

Hidden Figures: From the Movies North to Canada

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On November 8, 1946, Viola Desmond's car broke down in a small town about 100 miles from her home in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Desmond was on a trip promoting her line of beauty products. When she learned that she had to wait a day for her car to be repaired, she decided to go to the movies.

That is where she made history.

She bought her movie ticket, but, instead of sitting in the balcony where blacks like her were supposed to sit, Desmond chose a seat on the main floor. With her poor eyesight, it was easier to get comfortable closer to the screen. Except that is not how it worked out.

An usher told her that blacks weren't allowed to sit where she was. She would have to head up to the balcony. Desmond refused to do so. The police were called. Desmond was put in jail. The next day she was fined - not for breaking the laws of segregation. It turns out that the notion of separate sitting for blacks was simply convention in the particular movie theater. Desmond was fined, however, because she had paid for the less expensive balcony seat and then sat on the main floor. She owed the province an additional penny in taxes. She was fined \$26.

And the matter might have ended there except for the fact that the black community of Nova Scotia and other people across Canada didn't forget Viola. Nine years before Rosa Parks refused to leave her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama, Viola Desmond said no to segregation in Canada.

It was different. It is different in Canada. Even today, there are less than a million blacks in Canada. More than half of them have come to Canada from the Caribbean. Black Canadians (as they prefer to be called) don't have a legacy of slavery. Thousands actually arrived via the Underground Railroad precisely because slavery had been abolished in the British Empire and Canada as early as 1833.

And, of course, Canadians are by nature quieter than us Americans. When I grew up in Toronto, we prided ourselves on the differences between Canada and the USA. Canada offered what was called a "mosaic." There was no push towards the melting pot where differences were supposed to melt away. Canada valued the "mosaic" where every group was invited to cultivate its own story; heritage and ethnic differences were welcomed as part of the "mosaic."

It was a good idea. Largely true - except that it wasn't totally true.

For it turns out that a black story like Viola Desmond's wasn't really valued in Canada when I was growing up. It actually took until 1968 for a black person to be seated in Canada's Parliament. There were separate schools for blacks in parts of Nova Scotia and Ontario. The last such school wasn't closed until the mid-60's!

Viola Desmond herself was on that 1946 road trip because years earlier she had realized that major beauty companies didn't bother to have hair or skin products for black women. She had developed the products herself and was intent on reaching out to her black sisters to let them know someone cared. She was their advocate.

Who knew this story? I have to be honest. I only came across it when I was in Toronto recently and learned that Viola Desmond is going to be on the new Canadian \$10 bill!

Of course, the Canadian decision follows on America's decision to place Harriet Tubman on the currency. Tubman played her own remarkable role in the long history of civil rights with her involvement in the Underground Railroad. It turns out, by the way, that before the Civil War, Tubman

lived in Canada for a time. The chapel in St. Catharines, Ontario where she did much of her Canadian work has even been designated a national historic site for Canada.

For me, however, it's Viola Desmond who mainly surprises me. Here is a woman whose story was mainly hidden. She is not unlike the three African American women in the new motion picture, Hidden Figures. These three (Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan) worked behind the scenes in a segregated division of NASA. Their calculations helped the United States catch up in the "space race." Johnson, a mathematician, was so good at her work that John Glenn wouldn't commit to his historic mission around the earth until he knew she had reviewed the trajectory calculations.

Hidden figures. Hidden stories.

We are fortunate to live in a world where Viola Desmond and others like her stand for excellence and integrity.

I'm thinking that Viola Desmond would enjoy nothing more than purchasing a movie ticket with Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman. All three of them would then sit wherever they wished in the theater to marvel at the story of Johnson, Jackson, and Vaughan.

No need to be hidden.

Only our responsibility is to recognize and applaud great human accomplishment.

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