February Holiday Will Recognize Viola Desmond

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The first February holiday in Nova Scotia will recognize Viola Desmond, a black woman who was jailed and fined in 1946 for refusing to give up her seat in the whites-only section of a New Glasgow movie theatre. The provincial government made the announcement as it launched a naming campaign for the holiday, which begins on the third Monday in February of next year.

The month of February, is annually recognized by the Canadian government as black-history month. It was in February in 1965 that one of the first people to stand up for black rights in North America, died.

Years before American Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Alabama, in the United States in 1955, Canadian Viola Desmond refused to move from the floor seating of a movie theatre, to the balcony where blacks were told to sit.

A successful businesswoman in Halifax in 1946 was on a business trip to Cape Breton when her car broke down and she decided to see a film while waiting for repairs. She was sold a ticket for the balcony, but sat on the main floor, unaware that floor seating was “whites-only” in the town. An usherette told her that her ticket was not good for the floor, but when she tried to buy a floor ticket, she was told that being black; she couldn’t
have one and must sit in the balcony. At that point she decided to return to her floor seat.

When a manager told her to move, she refused and was later arrested –not for violating segregation laws, but under the thin disguise of not paying the one cent difference between floor and balcony seating, which she had tried to do. She spent the night in jail and then was fined 20$ (about 250$ in today’s money).

After launching several legal challenges to her conviction, the attention and embarrass Rogers Parks became the America’s version of “Viola Desmond” as well it finally obliged Nova Scotia to dismantle its segregation laws, and repeal them entirely in 1954, one year before Rosa Parks became America’s “Viola Desmond”.