

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Mona Parsons

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Mona Parsons biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Although her story isn't well known, Mona Parsons led a fascinating life. This Nova Scotia-born woman became part of a resistance unit in Nazi occupied Holland. She was imprisoned for her actions, but she managed to escape and make her way to safety by posing as a German.

### Aims

Students will learn about:

- The life of Mona Parsons
- Nazi occupation of Holland during WWII
- Women in the war years
- The resistance movement

### Background

Actress, nurse, millionaire, resistance fighter, escapee – Mona Parsons was all of these things. This video reveals the little-known story of a

remarkable woman.

Mona Parsons was born in 1901 in Middleton, Nova Scotia to successful businessman Norval Parsons and his wife Mary. As a young woman, Mona studied acting, a career choice that clearly reflects her daring and independent nature.

In 1929, she moved to New York City where she pursued her acting career. She briefly worked as a chorus girl with the Zeigfried Follies but made little headway in serious theatre. When the Depression hit, Parsons decided to become a nurse, since this career choice provided more opportunities for women. She received training in nursing at the Jersey City Medical Center and quickly landed a job on Park Avenue. Soon after, she was introduced to her husband to be - Dutch millionaire Willem Leonhardt.

In 1937, the married couple moved to Holland. There they lived a life of wealth and privilege, until the Nazis invaded Holland in 1940. The couple became part of a resistance unit, which defied the Nazis by attempting to repatriate downed Allied airmen. Their home at Ingleside had been used only four times for this purpose when a Nazi informer gave them away.

The couple was separated and after a brief trial, Mona was condemned to death by a Nazi tribunal. Her sentence was commuted to life in prison in 1942. After spending three years in various prisons, Parsons was moved to Vechta Prison where she and Baroness Wendelien van Holthe executed a daring escape plan.

When the men's side of the Vechta prison was bombed and the female prisoners were moved outside their compound as protection from further bombing, the two friends sneaked away from their jailers. The most

remarkable part of this story is that for three weeks the two women made their way to the Allied forces by posing as German sisters. Mona's acting skills became invaluable as she had to pretend that she was a mentally challenged woman with a speech impediment to mask her inauthentic German accent. Parsons finally made her way to an advancing Canadian battalion and revealed her fantastic story to an incredulous audience.

Although Willem and Mona were reunited, Willem never fully recovered from the stress of imprisonment and in 1956 he died. Shortly after, Parsons moved back to Nova Scotia. For the last twelve years of her life Parsons lived alone in Wolfville until her death in 1976. Although she received a commendation for her war effort from British Air Chief Marshal Tedder and U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower, few people were aware of Parsons's heroism. That is until now. This video finally reveals to all viewers the story of an unsung hero.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

Pre-viewing Activities

#### *1. Heroism:*

Place students into groups of four. Have them brainstorm the question: What makes a hero? Remind groups that a brainstorming session means providing ideas without censorship. Regroup as a class and create a concept web on the board on the topic. Have each group give one idea until you have exhausted each list. You should have a list of both

personal qualities and actions. Then have the class discuss whether they would like to remove any of the answers from the list. This should lead to some lively discussion. Once you have some kind of consensus, ask the students to individually rank the ideas from most important to least important in their notebooks. Once the video is finished you can have students refer to their list and create a thesis answering why Mona Parsons is considered a hero. This could be followed up with an essay assignment.

## *2. Bullying/Resistance:*

This is a very current issue and will get students relating historical events to themselves and to the present.

Have students complete a journal entry answering these questions:

- Describe one experience that you have seen or heard about where you or one of your peers has been bullied/treated unfairly by others.
- If the experience was personal, what did you do? Would you have done anything differently, in retrospect?
- If you were a witness, what did you do? How might you handle the situation differently now?
- If it was not a personal issue, what would you have done if you were the victim or if you were a witness?

Have students pair up and share their answers and then lead a group discussion by asking students to volunteer their answers. Create a list of suggestions of ways to deal with bullies. You might find some useful information on this topic at [Bully Beware](#), or you might want students to consult current or archived newspaper articles for stories about bullying.

Tie in the students' experiences with resistance fighters during WWII. Discuss the many ways that people resisted Nazi persecution and

oppression. Explain to the class that the video they are about to watch outlines the story of a Canadian woman who resisted Nazi occupation.

### Post-Viewing Activities

#### 3. Historica Canada Heritage Minute:

Have students create and perform [Historica Canada Heritage Minutes](#), which illustrate the essential details and significance of Mona Parsons to Canadian history.

Have students watch at least two Heritage Minutes on specific individuals and have them answer these questions:

- Who is featured?
- Why are they the subject?
- How is the person's character revealed to the audience (dialogue, actions, response of those around him/her, setting etc.)
- How is context established? (costumes, set, music etc.)
- How many scenes are depicted? What are the scenes?
- How is the story made dramatic? (Expression, body language, music, length of scenes etc.)

Place students in groups of four. Inform students that they will all work as a creative team and as actors, but that they also must be responsible for one other task. This will allow you to assess students' group work, as well as their individual contribution.

Their first task will be to come up with a name for their production company. Then have them decide on the role they will take in the creation of their Minute.

Production Team:

*Director:*

- Will manage the group to ensure that all stay on task.
- Will commit to arranging practice time or check on completion of tasks.
- Will decide on the actions and placement of actors.

*Scriptwriter:*

- Will coordinate the dialogue and record the parts.
- Will also help actors with their delivery of lines.

*Costume Designer:*

- Will coordinate costumes for all members.
- Will ensure that all costume changes can be carried out smoothly.

*Set Designer:*

- Will coordinate use of props and music.
- Will ensure that all scene changes are made obvious through use of props.

Once the production team is organized, have students decide how they will answer the same questions as the Heritage Minute analysis in order to construct their own Minute. At this point they should identify which elements of Parsons's life they will choose to include in their Minute.

Schedule class time for practice and performances. A variation of this activity might include a video production of the Minute, in which case, you might want to discuss camera-work and include the job of camera-person on the production team.

The teacher should assess the final product, but have students peer-

assess their process work by determining how well each individual completed his/her chosen job. Have students complete a reflection on what they did that was positive, and what they would do differently next time.

#### 4. Letter

Have students research the conditions of life in Nazi prisons and write letters from Mona's perspective to one of her family members. This letter should be "historically accurate" in representing prison life and in outlining the details leading up to the imprisonment.

#### 5. Mindmap

In groups of four, students should research the role of Canadian women during the Second World War. Two people should focus on women on the homefront and two should focus on women on the front lines. On a large piece of chart paper, students should create a mindmap to display their findings.

#### 6. Radio Interview

In groups of four, students should research Canada's role in the liberation of Holland from Nazi occupation. Using this information, students should conduct radio interviews. Students should take on one of the following roles:

- Canadian Liberator
- Dutch Citizen
- German soldier
- Canadian correspondent

- Dutch youngster

Students should play their taped show for the audience. Sound effects should be included.

## 7. Song

Students could compose songs in any musical style (rap, folk, country etc.) that tells Mona Parsons's story and then perform it for the class.

## 8. Role Play

In groups of 4-6, have students create a television special entitled "Women in War." During the show, students will interview Mona Parsons and the Baroness. You may want to collapse this assignment with the research assignment on the role of women in WWII and include other guests who would be suitable for the show. If you are doing an integrated study, you could include a book club recommendation, which relates to the topic of WWII. You should provide the audience with a summary of the book and explain why you have chosen it.

## **Resources**

[Mona Parsons - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Mona Parsons: Acting was a Matter of Life or Death - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Second World War – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Women and War - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Hanneke, Ippisch. *Sky: A True Story of Resistance during World War II*. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1996.

Hill, Andrea. *Mona Parsons: From Privilege to Prison, from Nova Scotia to Nazi Europe*. Halifax: Nimbus, 2000.

*Frontline! The Liberation of the Netherlands*. Liberation of the Netherlands Video Production Inc. Canada Remembers Advisory Council, 1995.