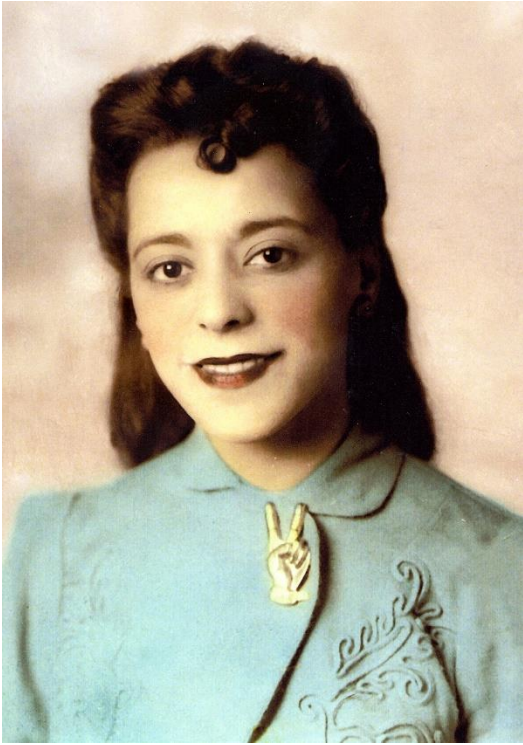


Viola Desmond (1914-1965)



Early Life

Viola Desmond was born in Nova Scotia July 6th, 1914, to James and Gwendolin Davis, which was her maiden name. She grew up with 10 siblings!

When she was growing up, Viola noticed that there was a lack of professional hair and skin care products that were available to black women, and aspired to become a beautician to help address the need.

After a short period teaching in segregated Black schools, she was accepted to study at the Field Beauty Culture School in Montreal, which at the time was one of the few beautician institutions in Canada that accepted Black applicants. She had been turned down from numerous other schools due to the colour of her skin.

She continued her training in Atlantic City and in New York and upon completion, Desmond opened Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture in Halifax.

Viola Desmond: Entrepreneur

In the early part of the 1900s, beauty parlours became a centre of social contact within the Black community, allowing the shop owner to achieve a position of status and authority.

Viola Desmond quickly found success as a beautician that offered her services to Black Canadians.

In light of this success, she opened a beauty school, the Desmond School of Beauty Culture, to train women and expanded her business across the province. Aware of her obligation to her community, Desmond created the school in order to provide training that would support the growth of employment for young Black women. Enrolment in Desmond's school grew rapidly, including students from New Brunswick and Québec. As many as 15 students graduated from the program each year.

At the same time, Desmond created a line of beauty products, which were sold at venues owned by graduates of her beauty school.

Viola Desmond and the 'incident' at the Roseland Theatre

On the evening of 8 November 1946, when she was 32 years old, Desmond made an unplanned stop in the small community of New Glasgow after her car broke down en route to a business meeting in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Waiting for repairs, she went to a movie to pass the time. At the Roseland Theatre, Desmond requested a ticket for a seat on the main floor. The ticket seller handed Desmond a ticket to the balcony instead, the seating generally reserved for non-White customers.

Thinking that a mistake had been made, Desmond returned to the cashier and asked her to exchange the ticket for one downstairs. The cashier refused. Realizing that the cashier was referring to the colour of her skin, Desmond decided to take a seat on the main floor.

Desmond was then confronted by the theatre manager, who argued that the theatre had the right to “refuse admission to any objectionable person.” Desmond pointed out that she had not been refused admission and had in fact been sold the ticket, which she still held in her hand. She added that she had attempted to exchange it for a main floor ticket and was willing to pay the difference in cost but had been refused.

When she declined to leave her seat, a police officer was called. Desmond was dragged out of the theatre, injuring her hip and knee in the process, and taken to jail. She was then held in a cell overnight. Shocked and frightened, she maintained her composure and, as she related later, sat bolt upright all night long.

The next morning, Desmond was brought to court and charged with attempting to defraud the provincial government based on her alleged refusal to pay a one cent amusement tax (i.e., the difference in tax between upstairs and downstairs ticket prices).

Throughout the trial, Desmond was not provided with a lawyer or informed that she was entitled to one.

At no point in the proceedings was the issue of race mentioned. Still, it was clear that Desmond's real offence was to violate the implicit rule that Black persons were to sit in the balcony seats, segregated from White persons on the main floor.

The judge chose to fine her \$26. Six of those dollars were awarded to the manager of the Roseland Theatre, who was listed in the court proceedings as prosecutor.

On the advice of the doctor who examined the injuries that resulted from her arrest, Desmond contacted a lawyer in order to reverse her charge.

Instead, Desmond's lawyer made Desmond the plaintiff in a lawsuit that named the theatre manager and the Roseland Theatre as defendants. It tried to establish that the manager had acted unlawfully when he forcibly ejected Desmond from the theatre, which would entitle her to compensation on the grounds of assault, malicious prosecution and false imprisonment.

The suit never made it to trial, and Desmond's lawyer later applied to the Supreme Court to have the criminal conviction put aside.

The case was considered by Nova Scotia Supreme Court Justice Archibald, who, on 20 January 1947, ruled against Desmond on technical grounds.

Legacy

Decades later, Viola Desmond's story began to receive public attention, primarily through the efforts of her sister Wanda Robson. In 2003, at the age of 73, Robson enrolled in a course on race relations at Cape Breton University. The course's professor taught the experience of Viola Desmond, prompting Wanda to speak out. With the help of her professor, she began a prolonged effort to tell her sister's story, including the publication of a book about her sister's experience.

On 15 April 2010, Viola Desmond was granted a free pardon by Nova Scotia's Lieutenant-Governor at a ceremony in Halifax. The pardon, accompanied by a public declaration and apology from the Premier of Nova Scotia, recognized that Desmond's conviction was a miscarriage of justice and that charges should never have been laid.