Hattie McDaniel
World Icon,

Colorado
Unknown

Shown here around 1929, the Gone With the Wind actress spent her youth in Denver and Fort Collins, Colorado. Photos from the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

By Charlene Porter
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, fellow members of the motion picture industry, and honored guests: This is one of the happiest moments of my life, and I want to thank each one of you who had a part in selecting me for one of the awards, for your kindness.

It has made me feel very, very humble; and I shall always hold it as a beacon for anything that I may be able to do in the future.

I sincerely hope I shall always be a credit to my race and to the motion picture industry. My heart is too full to tell you just how I feel, and may I say thank you and God bless you.

—Hattie McDaniel, upon receiving the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, 1940


But for the ingrained inequities of the field, Denver’s McDaniel family might have attained similar acclaim.

The McDaniel family? Of Denver, Colorado?

Yes.

With more stage and Hollywood screen credits collectively than the Coppolas, Fondas, and Barrymores, theatrical talent was a McDaniel family heirloom. Henry, Hattie’s father, had taught himself to play the banjo and guitar. Mother Susan was a gifted gospel singer. Of their surviving eight of thirteen children, four loved being on stage. Especially the youngest, Hattie.

Henry was born enslaved on a Virginia plantation. Since he never knew his parents, his birth year was a guess; likely 1838. At age nine he was sold to Tennessee farmer John McDaniel. Susan, whose birth was recorded as 1850, was enslaved on the Tennessee plantation of Pleasant Holbert.

They were freed on January 1, 1863, by President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. One week later Henry joined the Union’s Twelfth United States Colored Infantry. In 1878 Henry and Susan were married in a ceremony conducted by their African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) pastor. By then the backlash against Reconstruction had grown more severe. The McDaniels were residing in Tennessee, the home state of Ku Klux Klan cofounder and former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Moving their growing family to Kansas, where abolitionist John Brown had staged anti-slavery campaigns, seemed the opportunity for a fresh start. They joined other “Exodusters” and headed west, to the town of Manhattan. Upon settling there, they helped establish Bethel A.M.E. Church. Several years later, they relocated to Wichita, where Hattie was born in 1895.

A year later, the Supreme Court established that so-called “separate but equal” conditions were acceptable under federal law.

In 1898, the McDaniels moved on, to Denver, Colorado, where there was a black community of around four thousand. They settled in a neighborhood northeast of downtown called Five Points, named for the vertices where four streets meet: Twenty-Sixth and Twenty-Seventh Avenues and Washington and Welton Streets.

Although the area had originated in the 1880s as an upper-middle-class enclave, around the late 1890s prosperous African American families began moving in. Whites took flight to communities that were covenant restricted—with home sales not allowed specifically to black people. Thus was created Denver’s African American neighborhood, just as there were Italian, Irish, Jewish, Chinese, Polish, German, and Mexican ones.

The economic, ethnic, and cultural boundaries made for a tight-knit social fabric. The McDaniel family had only to walk a few blocks to their new church, Campbell A.M.E. Chapel, where Susan and Hattie became active in the choir. Susan, for a time, served as choir director. As Jill Watts writes in Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood, Campbell’s pastor, Reverend James Washington, “was an innovator and experimented with a variety of evangelistic techniques, including illustrated sermons and, on occasion, early motion pictures.

“He also encouraged parishioners to use the church’s facilities for secular events . . . plays, tableaux, contests, literary gatherings, as well as political forums on race relations.”

For the McDaniel siblings this meant performing in an array of theatrical presentations, which in turn developed

Facing: In 2017, African American actors earned a record six Oscar nominations, and with performances in films like Moonlight, Fences, and Hidden Figures, an actor of color was nominated in every category. Seventy-seven years ago, Hattie McDaniel was the first African American nominated for an Oscar and the first actor of color to win.
McDaniel toured as a vocalist for five years in the 1920s with George Morrison’s Denver-based Melody Hounds Jazz Orchestra. The Denver Post, August 15, 1922.

Starting in 1947, McDaniel performed on radio for millions of weekly listeners.

McDaniel in Gone With the Wind. Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

The previous year’s Best Supporting Actress—Fay Bainter, for her work in Jezebel—presented the Oscar to McDaniel. Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Facing: As chair of the Negro Division of the Hollywood Victory Committee, McDaniel leads entertainers and hostesses to a performance for World War II soldiers. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

Hattie and brother Sam McDaniel appeared together in The Great Lie, 1941. Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

FAMOUS JAZZ BAND TO GIVE CONCERT AT THE POST WEDNESDAY

Here again after a triumphal tour of England, George Morrison’s jazz band, known as the foremost aggregation of Negro singers and players in the United States, is to give a free concert at The Denver Post at noon Wednesday.

Morrison’s jazz band, which is appearing at the Empress theater all this week, is made up wholly of Denver talent. During recent months it has been touring vaudeville circuits in England and the highest salaries ever paid Negro entertainers in that country.

Hattie McDaniel, whose fame as a singer of jazz songs has become international, will sing “Daddy” and the “Crazy Blues” on the balcony of The Post building Wednesday noon. The band, led by George Morrison himself, will accompany her and will play other jazz numbers which will make your feet itch.

COLORADO HERITAGE / SPRING 2017
At a time when African Americans couldn’t imagine a level playing field, Hattie McDaniel proved herself a match for Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh (Hattie may have upstaged her a bit!) in winning the Oscar for Gone With the Wind.

Today, we can only imagine what her distinguished career might have been if she had the choice of playing more than was allowed then, primarily maids and cooks. Clearly, her timeless performance in Gone With the Wind has withstood the test of time. We are fortunate to look back and consider her one of Colorado’s greats.

—Donald Zuckerman, Colorado Film Commissioner, 2016
of Hollywood’s, and the world’s, foremost entertainment icons . . . yet so few in the town she was so proud to call home have any idea of who she is or of all that she accomplished?

**Selected Filmography**

1934 — Judge Priest (as Aunt Dibey), with Will Rogers and Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Perry)
1935 — The Little Colonel (as Mom Beck), with Shirley Temple and John Barrymore
1935 — Alice Adams (as Malena Burns), with Katharine Hepburn and Fred MacMurray
1936 — Show Boat (as Queenie), with Irene Dunne and Paul Robeson
1937 — True Confession (as Ella), with Carole Lombard and Edgar Kennedy
1938 — The Mad Miss Mantan (as Hilda), with Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda
1939 — Gone With the Wind (as Mammy), with Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh
1940 — Maryland (as Aunt Carrie), with Walter Brennan
1941 — The Great Lie (as Violet), with Bette Davis; featuring Hattie’s brother Sam McDaniel
1942 — The Male Animal (as Cleota), with Henry Fonda and Olivia de Havilland
1943 — Thank Your Lucky Stars (as a concerned neighbor), with Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino
1944 — Hi, Beautiful (as Millie), with Martha O’Driscoll
1946 — Song of the South (as Aunt Tempy), with James Baxter
1947 — The Flame (as Celia), with Broderick Crawford
1948 — Family Honeymoon (as Phyllis), with Claudette Colbert
1949 — The Big Wheel (as Minnie), with Mickey Rooney

**SHOW BOAT**

The 1927 Broadway hit Show Boat, based on the 1926 bestselling novel by Pulitzer Prize–winning author Edna Ferber, caused considerable social consternation as it was the first Broadway musical to seriously depict interracial marriage. At the time, thirty out of the then forty-eight states enforced laws prohibiting marriage between whites and blacks. During this era, Jim Crow dictates—state laws repressing the civic, personal, educational, employment, housing, transportation, and social rights of black Americans—were also enforced.

In Denver, black people were relegated to the balconies (the “crow’s nest”) of theaters; subjected to restricted mortgage covenants; forbidden to swim in Washington Park lake; refused contract employment in Denver Public Schools and the Denver Symphony; discouraged from entering department stores through front entrances; confined to segregated military housing at Lowry Airfield; and denied membership in service, business, and athletic clubs.

Hattie McDaniel was in the chorus of the musical’s late-1920s national touring company, then went on to portray the central character, Queenie, in Hollywood’s 1936 movie starring Paul Robeson.

**THE OSCAR WIN**

On Thursday evening, February 29, 1940, Hattie McDaniel won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in the David O. Selznick production Gone With the Wind. Fay Bainter, the previous year’s winner, presented the award to McDaniel in Los Angeles at the Ambassador Hotel’s Cocoanut Grove nightclub.

**Hattie McDaniel Timeline…1838–1900**

1838 Henry McDaniel is born enslaved on a Virginia plantation; is later sold at age six to the McDaniel plantation.
1850 Susan Holbert is born enslaved on a Tennessee plantation.
1857 The Supreme Court’s Dred Scott case holds that “a negro could not be an American citizen . . . and had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”
1863 January 1: President Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation. One week later, Henry McDaniel joins the U.S. Colored Infantry.
1868 14th Amendment ratified, making African Americans full U.S. citizens.
1875 Henry and Susan are married in Tennessee by an African Methodist Episcopal minister.
1890 The McDaniel family move to Fort Collins, Colorado.
1896 Plessy v. Ferguson: By a vote of 7 to 1 the Supreme Court upholds state racial segregation laws for public facilities under the doctrine of “separate but equal.”
1898 The McDaniel family relocates to Denver.
1900 George Morrison and his brother relocate with their parents from Fayette, Missouri, to Boulder, Colorado. Self-taught violinist George and his brother perform in area mining camps.
The hotel maintained a “whites only” policy. Because of her race, special permission had to be sought by the studio for McDaniel to attend the awards banquet. However, she, her guest, and her talent agent, William Meiklejohn (one of the few talent agents willing to represent African Americans, and who discovered other greats such as Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Lucille Ball, and Ronald Reagan), were seated on the perimeter of the room, at a small table of their own near the kitchen entrance.

McDaniel’s acceptance speech was reportedly written by the Selznick Studio, or Selznick’s father-in-law Louis B. Mayer’s studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the film’s distributor. It was Mayer’s idea, in 1927, to form the Academy. Only still photographers were present at the awards program. The winners’ speeches were filmed for the first time the following day.

THE HAYS CODE

Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America from 1922 to 1945, created the Motion Picture Code (the Hays Code) in 1930. Censorship of film content was its main purpose, and producers were forced to adhere to Hays Office rulings.

Under the subject “Particular Applications,” the code stipulated that miscegenation, or sexual relations between the white and black races, was “forbidden.” The mandate severely limited movie plots and casting options. Nevertheless, Hattie McDaniel’s proven talent, extraordinary work ethic, and rigorous professionalism led to her co-starring in the 1942 drama In This Our Life. Based on Ellen Glasgow’s 1941 Pulitzer-winning novel and directed by John Huston, it featured actresses Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland, and Hattie McDaniel as Minerva Clay, the mother of a hard-working young black man studying law and working as a law clerk who is falsely accused in the hit-and-run death of a young girl.

Due to its central theme of racial discrimination, the movie was “disapproved” for foreign release by the wartime Office of Censorship.

WALT DISNEY

Every form of work has its top-tier practitioners. As a creative artist Walt Disney was in an elite category all his own. He still holds the record for most Academy Awards earned by an individual: fifty-nine competitive nominations, twenty-two wins.

He created Mickey Mouse in 1928 and released his first feature-length cartoon, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs—the first animated feature made in full color and sound—in 1937. In the early 1940s Disney began production of Song of the South, his first dramatic movie combining live actors and animation. Oscar winner Hattie McDaniel, ever in search of roles worthy of her reservoir of theatrical talents, understood the rare opportunity to work with such a groundbreaking producer . . . even if it meant accepting a...
The move’s star, James Baskett (in his one and only acting job), became the second actor of color to receive an Academy Award, albeit honorary. The song he sang, the now classic “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah,” won the 1948 Oscar for Best Original Song.

The movie inspired one of Disneyland’s most popular rides: Splash Mountain. But the film’s portrayal of black freedmen was widely perceived as racist. Thus, to this day, it is rarely shown.

“"I Have Never Apologized""
By Hattie McDaniel,
The Hollywood Reporter, September 29, 1947

I had headlined on the Pantages and Orpheum circuits, but vaudeville was as dead as last month’s hit song. The stock market crash of ’29 had left big business paralyzed and every town had its breadline and hobo jungle. Entertainers were a dime a dozen and, even at that cut-rate price, there were no takers.

Milwaukee was really my springboard to Hollywood. [After the national tour of Show Boat closed unexpectedly] I landed there broke. Somebody told me of a place as a maid in the ladies’ room at Sam Pick’s Suburban Inn. I rushed out there and took the job. One night, after midnight, when all the entertainers had left, the manager called for volunteer talent from among the help. I asked the boys in the orchestra to strike up “St. Louis Blues.” I started to sing—“I hate to see that evening sun go down.” . . . I never had to go back to my maid’s job. For two years I starred in the floor show. . . .

Sam Pick’s patrons were nice to me, but they kept asking me one question that disturbed me—“Why don’t you go to Hollywood and get in the movies?”

Some friends were driving to Los Angeles. They persuaded me to come with them.

People are always telling me about the “lucky break” I got in pictures. I don’t take the trouble to tell them of all the years I sang in choruses, worked in mob scenes, thankful for the smallest thing. A call from Charlie Butler at Central Casting was like a letter from home, a bit part with a line of dialogue was like manna from heaven.

. . . As the years went by, I found myself working with such great stars as Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Clark Gable, Irene Dunne, Barbara Stanwyck, Will Rogers, Margaret Sullavan, Bette Davis and Jimmy Stewart. . . .

[After several comedy roles] David O. Selznick cast me as Mammy in Gone With the Wind. I was now a recognized featured player and although I had had other large roles at most of the major studios, this was my first chance at a straight dramatic role. For it, Hollywood bestowed upon me its greatest seal of approval, the Academy Award for the best supporting actress for 1939. . . .
My own people were especially happy. They felt that in honoring me, Hollywood had honored the entire race. That was the way I wanted it. I wanted this occasion to prove an inspiration to Negro youth for many years to come. . . . I have never apologized for the roles I play. Several times I have persuaded the directors to omit dialect from modern pictures. They readily agreed to the suggestion. . . . I have never gotten over my crush on Hollywood. At heart, I suppose I am still a tourist . . . !

“Audiences merely had to take one look at Hattie McDaniel to realize that here was a woman born to give, not take, orders.”
—John Kisch and Edward Mapp, A Separate Cinema: Fifty Years of Black-Cast Posters, 1992

For Further Reading
Henry McDaniel’s resting place, among more than 1,000 Civil War veterans buried in Riverside Cemetery, may not be traditional reading material, but the tribute carved into his headstone—CO. C, 12 U.S.C. INF.—bears witness to a significant portion of American history. The recently unveiled plaque at 317 Cherry in Fort Collins, the McDaniel family home during their brief residence in the city, also commemorates a little-known aspect of Colorado history. See also the Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame: cogreatwomen.org/project/hattie-mcdaniel.

The Special Collections of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, maintains the Hattie and Sam McDaniel papers, gifted by their family. A somewhat related collection, the Edward Mapp poster archive, is “one of the pre-eminent sources of information on black films.” Mapp authored African Americans and the Oscar: Decades of Struggle and Achievement. For Gone With the Wind fans (a.k.a. “Windies”), the David O. Selznick Collection in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin is a joy.

Of the biographies, Hattie: The Life of Hattie McDaniel by Carlton Jackson has its place, while Jill Watts’s Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood is the most extensively researched. African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900–1960, by Charlene B. Regester, is also insightful. For a more contemporary perspective see Foxy: My Life in Three Acts by (East High grad) Pam Grier with Andrea Cagan. An intriguing postulation about Douglas Fairbanks, who was born and raised in Denver, began his acting career at Elitch Gardens Theatre, and likewise attended East—and like McDaniel pursued a career rather than a diploma—is a motif in The First King of Hollywood: The Life of Douglas Fairbanks by Tracey Goessel.

CHARENLE PORTER is a fifth-generation Denverite, with fond memories of Washington, D.C., New York City, and Pasadena. Her debut historical novel and Denver Post number-one local bestseller, Boldfaced Lies, is being reissued and will be followed by companion World War II stories next summer. For more information, visit myauthorwebsite.net/charlene-porter/.

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