

CARRIE BEST AND THE CANADIAN MOVEMENT

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Although Canada is now internationally recognized as a nation of peace, equality, and diversity, our history has sung a much different tune. Many fail to acknowledge the sheer brutality accompanying the racial discrimination of our country's past and even fewer recognize the passion and tireless work of those who aimed to correct it. In many ways, the only people who could change the way our societal racial hierarchy were those who were the most disadvantaged. Fewer than a hundred years ago, Black Canadians were especially notable in this movement of the national, paradigmatic shift that ultimately shaped Canada's rich heritage.

One particularly remarkable individual who laboured tirelessly towards racial equality is Carrie Best (birth name Carrie Prevoe). Known as one of the more prominent luminaries of Canadian social change, she received scores of awards, each more impressive than the last. Born in 1903 in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, Best learned from a young age of the intense racism towards Black Canadians. Her animosity towards racism only heightened after she and her son were physically removed from the Roseland Theatre for sitting downstairs in the "whites-only" section, an area that she had sat in multiple times before. "I'd sit in that same seat for years." She told a CNN reporter. "And one day the usher just walked in and said to me, 'You can't sit here any more. You have got to go upstairs. All the black people sit upstairs.'" She refused and, in a manner similar to the well-known Rosa Parks event, she was "literally dragged" from the theatre, endured prosecution at a public trial for "disturbing the peace", and was ultimately fined. This blatant display of discrimination fuelled Carrie Best onwards to create a wave of awareness, which led to real, tangible change.

In 1926 she created *The Clarion*, the very first black owned and published newspaper produced for Black Canadians in Nova Scotia. As it was a bold and innovative concept at the time, sales boomed. Her articles stuck to the facts and usually featured Black Canadians, creating a platform for more Black-Canadian interests to be brought into the limelight. She didn't stop there though, and in 1954 she started *The Quiet Corner*, her own radio program. Featuring slow classics and poetry, she found an audience that pushed the program onwards for twelve years. It was an astonishing success. As she earned the respect of the larger community, she found that many doors were opening for her. This prompted her to write a human rights column in the *Pictou Advocate* newspaper from 1968 to 1975, where she wrote openly of the discrimination faced by Black property owners and the horrid living conditions on Aboriginal reserves. Perhaps her most distinguished achievement, though, was her joint effort against the provincial parliament. She worked with Viola Desmond, a famous activist who was also removed from the Roseland Theatre on grounds of racial segregation. The two women took action and lobbied the provincial government for removal of the segregation laws. In 1954, many years after they began their lobbying efforts, they finally succeeded and the segregation laws were officially removed by the provincial judicial system.

All of Carrie Best's efforts granted her the Queen Elizabeth Medal in 1977, a position on the Order of Canada, and even the opportunity to serve on the task force of the Status of Woman. She proved to all Canadians that one disadvantaged person is capable of igniting a meaningful progression towards what is right. She worked to validate the concerns and efforts of Black Canadians throughout her career and fought past the blockades that were placed before her long before she was even born. She walked brazenly throughout her life, carving out a new era for Canada's identity. It is because of these incredible accomplishments that I consider Carrie Best to be not only a pioneer of Canada's wider acceptance of diverse heritages, but also one of my personal heroes.

"And what are your weapons [for fighting racism]?"

"Intelligence, patience, a lot of prayer and a lot of forgiveness."

~ Carrie Best, 1903 - 2001

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