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Black women earn a place in U.S. history

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"Look at me! Ain't I a woman? Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gave me any best place... I have ploughed, and I have planted, and I have gathered into barns... I have borne 13 children and seen them most all sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?"

These are the words of Sojourner Truth, the great black abolitionist, proclaiming at the Women's Rights Convention of 1851 that accomplishment and suffering knew no racial or sexual barriers.

Recognition, however, is another matter. Being both black and female in this country has long meant laboring under a double whammy of obscurity.

A Smithsonian Institution exhibit on display at the Homewood branch of Carnegie Library until March 15 aims to reverse this trend. "Black Women: Achievements Against the Odds," is a collection of 20 posters featuring 18 women and recognizing 102 others in 16 fields.

Their stories span more than 200 years of American history, and include such women as Madame C.J. Walker, who became the first female black millionaire by working her way from washerwoman to head of her own cosmetics firm, and Lucy E. Parsons, a major figure in the radical labor movement in Chicago.

Featuring charcoal sketches and vintage photographs, the exhibit portrays its subjects with all the dignity, courage and

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Bill Levis/Post-Gazette

Pauli Murray, left, and Maida Springer-Kemp, are two subjects of a Smithsonian Institution tribute to black women in America.

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fire that characterized their lives.

Three of the women have Pittsburgh connections: Mary Lou Williams, jazz pianist who composed and arranged music for Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington, who went to Westinghouse High School, as did high fashion model Naomi Sims; singer Lena Horne also lived here for four years when she was married to Louis Jones.

Two other subjects are even more strongly connected to the city — they live here.

Maida Springer-Kemp, labor organizer and the first black business agent for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, resides in Point Breeze. Pauli Murray, writer and poet, former professor of law at Brandeis University, co-founder with Betty Friedan of the National Organization for Women, and the first black female priest in the Episcopal church, has just moved here from Baltimore. (She is staying with Springer-Kemp until she finishes writing her autobiography and has time to find living quarters of her own.)

Their friendship has endured through 42 years of trailblazing work for social, racial and sexual equality. Each has fought different battles in the same war, and each speaks with the quiet eloquence of a woman who has met personal and public challenge head-on, and won. Through it all, they have maintained a gentle humor.

"I'm now part of five minority groups," says Murray over a pot of tea. "I'm a person of color, a woman, hard of hearing, left-handed, and over 70 years old."

Springer-Kemp, 73, came to the United States from her native Panama in 1917. During the Depression, she went to work in the New York dress factories. Worker exploitation led her to join the ILGWU in 1933, when it was still a fairly ineffective organization. As the union gained strength, so did she. She rose through the ranks to become a major force in American labor, as well as the trade union movement in Africa.

Throughout her life, she has maintained a fierce love for the United States, implanted by her proud immigrant mother who believed this was truly the land of opportunity.

"My mother traveled to Panama often. She was always preaching about what she called *the* United States of America. 'Come to America and my daughter will get you a job,' she would tell people. They would arrive at our home in Brooklyn in the middle of the night, in a taxi, and my mother would say, 'Oh, dear, I just mentioned it to them in passing. . . .' And I would get them a job."

Springer-Kemp is distressed at what she sees as the national swing toward destroying the labor movement.

"What are people talking about when they say 'Big Labor'? Don't they realize this country has only 14½ million organized laborers out of a work force of 80 [million] to 90 million? We still have sweated labor in this country, people who are terribly underpaid. Unfortunately, we also have an administration that has set the anti-labor tone. It is very difficult for me to watch."

Despite the barriers she has broken, she says, "I weary of this 'first' business. After a while, it ceases to be important."

Murray interrupts. "But historically, it *is* important. It says where we are in this country, that in 1984 there are still so many firsts to be achieved."

Murray, whose ancestry is Cherokee, black and white, knows about achievement. She is a historian and poet, a lawyer and college professor, a scholar and an organizer, and a member of the clergy.

In the 1930s, after graduation from Hunter College, she worked in New York for the Workers' Defense League, "a defense agency for people who fell between the cracks of the labor unions and the NAACP."

She attended law school at Howard University, earned her doctorate of law at Yale, became vice president of Benedict College in South Carolina, and taught law in Ghana and at Brandeis.

Then, at the age of 66, she was one of the first women to be ordained an Episcopalian priest. Last year, at 72, she was retired from her ministry in Baltimore under mandatory canon law.

Among her published writings are "Dark Testament and Other Poems," "Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family," which she calls the first "Roots," and a massive reference work called "States' Laws on Race and Color."

Bringing Bach to the Strip

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certs are flutist Jeffrey Khaner; cellist Zela Terry and soprano Lisa Vroman.

Van Trump will speak tonight at 7:30. The concerts are at 8 tonight, tomorrow and Thursday. For more information, call 241-4243.

Church has a long history

St. Stanislaus Roman Catholic Church was the first parish church built by the Polish-American community in 1892 and named for a Polish general.

The church was designed by the German-born American architect Frederick Sauer (1860-1942), who also did St. Nicholas R.C. Church, Millvale, and St. Colman R.C. Church, Turtle Creek. St. Stanislaus was known for its outdoor creche at Christmas.

"The quasi-baroque, quasi-romanesque style reminds me of St. Anne de Beaupre [Church] in Montreal," said James D. Van Trump, architectural historian. "Inside, it's a pleasant hunky church. Rather florid with frescoes and stained

the commercial district all around it."

Poster is souvenir of event

Pittsburgh architect John Martine, designer/-partner of the Brady Street Bridge Cafe, and designer of the "Welcome to Birmingham" mural, both in Southside, has made a large mauve-and-gray souvenir poster for the Bach program. It will be on sale there for a $10 donation to the Chamber Music Project.

"Everyone knows the church because of its location," Martine said. "I was asked to do the poster because of my work on the Southside. I studied the exterior to do the poster but haven't been inside."

"It has a very interesting setting in the produce area. Its facade is somewhat busy with its brick and stone trim, but I love the large rose window. The rectory has an arcade and it's a nice little complex."

Martine last week opened his second exhibition of architectural drawings in 18 months at Les Idees Gallery, Duquesne University Student Un-