



Staff photo by Bonnie Calhoun

Storyteller Estelle Condra sings to the beat of her drum
...as she spins her African tales Wednesday at Richview School.

African Native Uses Storytelling To Describe Life In Dark Continent

By BONNIE CALHOUN
Of The Leaf-Chronicle Staff

Africa—the dark continent—a place from where many Americans trace their ancestry, but few of us know much about.

Africa is the home of Mamaroe, Tokkeloshi, Tombimbi—and Estelle Condra.

Unlike the first three, Mrs. Condra is made of flesh and blood. And she possesses a compelling voice to spread the word of her legendary compatriots and thereby illuminate the mysterious culture of her native land.

Mrs. Condra left South Africa nine years ago. But she took with her the stories she had heard as a child from her nannie, Lena, a member of the SoSotho tribe. In the United States, she developed her repertoire and her technique to become a professional storyteller.

Wednesday she took her voice and her culture to a teachers' workshop at Richview Middle School.

Crying out the high-pitched call of the cowherd, Mrs. Condra entered the stage leaping and lunging with a spear at her imaginary cattle. Dressed in an patterned blanket and a cone-shaped straw hat, she introduced herself as the village herds woman—and the spell was cast.

For an hour she talked, sang, and chanted, weaving her stories of magic cows, evil spirits, and beautiful daughters until "night" fell and she retreated, pushing her formless cows before her.

The 150 teachers and librarians in the audience were almost as out of breath as Mrs. Condra after the performance as they readjusted their sights from the villages of Africa to the Richview auditorium.

"I am not afraid of the lion and leopard here because I am not alone," announced the herds woman, her voice rising and falling in a lilting African accent.

"There is a bird here, who sings, 'K-o-o-w-a-y! K-o-o-w-a-y!'" The herds woman's voice broke into a resonant imitation of the bird's song.

"We call him the kooway bird," she said.

The other stories were not quite so matter of fact, but were filled with the magic, competing good and evil, and happy endings that most of us remember in childhood fairy tales.

Mahelanie, the favorite cow of a young Xhosa boy named Japie, could not be killed by the bad warriors who wanted to eat her. Yes, they cooked and consumed her flesh, but she rose again from the discarded bones and skin, rather like the triumphant Christ.

In another story, Tombimbi, the most beautiful daughter of a Matabela chief, was murdered by her jealous sisters. Cinderella, anyone?

Not quite. Instead of mice and a pumpkin becoming a coach and four, the fallen Tombimbi turned into a bird, who was transfigured back into the girl when her father rubbed the bird with fat.

Evil forces abounded in the stories. The herds woman's spear would protect her from fierce animals, but not from Tokkeloshi, a tiny witch doctor hundreds of years old who had the power to turn people into lizards and spiders. Only the answers to three questions could save the herds woman from his spell.

Rumpelstiltskin's demand for identification was hardly more menacing than Tokkeloshi's, "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?"

Fortunately for the herds woman, the audience had been clued into the answers and rescued her with its shouted responses at the last moment.

Following the performance, Mrs. Condra reappeared as herself, looking somehow smaller, and explained a little how such storytelling can be used in the classroom.

The art of storytelling is making a comeback as a tool for teaching children how to comprehend, interpret, analyze and ultimately create, according to Rachel Simmons and Carol Reed, the teachers who organized the workshop.

But Mrs. Condra's goals on Wednesday were simpler.

"I would be very happy if they could have seen the pastures and the huts—the image I was trying to create," she said.