

Lena O'Ree

Meet Lena O'Ree

Lena O'Ree was a female trailblazer and pioneer who made important contributions to Black communities in Canada.



Background

O'Ree was born on January 8th, 1914 in Saint John, New Brunswick. Not much is known about her early life, but she is best remembered for her achievements. At just 17 years old, in 1931, she hosted the first Black radio show in Saint John. Due to the prevalent racism of the time, the radio station chose to keep it a secret that O'Ree was a Black woman hosting the program.

In 1936, O'Ree wanted to join the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), but she faced additional challenges. The YWCA told her she needed to bring five other Black women with her to join. Determined to make a change, she returned the next day with ten women who were ready to sign up. O'Ree was focused on creating opportunities for women and breaking down racial barriers.

In the 1950s, O'Ree worked as a housekeeper at the Admiral Beatty Hotel. Despite her role, Black people were not allowed to enter the hotel through the front door. Notably, famous guests like Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, who stayed there, were also denied entry through the front door.

O'Ree's Protest

When O'Ree discovered the hotel's back-door policy, she refused to work until she was allowed to enter through the front. Her courageous protest made national headlines, bringing attention to her stand against racism. Thanks to O'Ree's bravery and the public outcry that followed, the hotel changed its rules. Black guests were now allowed to enter through the front door and sit in the dining rooms.

O'Ree's actions helped change racist policies at the hotel and inspired others to fight for equal rights. Her courage demonstrated that one person can make a significant difference.