

BARBARA MASON SHARES THE SPOTLIGHT
WITH THE NOBLE BLOODSUCKER

The Leech Lady

Ask anyone at the School of Medicine who “The Leech Lady” is and they won’t hesitate — it’s Barbara Mason. She is famous throughout the School for her devotion to the ugly but useful medicinal leech, which became a medical tool 2,500 years ago and has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years.

“There’s nothing new under the sun,” quips Mason in her crisp British accent. That’s true in the case of medicinal leeches and apparently in game shows as well. Mason will soon be known nationwide under the title of “The Leech Lady” after the broadcast of her recent appearance on the revived television game show, *To Tell the Truth*.

Professionally, Mason is known under her other title: curator of the Pearson Museum located at the School of Medicine in Springfield. Her sparkling personality and zest for life captivate all who know her. Her eyes glisten as she speaks about her work and her friends, all with a dazzling smile. British witticisms pepper her cultured speech. Mason emits more energy and vitality from her petite

frame than many twenty-somethings. This lady’s got spunk.

Nestled in her office near the Pearson Museum, Mason peeks from behind her overflowing desk to chat with friends who frequently stop in to share momentos, collect work or discuss personal events. Pictures of friends and colleagues line her desk and cover her office walls. Even with a crowded schedule, she makes time for everybody. “I don’t think there’s anybody on this campus I don’t like,” she says, smiling.

Just how did Mason the curator become known as “The Leech Lady?” It all began last spring with a visit from *Roadside America*, a group of authors who publish an online guide to offbeat tourist attractions. Mason led them on a tour of the Pearson Museum, where, among all the unique items, they were especially enthralled with the medicinal leeches. *Roadside America*’s online article inspired television producers to give Mason a call. “The TV people rang me,” she remembers. “I thought it was the TV people from Vandalia, and I said [jokingly] ‘where’s [area code] 818? It must be

Hollywood.’ And it was!”

Ever outgoing, Mason agreed to appear on the revived game show, *To Tell the Truth*. The program, first televised in the 1950s, features a panel of celebrities who address questions to three contestants. After receiving a description of the “real” guest, the celebrities try to determine which of the three is telling the truth and which are imposters. While the contestants often plug their books or other achievements, Mason says, “I made sure to get a plug in for SIU.”

Filmed in Hollywood over a weekend in June, the show’s preparations seemed chaotic to Mason, who nevertheless managed to maintain her easygoing demeanor. But the two other “Barbara Masons” were nervous, says the real thing.

Ironically, the actual taping of the show was not centered on Mason. “The question I was asked was: ‘Would you be prepared to give up your leg if it helped research?’” It seemed a silly question to Mason, who responded with a demure, “No,” that brought the house down. “But I should have said, ‘Not until I’m through with it.’”





*Barbara goes Hollywood:
To Tell The Truth panelists Dave Coulier,
Debbi Morgan, Barbara, Paula Poundstone,
and Meshach Taylor.
Barbara with host John O' Hurley.*

Mason was the star of the show and charmed her fellow contestants and the panel of celebrities that consisted of comedienne Paula Poundstone, actor Meshach Taylor, actress Debbi Morgan and comedian Dave Coulier. The host of the show, actor John O'Hurley, best known as the eccentric clothing tycoon, Mr. Peterman, on *Seinfeld*, insisted on meeting Mason. "He was very friendly and handsome to boot," she says.

Mason says she had a great time taping the program, and she was impressed with the hard-working producers who had their own encounter with the frisky leeches that were flown in especially for the show.

She laughs as she recalls: "I heard terrible screams coming from the ladies' room, and then men's voices. Two young producers with the big round bowl of leeches were trying to tip them down the loo. I asked, 'Did you kill them first?' They said, 'No.' I said [jokingly], 'Oh no! You'll have leeches in every loo all over Hollywood now! All the movie stars will have leeches biting their bums!'"

Leave it to Barbara Mason to put

Hollywood in its place. For the record, a touch of alcohol kills the leeches, and Mason thinks that the chlorine in the toilet water probably killed the TV-star leeches. "I always say, 'Their lives end nobly.'"

Nobly, indeed. Medicinal leeches, which are one of 600 varieties of the bloodsuckers, have been a medical tool for centuries, used to relieve patients of "bad humors" and illnesses ranging from headaches to gout. In the mid-1980s, medicinal leeches were rediscovered and now are used to foster circulation during limb-reattachment surgeries.

"Leeches are wonderful," asserts Mason. "They live on blood, you know, and their job is to get the blood flowing so the reattached limb will take." The bloodsuckers inject their own anesthetic into the skin, as well as an anti-coagulant called hirudin that keeps the blood flowing after the leeches drop off their host. SIU surgeons keep a healthy supply of leeches in the surgery department.

And how do patients react to the use of leeches as a medical instrument? Says Mason, "When one is faced

with losing a hand or having leeches used, most will choose the leeches."

Dedication to the leech has led Mason to expand her research to support another creepy critter. "Whenever I see a surgeon, I ask, 'Are you a maggot man?'" Maggots, says Mason, actually help a wound heal by eating away at dead tissue. She cites the example of a Frenchman who fell off of his bicycle and was found days later. His wounds were healing nicely because of the maggots. "Of course it's very important to have the right kind of maggots. For instance, saw flies could cause a disaster!"

For now, it is the leeches — which she has named Larry, Lily, Latitia and Lulu — that star in Mason's famous lectures on the history of medicine, which she gives as part of her duties as curator of the Pearson Museum.

Before being introduced to the wonders of leeches, Mason succeeded at numerous interesting positions in the U.S. and her homeland, England. BBC administrative assistant, governor of a London psychiatric hospital,

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newswoman, sports reporter, drama teacher and freelance writer, the gregarious Mason loves meeting new people and learning new things.

As a journalist in England, Mason's beat included Windsor Castle, where she watched Prince Philip and Prince Charles play polo, and where her young daughter, Peta, sometimes played with Princess Anne, who was about the same age. Mason, just two hours older than Queen Elizabeth II, also has a son, Heath.

Mason came to the United States in the 1970s to edit and prepare manuscripts for publication at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, N.Y., and at the University of Tennessee in Memphis. She started working for the School of Medicine in 1984 as a freelance writer, later becoming curator of SIU's permanent art collection and a volunteer in the Pearson Museum. When the position of museum curator became available, Mason eagerly accepted the job. A decade later, she reigns as the School's longest-serving curator of the Pearson Museum. "My job has become my life," she says. "But I love

it. I never know what the day's going to bring forth."

Mason excels at the multitude of functions required of the Museum's curator. On any given day, Mason could be researching, unpacking, cataloguing and preserving artifacts that have been donated to the Pearson Museum collection. Boxes of donated artifacts encircle Mason's desk. The Museum receives items from all over the world. "I collect everything, because I'm not just collecting historical things, I'm collecting for posterity, too."

Another day Mason could be compiling fascinating exhibits on medical history topics. Her office is filled from floor to ceiling with the more than 100 exhibits she has created over the years on topics such as surgery in the Civil War, body snatching, frontier physicians, wine as therapy and disinfected mail.

On yet another day Mason might be touring Illinois, giving her famous lectures on the history of medicine. "I keep my suitcase packed," she says, a suitcase brimming with history,

including a Civil War amputation kit, an instrument for drilling holes in the skull, a diphtheria kit and more. Mason spins her tales to rapt audiences at schools, churches, professional societies, the Lincoln Home Visitors Center and various medical groups. She is sure to bring Larry, Lily, Latitia and Lulu along. This grandmother of four can be just as at ease with five-year-olds as she is with medical students, faculty, scholars and retirees.

As on the game show, Mason tells the truth about medical history, even though many ancient practices are rather alarming. Her current exhibit in the Pearson Museum depicts the historical treatments of mental patients, which included violent immersion into a pit of water; confinement to a chair, closet or cage for days; and hot and icy cold water baths. "One family in five has experience with mental illness," says Mason. "This exhibit is something people can relate to."

Still other days Mason might be updating her finely-tuned filing system. She has taken it upon herself to become a one-woman medical



Barbara Mason (far left) meets the Queen Mother at the opening of a sheltered workshop and hostel for the mentally handicapped in Buckinghamshire, U.K., circa 1963.

Barbara was an organizer and fund-raiser for the project, which provided a home for the mentally handicapped.

resource center. Her huge file cabinets — most far bigger than she is — are chock-full of clippings about area physicians, medical diseases and photographs of historical importance. “One of the things I’m most proud of is that I have got students and faculty interested in medical history, and they come to the museum for information.” She adds, “People used to think of the Pearson Museum just as a place to have tea parties.”

For Mason, encouraging physicians, medical students, youngsters and the public to remember medical history has been one of her goals. “Just imagine the knowledge that’s been discovered, worked on and then never recorded, so it’s lost,” she says. “The mind boggles at the encyclopedias we would need to record it all.”

As an example, Mason tells the tale of the stitch, or ligature, in medicine. Sixteenth-century French surgeon Ambroise Paré invented the idea of the stitch, replacing the previous treatment of pouring boiling oil on wounds or cauterizing them with a hot iron. While the stitch was considered a brilliant idea, the high rate of

infection that followed its use caused physicians to fear it. “The stitch was dropped like a hot brick,” says Mason. Over the centuries, the idea was rediscovered numerous times before its present, antiseptic application made it a useful technique. Mason is filled with historical anecdotes like this.

Yes, Barbara Mason’s stories are fascinating, and believe me, they’re all true. “I’ve had a wonderful life,” she says. But it’s far from over. Mason is involved in more activities, committees and clubs than most people half her age. She is a “master gardener” and an avid reader who estimates her personal book collection at nearly 5,000 volumes. She is also a volunteer for the HealthFirst clinic, a fund-raiser for PBS, serves on the county and state historical societies’ boards, and belongs to a host of professional organizations. “I like everything,” she declares. “I like just being alive!”

Though game shows may try to fool you with imitations of Barbara Mason, no one can compare to the lady herself. To tell the truth, she is truly one-of-a-kind. ■

The Pearson Museum

is a fascinating gallery with an ever-rotating collection of medical artifacts from the late Dr. Emmet Pearson and hundreds of other items donated from across the world. “Fritz” the skeleton watches over the collection, which includes a turn-of-the-century pharmacy, a complete dispensary of homeopathic remedies, 19th century dentist’s and doctor’s offices, a “fainting couch” and a “bleeding bowl” to name just a few.

The Pearson Museum also has become an information resource for other institutions all over the world. Mason has received inquiries from England, Ireland, Czechoslovakia and Australia.