



A STORIED *History*

VP HISTORIAN BEV SCHUETZ

By Joan Lerch

The seventeen floats featured in the first Veiled Prophet parade were purchased for \$8,000—a princely sum in 1878. And on the final float, thousands of spectators were introduced to the mysterious Veiled Prophet of Khorassan, as the torch-lit nighttime parade wound through the cobblestone streets of St. Louis.

Later that evening, at a gala celebration, the Veiled Prophet chose a ‘belle of the ball’ from the young ladies in attendance. “That first year, the Prophet chose Susie Slayback. She was the 16-year-old daughter of Alonzo Slayback, a co-founder of the Veiled Prophet Organization,” explains historian and lecturer **Bev Schuetz**. It wasn’t until 1894, she adds, that the name of the evening’s honoree was changed to ‘Queen of Love and Beauty,’ the title still bestowed each year at the Veiled Prophet Ball. “Hester Bates Laughlin was the first Queen of Love and Beauty,” she adds.

Her popular lectures discuss subjects as diverse as the history of

underwear and the works of Patience Worth, but Schuetz says the story of the Veiled Prophet was the impetus behind her business, History Talks. “I attended lectures often, but no one ever covered the VP, and I became so fascinated when I began doing my own research.” One of her favorite stories describes the reaction of Virginia Joy, who was chosen as Belle of the Ball in 1885. “Until that time, the names of the belles were not printed because it was not proper for a young woman to have her name in the newspaper,” Schuetz explains. “Many years later, Virginia wrote: *I shudder even now as I think of it. I felt honored, of course, but at the same time, disgraced for life at being made so conspicuous.*”

The protocol of a bygone era would bring greater discomfort, and even social disgrace, to the 1928 Queen of Love and Beauty. “She was the daughter of a very prominent family, a descendant of Pierre Laclede,” Schuetz says. “All of the books describe her as just

darling, in a short flapper dress—the perfect queen for the 50th anniversary celebration.” Perfect, that is, until 20 days after the ball, when the VP organization suddenly announced that she had abdicated and there would be no queen for that year. “She had secretly married a few months earlier, and that was strictly forbidden,” Schuetz says. “She moved away from St. Louis, and her name was removed from the Social Register.”

Describing today’s Veiled Prophet Ball as a ‘far cry’ from those long-ago stories, Schuetz has high praise for the civic contributions of the young women presented each year, particularly the two years of community service they must complete before they attend the ball. “They put so much ‘sweat equity’ into the projects they do with their dads! It’s just wonderful,” she says. “For many years it was all social, but now it benefits the entire community in so many ways.”

