, 2005); these Michigan City characteristics suggest why Anita King’s parents, German immigrants who eventually would start a farm in that location, were drawn to the area (Boardman, 2015; Drew, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Zurkski, 2019). Connecting the Haskell & Barker Historic District and Michigan City’s railroad ties, John Barker, grain merchant and freight car investor, commissioned the construction of the Barker Mansion for his family in 1905. The residence is suspected to be one of the Michigan City mansions King worked in after the death of her parents (Boardman, 2015; Drew, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Zurkski, 2019). Catherine Barker, John’s daughter, lost both of her parents in 1910 when she was 14 years old, much like Anita King, and inherited the mansion, which was later presented to Purdue University and used as a study center (Coates et al., 2019).

The Lincoln Highway, King’s route for her famous drive, wound between Fort Wayne, Valparaiso, Elkhart, South Bend, La Porte, and Plymouth Indiana. US 30 follows a similar route today. Midwestern historians assert that what makes the Midwest unique is that it does not represent just one identity. The Midwest is a segment of the

United States where many different styles of music, types of religion, and variances of culture and geography came together to create one place, and each variance wove together like the cities and towns connected by the Lincoln Highway to contribute to a concomitant of a completely unique regional identification (Mueller, 2005).

Anita King’s Backstory

In early 1915 work on the Lincoln Highway was coming to a close, and the suffragette movement was five years from realizing its goal. On set one afternoon, Anita King heard director Cecille B. DeMille exclaim that it would be “some time yet before the road was fit enough that a woman could make the drive alone” on the Lincoln Highway (Boardman, 2015; Drew, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Zurkski, 2019). King had come to Hollywood in 1908 to pursue acting after encouragement from stage actress Lillian Russell, whom she met while modeling in Chicago to support her siblings after her parents died. King challenged herself throughout her life, becoming one of the first female race car drivers on the West Coast in 1910, joining the motion picture scene just before her 30th birthday, and working with the well-known “serial queens” of her era by performing her own stunts in films (Gregory, 2021). Naturally, she aimed to challenge DeMille’s idea of a woman’s capabilities by asserting that she could complete that drive. King was offered a new Kissel Kar and a leading role in a Paramount film if she could make the drive. She reached City Hall in New York on October 19, 1915, completing the drive in 48 days after averaging 4.54 miles per hour during her trip and covering 109 miles per day (Boardman, 2015; Drew, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Zurkski, 2019). Figure 1 shows an ad inspired by her famous drive.

Women and Race Car Driving

Anita King also challenged and unsettled common notions of gender and maternity as she drove across the country. Deborah Clarke (2007) in *Driving Women* argues that a natural connection existed between women and driving in the early automotive era, offering the concept of “automotive maternity” whereby the roles of mother, caregiver, and homemaker (i.e., the driving force of life at home) is instead juxtaposed for women as drivers in the literal sense, challenging the general ideal of a woman’s place in the home. This leads to the ideal of “automotive citizenship” whereby a person’s sense of acceptance and belonging lies symbolically and literally with the car. Clarke asserts that this theory holds even greater truth for those who occupy a tenuous place in mainstream society, such as immigrants, minorities,



What This Paramount Girl Did with a Stock KesselKar

All motordom is wondering at the performance of a stock KesselKar 42-Six driven from San Francisco to New York—alone—by Anita King, the Paramount Girl. Miss King made this grilling trip without motor trouble of any kind whatever—carburetion and ignition perfect. Although encountering the worst imaginable roads and weather for 27 days, no mechanical trouble of any consequence was experienced.

KISSELKAR
EVERY INCH A CAR

What Miss King accomplished is a great tribute to one woman's pluck and daring—it is likewise a great tribute to the power, sturdiness and simplicity of the KesselKar.

Write for literature describing the new KesselKars—Touring Cars, \$1050 to \$1750—Roadsters, \$1150 to \$1650—ALL-YEAR Cars, \$1450 to \$2100. Unparalleled values.

SOME TERRITORY STILL OPEN. WRITE OR WIRE TODAY.

Kissel Motor Car Company, 135 Kissel Avenue, Hartford, Wisconsin

The
ALL-YEAR
Car

The KesselKar was the first and, up to now, is the only successful ALL-YEAR car. Offered either with a Coupe or a Sedan top—the changes easily made by any one.

Figure 1. Anita King, Paramount Girl. Credit Curt McConnell

and women. Driving opens a space of citizenship and belonging and grants access to civic life.

The Silent Film Industry

The male gaze was prominent in Hollywood in the silent movie era and continues to be to this day. Directors such as Cecil B. DeMille saw actors such as Anita King as objects rather than equals. According to DeMille, “Never give money to a woman. Make her borrow it. . . . Never be humbled by anyone” (Eyman, 2013; Gaines, 2004; Gaines & Frost, 2019). In the postwar period, King had no further acting credits to her name after 1919. By this point, films began to transition from silent to the talkies. King’s family suspects that the end of her work with Paramount was due to her determination as an activist even though the industry simply claimed that she did not have a suitable voice for pictures with sound. In reality, King’s voice had only gotten stronger; she had grown increasingly outspoken against the abuse women were facing in Hollywood. Following her success, King strove to protect other women dreaming of the acting scene. She was dubbed the “Deputy Mother of Los Angeles” and worked to ensure that every motion picture plant had at

least one female officer, and she also organized a YWCA recreation club for women trying to find work in the studios as well, which became a safehouse for females facing the harassment and discrimination that was horribly typical for women in Hollywood (Boardman, 2015; Drew, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Zurkski, 2019).

DESCRIPTION

Since all the partnerships involved in this project led to an exhibit at the LaPorte County Historical Society Museum, I will focus on that community partner for this reflection. The LaPorte County Historical Society Museum (shown in Figure 2) is a nonprofit organization that promotes public awareness of the past through events and historical research. The historical society was officially organized in 1906, and there were many iterations of the museum throughout LaPorte County as donated spaces and funding (such as from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation) evolved (LaPorte County Historical Society, 2022). In 2003, the museum’s home became a building at 2405 Indiana Avenue near the historic Door Prairie barn on the south side of LaPorte. In 1993 Dr. Peter Kesling, a well-known orthodontist and philanthropist, built the Door Prairie Auto Museum there to display his personal collection of antique automobiles. With the money he received from the museum purchase, he built a three-story addition on the back of the museum that allowed for more display spaces. The second floor of the building remained a showroom for Kesling’s automobile collection and the Kesling Foundation offices (LaPorte County Historical Society, 2022).

The museum not only serves community residents, children, and schools in LaPorte County’s 21 townships but also welcomes visitors from around the world who are eager to see the Belle Guinness exhibit, the Sports Display, and more.

The museum is always seeking volunteer students from middle school through college and also welcomes community volunteers. Volunteer work includes helping with various museum projects, learning about museum operations while running the front desk, and gaining experience with “research, preservation, photography, history, geography, local sports, science, books, organization, and events” (LaPorte County Historical Society, 2022). There are additional opportunities to intern with the museum, work on exhibit repair and upkeep, write grants, lead tours, and catalog texts and artifacts. Students may earn course credit for many of these roles and bring creative ideas to their work; these opportunities are available on a regular basis, but many experiences such



Figure 2. Historical Society Museum. Credit LaPorte County Historical Society

as the Anita King project are unique. Though the opportunities are generated by the museum, many faculty members at Purdue University Northwest connect these opportunities with their courses to spark service-learning.

In my personal experience, faculty mentors such as Dr. Holt and history professor Dr. Mary Beth Connolly encouraged my connections with community partners for this project. After connecting with a local paper (Fritz, 2020) to spread the word about my mission, county historian and museum director Bruce Johnson reached out and told me that he would be able to support my project with a space to display any artifacts I uncovered. I had no idea how much I would come to learn from the journey and all that we would accomplish for the community.

There were many steps involved with the project overall. After conducting the textual research, I identified key parts of King's history to highlight (Vasilko, 2021). I wrote several grants, including the Purdue University Northwest Undergraduate Research Grant, the Purdue Service-Learning Grant, and multiple community grants (such as with the Indiana Commission for Women) that I used to bring artifacts back to the museum. With the

guidance of many mentors, I located King's films in the Library of Congress (I was able to work with the library to get the films restored only months before they would have been completely disintegrated), several movie posters from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and artifacts from Lucianne Boardman, King's great-niece, as shown by Figure 3 (Boardman, 2015).

I also connected with Lynn and Jeanne Kissel, both of whom are members of a prominent Kissel Kar organization, and Lynn is also the editor of the *Kisselgraph* (KisselKar, 2022); after learning about the mission of the project, they agreed to allow their 1914 KisselKar Touring, named "Annie" (Kissel, 2018), shown in Figure 4, to be "dressed up" to resemble King's car during her famous drive. Lynn cautioned that auto transport was not easy by any means, but it seemed that Anita King was watching over the project. "Annie" was transported from an exhibit at the Wisconsin Automotive Museum in Hartford, Wisconsin, to the LaPorte, Indiana, museum and dressed in the famous lettering just in time for the Anita King exhibit, shown in Figure 5.

Many COVID-19 restrictions were still in place for much of the project, so a lot of the coordination of the



Figure 3. Anita King Exhibit



Figure 4. "Annie." Credit, Lynn Kissel



Figure 5. Anita King Exhibit

exhibit was done virtually, especially the out-of-state search for artifacts. One of the first times we all gathered in person was near the end of the project when the exhibit was assembled. Lucianne Boardman and her sister Aleta Wilke, both of whom had previously re-created Anita's drive (Marselas, 2015), came out to bring some of King's jewelry and additional artifacts. It was incredible to see all of the pieces in one place after so many months of searching.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Few individuals knew about Anita King and her determination at the start of this project; thus, community education was one of the main objectives. We measured success of the project through the number of ways we were able to share that story. Not only was the exhibit on display for several months, but also through the grants earned, three of King's films were fully restored and permanently archived at the LaPorte County Historical Society Museum. Countless groups of students continue to come through on tours and are able to view the films. While the exhibit ran, we added a special educational program as part of the museum's annual car show during which I was able give presentations on the research behind King's life and the significance of her legacy and the artifacts. Additionally, we were able to film a two-woman play in the historic Indiana Barker Mansion based on a script I wrote inspired by King's life (King and her sisters worked as maids at the mansion following their parents' deaths). The play has been shown at the museum and remains in the archives. Finally, I was able to create a historical plaque to display in Michigan City, Indiana, King's hometown.

The museum had significant experience working with students because of the regular service opportunities available, but given the unique characteristics of the project (bringing in a rare antique car from Wisconsin, uncovering artifacts during a pandemic, etc.), a lot of the journey was new territory for all involved. Yet even still, Bruce Johnson and everyone at the museum supported every aspect of the project tremendously, and even the transport of "Annie" all the way down to the museum's basement showroom went smoothly. The most significant barriers involved the pandemic early on, but with innovation the pandemic actually helped the project; originally, many of the grants were written to fund travel to California for an artifact hunt, but when travel became impossible, the funding was reallocated for the transportation of more artifacts themselves. On top of this, remote communication (such as Zoom) was more widely



Figure 6. Educational Presentation

acceptable, which allowed me to cover more ground and connect with even more organizations.

The archiving of these artifacts at an educational center such as the LaPorte County Historical Society Museum, continued community awareness programming such as the designation of August 14 as Anita King Day by the Michigan City mayor, and the promotion of the story by WGN-TV (Potash, 2022) will help ensure that the project is sustained. Figures 6 and 7 represent additional examples of community awareness programming. Even when "Annie" had to return Wisconsin, Lynne and Jeanne decided to keep the Anita King period decor on the car, and Lucianne allowed some artifacts to accompany "Annie" back to the Wisconsin Automotive Museum in Hartford, which sparked a traveling Anita King exhibit. During her drive in 1915, King collected signatures on a canvas from individuals in every state she entered along the way. During the course of the exhibit at the LaPorte County Historical Society Museum, all visitors were encouraged to sign a canvas that then also was sent to Hartford to continue the impact.



Figure 7. Historical Anita King Plaque

AUTHOR IMPACT

As I finished the exhibit, I completed several reflective assignments for Dr. Mary Beth Connolly’s “Backyard History” course. It was empowering to shed light on a woman such as Anita King who represented determination and strength for so many during her time. Not only did I learn more about grant writing, problem solving, and specific practices of historical preservation, but I also gained confidence in my ability to carry out a project and make a difference in the community. I have carried every skill that I gained from this project on to my work as a graduate instructor, volunteer, and organization leader.

I am still very connected to the project and the Historical Society Museum. I am currently mentoring a student from Sinclair College who is starting a service-learning project centered on preserving local history with a focus on Anita King. Additionally, I just put together a proposal for Bruce Johnson to have a bridge named after Anita King in LaPorte County. Since the exhibit, I have

been able to work with Bruce on a number of new projects, such as the Indiana Pandemic Poetry Project (Legacy Foundation, 2023).

If I were to do the project over again, I would set longer deadlines for tasks. Even as COVID-19 restrictions loosened, everything took much longer than anticipated, but it was all well worth it. I had known I was passionate about grant writing and community work, but this project immersed me in the concepts unlike I had ever been and has greatly impacted my future plans. I now understand that service-learning, community engagement, and scholarship are things I will always focus on with my work.

CONCLUSION

Even considering Anita King’s undeniable bravery and accomplishments, along with the successes of this project, she is still regarded as “mostly forgotten,” and conditions in the workforce in and outside of Hollywood remain tumultuous. This project and the results left

behind call for a broader urgency for the recognition and preservation of feminist history and film history, which have significant applications for the fight for equality in society. Although much was uncovered through the project, there is still much more to be done. A recent outreach by another family member of King's who heard about this project and wishes to discuss new artifacts is evidence that there is much more to discover as well. More student volunteers or interns willing to further this project will enhance reciprocity for the community partner, students, and the cause behind the project. I encourage students considering engaging with a service-learning project to not be afraid to ask, even when it seems impossible. There was great risk for Lynn and Jeanne in allowing their Kissel to be displayed in Indiana, but when I reached out and shared the meaning behind the project, they decided it was worth it. It may feel daunting, but if you trust yourself to imagine your project without a ceiling and then dare to reach out, inquire, and make connections, you will have done all that you can do to open the door to endless possibilities. I wrote this essay because I believe that the project represents both an example of incredible beauty in the world through King's determination and a great need for change. Bringing this and any story that involve challenges to light makes it possible to spark new ideas for engagement, activism, and change.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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