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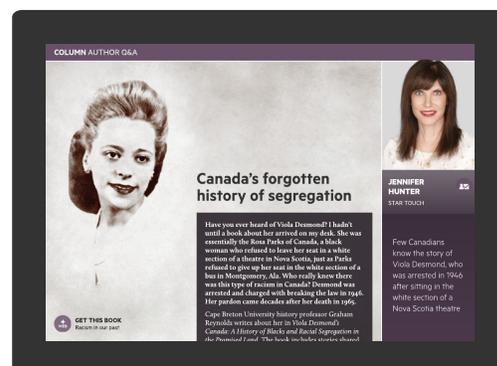
HOW-TO



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CANADA'S FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF SEGREGATION

Few Canadians know the story of Viola Desmond, who was arrested in 1946 after sitting in the white section of a Nova Scotia theatre

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Have you ever heard of Viola Desmond? I hadn't until a book about her arrived on my desk. She was essentially the Rosa Parks of Canada, a black woman who refused to leave her seat in a white section of a theatre in Nova Scotia, just as Parks refused to give up her seat in the white section of a bus in Montgomery, Ala. Who really knew there was this type of racism in Canada? Desmond was arrested and charged with breaking the law in 1946. Her pardon came decades after her death in 1965.

Cape Breton University history professor Graham Reynolds writes about her in *Viola Desmond's Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land*. The book includes stories shared with the author by Wanda Robson, Desmond's sister.

Our conversation has been edited for length.

Canadians always think we were better about accepting others than the Americans. Who knew that J.S. Woodsworth, leader of the left-wing CCF, was against the immigration of people of colour or different religions? Who knew the Ku Klux Klan was huge in Canada in the 1930s? I grew up in Toronto in the 1960s and knew about anti-Semitism and bias against Italian immigrants but didn't appreciate the difficulties blacks had experienced since their arrival in Canada with the French in the 18th century.

There isn't a tremendous amount of awareness of the history of race relations and how things were in the past. Decidedly race relations today are better than they were 10 years ago, but we can't fool ourselves into thinking there aren't problems today. In 2010 there was a cross burning in Nova Scotia, and recently in Dartmouth a hangman's noose was placed near the desk of a man working at Leon's.

If you go back to the early 1900s, most people would agree with Canada's racially restrictive immigration policy. It was maintained well into the 1950s. The Ku Klux Klan was a mainstream organization in Canada. There were

cross burnings in a lot of the provinces. There were meetings in Kingston, Ont., of hooded men, and in other rural communities and in Saskatchewan.

A strong nativism runs throughout the rural regions of Canada. There was a sense of identity with the British Empire and all things British, that was what the Klan was able to feed into. It thrived in Saskatchewan because it took on local issues. It was pro-temperance and took on religious causes that the communities cared about.

We have felt a sense of moral superiority with the Americans because of the extent of the problem in the United States. We look south and see violent racism and we are shocked. But if we have a close look at our own history, we have the same problems. We are less violent and it is less apparent, but we also have a kind of amnesia that helps us to easily forget our own racial segregation.

But it wasn't just blacks. The Sikh community in British Columbia can never forget how the Komagata Maru boat, with its many Punjabi passengers, was unable to land in Canada. Jews remember boats of refugees from Hitler's Germany being turned away. The Chinese remember being badly treated while they built the national railroad, and on and on.

There is that famous phrase, "None is too many," that was Canada's policy during the Second World War regarding Jews, and we can trace that back to the racial discrimination policy in the early 19th century. Yes, we had issues with immigration of any people who weren't from British stock, and this was the case until recent times.

Everyone knows about Rosa Parks and her refusal to move from the white section of the bus in Alabama. Viola did something similar in Nova Scotia.

Viola was a successful businesswoman; she was a beautician in Halifax. She ran the Desmond School of Beauty Culture. In November 1946 she set out to service her business, to sell products. She got a car and took off and got to New Glasgow, a town 160 kilometres from Halifax.

Her car started to make odd sounds so she pulled into a service station and was told her car needed a part that had to be brought in from Halifax. She had time to kill, so she decided to go to the theatre and see a movie. She asked to sit downstairs because her vision was bad and she did not know the theatre was racially segregated. Blacks were supposed to sit upstairs.

The manager and ticket agent came and explained she shouldn't sit downstairs. The manager called a police officer and he forcefully removed her from the theatre. She was dragged from the theatre and put into jail.

She had no legal counsel and was brought before the magistrate and found guilty of defrauding the province of one penny of its amusement tax, the difference in price between sitting downstairs and upstairs. No mention was made of segregation or racism. Viola appealed to the Nova Scotia Supreme Court but she lost on a technicality. The struggle continued quietly among the black community in the Maritimes.

Few of us know about Viola, except maybe those in Nova Scotia.

In general, Canadians are not willing to accept the reality that we had racial segregation. It wasn't enforced in the same way it was in the U.S. with Jim Crow laws. But in some ways it was worse. There was a practice of racial segregation quietly enforced by theatres, hotels, restaurants. Dresden, Ont., was as racially segregated as any city in the U.S. and it took a great effort to change that.

We don't have the same size of black community as they do in the U.S., and there was the civil rights movement (there) that was well organized. In Canada, we don't talk about these problems but they are quietly under the surface.

But what about the Underground Railroad and the Canadian help with that?

Canada did accept abolition of slavery at the end of the 18th century and there was this idea that slavery was not part of the Canadian experience, although there were once slaves here. In terms of the Underground Railroad, yes, there were Canadian heroes. Harriet Tubman lived for a while in St. Catharines before she returned to fight in the Civil War.

All that is true, but we have this kind of contradictory tension that runs throughout Canadian history. There is aspiration for freedom and equality alongside oppression and slavery. We need to acknowledge both of those. At the turn of the 20th century, Canadians thought very much like the British. There was an unspoken racism.

We need to have a dialogue about this and talk about it so we can act on it. That's why I wrote my book.