



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Hattie McDaniel (1895-1952)

Hattie McDaniel was born in Wichita, Kan., in a time when both gender inequalities and racial inequalities were extremely prevalent. As an African-American woman, McDaniel defied the odds and became one of the most well known actresses of her time. She is still remembered today for her moving performances in film, television and on the radio.

The youngest of 13 children, McDaniel grew up in a religious family in Denver, Colo. Her father a preacher and her mother a religious singer, McDaniel grew up singing in church and singing and performing drama in school. After her sophomore year in high school, she dropped out to perform with a traveling minstrel group. In 1925, McDaniel began singing on a local radio program, and "Hi-Hat Hattie" became the star of the show.

Despite all of her success, the stock market crash of 1929 left McDaniel unemployed. She took a job as a bathroom attendant in a nightclub in Milwaukee, and eventually became a regular singer on stage there. In 1931, McDaniel made her way to Los Angeles to be with her siblings and pursue her dreams.

McDaniel worked as a maid, a washwoman and on a radio program to support herself while searching for film work. Her first on-screen credit came in 1934 for Will Rogers' movie "Judge Priest." Her strong performance led to many additional film roles in the 1930s, culminating with her role as Mammy in the 1939 movie "Gone with the Wind." McDaniel was the first African-American to win an Academy Award, which she won for Best Supporting Actress in the film, and solidified her place in movie history.

Although McDaniel received a great deal of praise for her work, she also received strong criticism from the African-American community and especially the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for the stereotypical roles in which she acted. McDaniel usually portrayed a maid or servant, but it was difficult to find quality roles for African-American women. McDaniel responded to the criticism by reminding critics she would rather play a maid in a movie role than work as one in real life.

McDaniel often played in comic roles, providing sassy and sometimes outspoken critiques of her white masters. In the 1940s, she continued to work in a few films, including "They Died with Their Boots On" and "In This Our Life." Eventually, McDaniel turned back to radio work as the title character in "Beulah," a popular CBS radio show. When CBS decided to broadcast the show on television, McDaniel filmed a few of the first episodes, but fell ill to breast cancer and couldn't work anymore.

Off-screen, McDaniel faced difficult personal issues. She was married and divorced four times. She never bore children and suffered from several health problems including diabetes and heart disease. Still, she surrounded herself with friends and family and made the most of her successes, proving that drive and determination are more important than skin color.

