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Haley family contributes to trove of archived legacy

Author's son and former wife lend voices to history

By Karen Matthews
Associated Press
May 26, 2007

NEW YORK -- Alex Haley was in the Coast Guard when he met his future bride in North Carolina.

"He wanted to know if he could come and court me," Nannie Haley, 82, recalled Tuesday. "And I said, 'You'll have to ask my parents.'"

Nannie's father said no, but Haley persisted, dedicating songs such as "The Very Thought of You" and "Stardust" on the radio and writing love letters that Nannie's mother steamed open and read while her daughter was at school.

The story of the young couple's star-crossed courtship is now part of the historical record.

In an event timed to coincide with Tuesday's publication of the 30th anniversary paperback edition of Haley's groundbreaking book, "Roots," Nannie Haley and her son, William Haley, interviewed each other at Grand Central Terminal for the StoryCorps oral history project.

The project, created by radio documentarian Dave Isay, consists of 40-minute interviews. At the end of the session, participants get a CD of their interview. A second copy goes to the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, where it will become part of a digital archive.

The Haleys' interview is part of StoryCorps' Griot Initiative, a yearlong effort to collect interviews from at least 1,750 black people.

"I certainly believe in people putting down their stories," William Haley, 61, said after the session. "It's a beginning, and I think it will probably mushroom."

Alex Haley and Nannie Branch married in 1941 and divorced in 1964. Alex Haley died in 1992 at age 70.

His Pulitzer Prize-winning "Roots: The Saga of an American Family" chronicled his family history from Africa to slavery and freedom in the United States. It was made into an ABC miniseries and spurred an interest in genealogy across ethnic groups.

The book "has had an impact on our entire society," said John W. Franklin, program manager for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution that is being built in Washington and that will house the StoryCorps Griot CDs.

"When Alex Haley wrote 'Roots,' it encouraged people of all kinds around the country to look into their own ancestry, and they invaded the archives," Franklin said.

Though it was critically acclaimed and a best seller, "Roots," originally published in 1976, had a troubled history. A copyright infringement lawsuit was settled with Harold Courtlander, who claimed that a passage was lifted from a novel he wrote.

And while Haley called "Roots" a blend of fact and fiction, critics questioned the extent of the book's factual basis.

In a statement in the reissued book, the publisher, Vanguard, says: "But none of the controversy affects the basic issues. 'Roots' fostered a remarkable dialogue about not just the past but the then present-day 1970s and how America had fared since the days portrayed in 'Roots.'"

William Haley noted that his father called his blend of fact and fiction "faction."



Alex Haley has been praised and panned for his part-fact, part-fiction "Roots," the story of his family legacy from Africa to the United States. But the fact remains that "Roots" jump-started an interest in genealogy that crossed racial lines.

"The faction is putting the body on the skeleton, which is the embellishment that we all do when we talk about our ancestors," he said.

On the Net: StoryCorps' Griot Initiative at storycorps.net/griot/

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