

HATTIE MCDANIEL

Hattie McDaniel advanced her race with every role she played. As a Black woman seeking success in Hollywood in the 1930s, she refused to say derogatory words about her people on screen and only took roles which would show her race favorably. She is best known for her role as Mammy in the film, "Gone with the Wind," for which she was the first Black person to win an Oscar.

EARLY LIFE

Until she was about eight years old, when her father, Henry McDaniel, moved the family to Denver, Hattie lived on Cherry Street in Fort Collins. Born in 1893 in Wichita, Kansas, she attended Franklin School here and played with her neighbor, Ruth Collamer, who remembered her as a sweet girl with a ruffled bonnet and a wide smile. Even after the McDaniel family moved to Denver, and as adults, the two remained fast friends. Hattie attended high school in Denver, which is where she got her start as an actress.

CAREER STRUGGLES

Hattie's two brothers, Otis and Sam, and her sister, Etta, started performing vaudevillian acts on stage, and Hattie, not wanted to be left out, joined them. For a time they had a performing band and Hattie sang. She performed with a Black tourist ensemble, Melody Hounds, in the 1920s, and then had a stint on radio, singing the group's songs. She was living in Milwaukee when the stock market crashed in October, 1929, and performed on stage at a club there before moving to Los Angeles in 1931 to join her siblings. Her first film was *The Golden West*, in 1932, in which she played a maid.

Gradually she obtained larger roles on screen, appearing in *The Little Colonel* with Shirley Temple and having a lead role in *Judge Priest*, in which she has a duet with Will Rogers. She went on to have major roles in several films. *Gone with the Wind* came out in 1939. Hattie did not attend the film's premier in Atlanta because seating at the theater was segregated. Dismayingly, the Los Angeles hotel where the Oscar ceremony was held was also segregated; Hattie had to sit away from the other actors in the film to receive her Oscar.

LEGAL CASE

Hattie was one of several Black homeowners who had purchased houses in Pasadena, California, whose move into the West Adams neighborhood was protested by whites living there. The case went to court in 1945 and was thrown out by the judge, so the homeowners were allowed to remain. (Her home became known as a favorite of actor Clark Gable, among others. They appeared together in *Gone with the Wind*.)

RACIAL CONTROVERSY

Hattie was on the horns of a dilemma—to pursue her career in films, she had to avoid civil rights protests and actions and was subject to criticism by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She had a white agent and many white friends among the acting community in Hollywood.

VOLUNTEERISM

During World War II she helped provide entertainment for soldiers stationed at military bases. Since the military was segregated, she entertained at bases where Blacks were stationed. Black people were not allowed to serve on white entertainment committees. She made numerous personal appearances and helped raise money for war bonds. Bette Davis, a famous actress of that time, was a member of Hattie's acting troupe.

PERSONAL LIFE AND DEATH

Hattie never had children. She married three times, losing one husband to death and divorcing two others. At age 59 she developed breast cancer, at that time untreatable, and died in 1952. She was buried at Rosedale Cemetery because the owner of the Hollywood cemetery would not allow her remains to be buried there. Although her Oscar was willed to Howard University, its whereabouts are unknown.

HER LEGACY

Hattie appeared in numerous films. She earned accolades from her performing peers for her skill. She has two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, one for her work in radio and the other for her work in motion pictures. A film of her life, *Beyond Tara: The Extraordinary Life of Hattie McDaniel*, was aired on television in 2001. She has been honored with a postage stamp. Her great-nephew, Kevin Goff, described her as compassionate and very loving. She was highly regarded by Hollywood personalities such as Tallulah Bankhead, Joan Crawford and Bing Crosby, respected by other professionals, and valued for her contributions to the advancement of her race in Hollywood.

TIMELINE

June 10, 1893—born in Wichita, Kansas
1900—move to Denver, Colorado
1920-25—Melody Hounds touring ensemble
1926-29—radio career as a singer
1931—move to Los Angeles
1932—first film, *The Golden West*
1934—*The Little Colonel*

1935—prominent roles in films

1936—*Show Boat*

1939—*Gone with the Wind*

1940—Oscar as Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Gone with the Wind*

1942-45—World War II entertaining troops

1949—last film of about 300, *Family Honeymoon*

1950—radio show, *Beulah*

1952—death from breast cancer

QUESTIONS

1. Did Hattie have an obligation to her race to address racism when she became a film actress?
2. If so, what should or could she have done?
3. Are minority performers treated more equably today? If so, in what ways? Or if not, how are they treated less well?
4. What was her greatest accomplishment?
5. Hattie said, "I would rather play a maid and be paid \$700 than be a maid and be paid \$7." How do you interpret that comment?

GLOSSARY

Derogatory—negative comments

Dilemma—a problem that needs a solution

Prominent—important, major

Segregated—kept apart

Vaudeville—a time when performers appeared on stage doing short skits, stand-up comedy or musical numbers, with several performers each evening

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For more interesting facts and information about Hattie McDaniel, go to <https://hattiemcdaniel.com/>

San Diego newspaper article at: <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/story/2020-08-19/hattie-mcdaniel-gone-with-the-wind-black-oscar>

Written by Barbara Fleming Author, Coloradoan Columnist and Living Her Legacy Wordsmith