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Segregation in Nova Scotia

Before Rosa Parks, there was Viola Desmond of Nova Scotia

Before Rosa Parks, there was Viola Desmond of Nova Scotia, all of four feet 11 inches, refusing to leave her seat in the floor section of the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow before being carried out by a police officer and the theatre's manager. This was in 1946, after a world war in which the evils of bigotry should have been established as such for all time. It was nine years before Ms. Parks refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus in Montgomery, Ala. No one ever calls Rosa Parks the United States' Viola Desmond, but maybe they should.

Ms. Desmond, who died in 1965, received a posthumous free pardon last week from Nova Scotia, a declaration that the conviction registered against her was unjust. In a country in which governmental contrition sometimes seems a cottage industry, this declaration was eminently sensible, especially while her sister, 83-year-old Wanda Robson, is around to hear it.

Ms. Desmond's story highlights a forgotten or little-known history of racial segregation. This 33-year-old Halifax beautician was in New Glasgow, Pictou County, because white-run beauty schools barred black people from enrolling, and she was travelling around the province to set up her own beauty school.

Segregation was policy, not law. There were no formal laws enforcing segregation in movie theatres in New Glasgow, and the theatre had no sign telling its patrons about the policy, according to research done by the University of Ottawa law professor Constance Backhouse. Ms. Desmond purchased her ticket unaware of the segregation and, being shortsighted, went to sit in the floor section to be close to the screen. When she was asked to move, she realized what was happening, and refused, for which she spent 12 hours in jail, and paid a \$20 fine. The tax on the balcony price of 20 cents was two cents; the tax on the floor price of 40 cents was three cents. She was convicted of depriving the government of one cent in tax.

The campaign launched in her name failed in one sense - the Nova Scotia Supreme Court refused her application for judicial review without even considering the issue of racial discrimination. "No one even spoke about the racism that lay at the heart of the incident," says Constance Backhouse, who has researched and written about Ms. Desmond. "On the surface, it was billed as a case of simple tax evasion - thus continuing to maintain the myth that Canada is a raceless country with no blemish of racism."

But it succeeded in drawing attention to the evils of segregation. "The unjust legal result galvanized the African-Canadian community, which turned its energy toward challenging racial discrimination more widely - in education, housing and employment."

Viola Desmond was a woman of courage and vision, who stood up to injustice, and left her mark on the country. Next time you hear the name Rosa Parks, think - ah, the American Viola Desmond.

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