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**Rachel Décoste** [Become a fan](#)  
Media critic, policy analyst and pundit

## This Canadian Stood Up to Racism Before Rosa Parks

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*As a Verdun resident, Fred Christie follows the Habs, as do a legion of other Quebecers. The Montrealer is even a proud season-ticket holder.*

*Accompanied by two friends, Mr. Christie enters the tavern at the Canadiens' hockey area, plunks down some cash and orders a few beers. The bartender refuses to serve him. The assistant manager then explains to his would-be customers that the establishment extends no courtesy to Negroes.*

*It is 1936. July 11, 1936.*

The protagonist had resided in the *Métropole* for over 20 years. Mr. Christie converted to the cult of ice hockey even though the NHL had barred all coloured players. Although Mr. Christie, a Jamaican immigrant, integrated himself into Canadian culture and acclimatized himself to his adopted country, he was not treated like other customers.



Long before Canada's "multiculturalism mantra," this was an everyday scenario played out in Toronto, Calgary, Nova Scotia... just about everywhere in the Great "White" North. Aboriginals, Asians and Africans-descendants suffered overt discrimination at will.

During the hostility at *le Forum de Montréal's* tavern, Mr. Christie tried to explain to the manager that this race-based rule was unfair. His pleas fell on deaf ears. Mr. Christie then called the police, which only served to add insult to injury. Humiliated, Fred and his friends left the tavern thirst unquenched and empty-handed. Like most Afro-Canadians in Montreal, Mr. Christie knew which shops and theatres avoid, which jobs were denied to him, and which neighbourhoods were forbidden to "Negroes." After all, the city was then a sanctum of segregation.

But, for the man who felt at home in the *Temple du Hockey*, the tavern's racist rule was the straw that broke the camel's back. Fred Christie filed a discrimination case against the York corporation to court. Despite registering multiple setbacks, Christie's case went all the way to the Supreme Court.

On December 9, 1939, the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) rendered its final decision.

It ruled that the general principle of the law in Québec is complete freedom of business. As long as a merchant did not break the law, he or she was free to refuse any member of the public on any grounds.



The Court proceeded to blame Christie for his own misfortune:

"The respondent was merely protecting its business interests.

It appears from the evidence that, in refusing to sell beer to the appellant [Mr. Christie], the respondent's employees did so quietly, politely and without causing any scene or commotion whatever. If any notice was attracted to the appellant on the occasion in question, it arose out of the fact that the appellant persisted in demanding beer after he had been so refused and went to the length of calling the police, which was entirely unwarranted by the circumstances." ~Justice Rinfret

Decidedly, the SCC ratified the "no service for coloureds" doctrine as being in line with the moral standards of the day.

In the social context of Canada before the Quiet Revolution (1950's), before Viola Desmond's act of defiance (1946), before Rosa Parks triggered the United States' Civil Rights Movement (1955), Fred Christie stood up to institutional discrimination.

A decade before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1947), Fred Christie exhibited unimaginable courage and perseverance in asserting his civil rights. Though the judicial process did not deliver the desired result, Fred Christie remains a key instigator in Canada's journey towards the establishment of universal rights. As Aboriginals, Francophones and elderly people of colour know, the Canadian justice has not always been kind to minorities. Fred Christie paved the way for us all.

Four years after the SCC's shameful ruling, Ontario heralded a new anti-discrimination era with its 1944 "Racial Discrimination Act." And sometimes anti-racism laws were even enforced! The jurisprudence would spread from coast to coast.

Fred Christie died enclosed in obscurity. He received no honours befitting of his buoyant bravery -- in life or in death.

It's about time, is not it?

*This blog originally appeared in French on the Huffington Post Québec.*

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