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GRAY PLANS PRESIDENTIAL PORTAYAL

By Dawn Marks, News and Eagle Staff

When Gary Gray steps up to the podium he will become a different man.

Gray has worked for almost a year leaning all he can about one of America's most unknown presidents, James A. Garfield, so that he can portray him accurately.

"I have to absorb a guy for about eight months until I'm ready. Then I can step on a stage and be him for an hour," he said.

Gray's work will culminate in two performances in the next few weeks. Thursday he will perform at the Public Library of Enid and Garfield County in the Great Plains Room at 7 p. m. and March 1 he will be a the Museum of the Cherokee Strip Brown Bag Luncheon series at noon.

Garfield was a good choice because Garfield County is named in his honor and because he was president of Hiram College, a sister college to Phillips University, Gray said.

Gray said that in order to portray Garfield he had to do extensive research about his life. He met with Garfield biographer Alan Peskin of Cleveland State University, traveled to Garfield's birthplace, visited Hiram College and his home there, saw his home in Mentor, Ohio, and visited his burial site near Cleveland.

The 20th president was diversified and intelligent, Gray said. He was a major general in the Civil War, a lawyer, a congressman and an ordained minister.

He was born into poverty in a log cabin in northeast Ohio, but vowed to overcome it through gaining knowledge. "His rise was quite unique," Gray said. Garfield didn't attend public school until he was 17, and was a college president by the time he was 26.

Unfortunately, Charles Julius Guiteau assassinated Garfield after he was in office only 200 days. Guiteau was under the impression that he would be given an ambassadorship for his action. "Instead he got hung," Gray said.

The whole nation mourned Garfield's death. He was 49 and had a family with five children.

"The mourning that took place was more significant than any other president other than Washington (until that time)," Gray said. "The whole nation was watching."

Gray will draw from Garfield's life to make his presentation and also will take questions after the portrayals.

Glenda Lamb, library director, said the performances have become a tradition that visitors enjoy, and Gray's research is excellent.

"This gives us a way to celebrate Presidents' Day," she said. "He really becomes that person."

This will be the third year Gray has portrayed a president. He previously depicted George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt.

Glen McIntyre, museum assistant curator, said museum visitors also enjoy Gray's portrayals, which was one reason the museum asked Gray to return for the series.

"They seemed to really enjoy Teddy Roosevelt. We knew he does a good job," he said.

Gray said he plans to continue his presidential tradition with Franklin Roosevelt next year and Andrew Johnson and Thomas Jefferson in following years.