

**HISTORY
WRITTEN
IN
STEEL**

by Kyle Warmack,
Program Officer

Readers of *The Broad Side* are already familiar with the Council's West Virginia National Cemeteries Project, made possible through a grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. In the process of working with our high schoolers to research and write biographies for veterans interred in the state's two national cemeteries—both located in Taylor County—one of the purest delights is making connections between these veterans' lives and the rich history of West Virginia itself.

Most recently, this has manifested in the life of Wilbert Illig, a Brooke County boy who fought with the 82nd Airborne during World War II. Sadly, Illig was killed in Italy in the midst of hellish fighting around Anzio in 1944, at the age of 22. While details of Illig's wartime service are still taking shape, his early life is coming more into focus as we speak. So, too, are the reasons why the Council is so uniquely positioned to carry on this work.

We noticed that Wilbert was born in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, but was soon growing up in Hollidays Cove (one of several towns that consolidated to form modern-day Weirton in 1947). It was thus a fair bet that Illig's father, George, was involved in the steel industry. Sure enough, the 1930 U.S. Census soon revealed George's occupation as "open hearth," denoting part of the steel-making process. From there, the research took a distinctly Council turn.

Two years ago, the Council was working closely with the Weirton Area Museum and Cultural Center (WAMCC) as one of several hosts of the *Crossroads* Smithsonian exhibit tour. During that process, then-WAMCC director Savannah Guz secured



Revella Hughes in one of her showbiz glamour portraits. Marshall University Special Collections

NIGHTINGALE
THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE
AND CAREER OF
REVELLA HUGHES

by Stan Bumgardner,
e-WV Editor

West Virginians formed an important part of the Harlem Renaissance, that famous wave of Black arts and culture which swept New York City in the 1920s. Poet Anne Spencer, for instance, spent her formative years in Bramwell. Author/scholar John Frederick Matheus was from Keyser. Two of the era's most influential jazz composers and arrangers were Don Redman (also a Mineral County native, this time from Piedmont) and Maceo Pinkard (from Bluefield), who co-wrote "Sweet Georgia Brown."

Not to be outdone, Cabell County was to make its mark in Harlem, too. Singer and instrumentalist Revella Eudosa Hughes was born in Huntington on July 27, 1895. Her father, George Hughes, was a switchman in that relatively new railroad city and then a long-time postal carrier; Anna Page Hughes, her mother, taught piano and also worked as a seamstress.

Revella Hughes started taking piano and singing lessons at age five and violin when she was 10. In 1909, she earned a diploma from her mother's alma mater, Richmond's Hartshorn Memorial College (now part of Virginia Union University). She graduated from Oberlin High and Conservatory (1915) and earned a bachelor's in music from Howard University (1917). Blending influences from classical music, spirituals, and the burgeoning Jazz Age, she forged a distinct career of her own—and on her own terms.

After teaching at the Washington Conservatory of Music and Expression and at what is now South Carolina State University, she headed to Harlem just as the Renaissance was unfolding. Based on the 1920 census, she first lived there in the household of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. For about a decade in his younger days, Powell had lived on Paint Creek in Kanawha County and, by the 1920s, was building Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church into the world's largest Baptist congregation. Hughes apparently knew Powell because he and her father had attended Washington's Wayland Seminary (later part of Virginia Union) together. During her brief stay with the Powells, she was a housemate of 11-year-old Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who would succeed his father as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist and become the most politically powerful Black representative in Congress.

Another housemate was Marianna Johnson, a contralto and pianist who likewise grew up in Huntington. Both Hughes and Johnson

recorded for Black Swan, a short-lived but historically important early record label owned by Black entrepreneurs featuring Black musicians. In 1921, Hughes cut Black Swan's first 78 rpm: "At Dawning" and "Thank God For A Garden," classical-style spiritual pieces selected by the label to reach broader audiences.

Revella and Marianna performed together regularly in the early '20s, including local fundraisers for Marcus Garvey, a prominent and controversial leader who promoted Black financial independence and the relocation of Blacks from the United States to Africa.

By 1923, however, Marianna Johnson had returned to Huntington, which appears to have coincided with the end of her professional music career. Hughes, on the other hand, was taking the Big Apple by storm. In September 1921, she became the first featured Black soloist at New York Mayor John Hylan's Peoples' Concerts in Central Park. Her stunning soprano voice and other musical talents soon took her to the top of what was becoming known as "Black Broadway." Performing at times under the stage name Carmela Desche, her first show, *Dumb Luck*, flopped. After that, though, her career looked unstoppable.

She broke traditional gender roles by serving as choral director for the popular *Shuffle Along* touring show, while appearing on stage with the likes of Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson. She played the female lead in the touring company of *Runnin' Wild*, which introduced "The Charleston" song-and-dance rage, followed by a third hit show, *Hot Rhythm*. Meanwhile, the remarkably versatile Hughes was performing classical piano with the Washington Symphony Orchestra and jazz and swing piano with such legendary figures as Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway.

In 1930, Hughes partnered with Georgette Harvey, Musa Williams, and Lois Parker to sing twice weekly on radio as the Four Bon-Bons, although CBS avoided any mention of their race. In August 1931, they were part of an experimental television simulcast. The Four Bon-Bons ended their radio career in February 1932 but appeared on stage in *Blackberries of 1932*. Hughes was the group's chief music arranger.

In 1932, at the peak of her success, she returned to Huntington to care for her widowed mother. For the next decade, Hughes was music supervisor of Huntington's Black school system. Doris Evans McGinty, an esteemed musicologist and Howard University professor, notes it was rare for a Black woman to lead a music department anywhere in the country at that time. Hughes established Douglass High School's band and Barnett Grade School's orchestra, and eventually headed the piano and violin departments at West Virginia State College (now University). Hughes sensed initial distrust from the

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Portrait of Duke Ellington, with whom Revella Hughes worked, signed for her by the famous composer. The inscription, "To Revella: In My Solitude," is a reference to one of his songs, later immortalized in recordings with Billie Holiday. Marshall University Special Collections



**NIGHTINGALE:
THE LIFE AND CAREER OF REVELLA HUGHES**

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public due to her stage background, later recalling, "Some parents . . . complained to the school board that they didn't want this show business woman teaching their children."

The business side of live entertainment, however, had honed the very skills that would serve her well as a school administrator. For three consecutive years, the Douglass band won the West Virginia High School Music Contest for Black schools. She remembered, "When I was ready to leave, the parents begged me to . . . stay with them. Isn't life funny? When I left, I left them with a band of 124 pieces. There was \$900 in the bank; they had uniforms and good instruments, including sousaphones. . . . When I began we had to borrow instruments from stores and organizations for our parades."

After her mother died in May 1942, Hughes left Huntington, returned to the performance ranks, and earned a master's in music from Northwestern University. Touring with the USO during World War II, she entertained Allied troops in North Africa and Turkey. Her concerts in the states increasingly demonstrated her versatility as she added the new Hammond organ to her repertoire. She officially retired in 1955 and started spending her spare time transcribing old spirituals for piano and organ.

In 1960, Hughes was thrust back into the national spotlight when chewing gum heiress Evelyn Adams died and left her nearly a million dollars. The two had lived together in Adams's Long Island home. The news went public after a bizarre incident in February 1961 when Hughes accidentally shot herself and a friend while admiring a World War I German handgun at Adams's former home. Both recovered.

At age 84, Hughes came out of retirement for the New York Women's Jazz Festival in 1980. She continued to perform periodically for the next four years. One of her final appearances was at the 1984 West Virginia Black Cultural Festival at the state Culture Center in Charleston. The next year, Marshall University awarded her an honorary doctorate, and she donated a sizeable part of her memorabilia to the school library's Special Collections.

Revelva Hughes died in New York City on October 24, 1987, and was buried in Huntington's Spring Hill Cemetery.

Doris McGinty, the musicologist, observes that Hughes's nicknames of "The Colored Nightingale, The Prima Donna of the Musical Stage, and The Sophisticated Lady of the Organ . . . reflect how varied was her musical career." Revelva Hughes, the nightingale, had soared to great heights on theater stages, in concert halls, and in the band rooms of her native city.

Revelva Hughes (holding cello) and the Barnett Grade School Orchestra, Huntington, ca. 1933. West Virginia Archives & History



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grants for the organization to host its entire collection of *Weirton Steel Bulletins* in a comprehensive online archive spanning 1934 to 1989 (the issues having been meticulously digitized years earlier by WAMCC president emeritus Dennis Jones).

Thanks to this digitization and hosting project, and the Council grant that helped make it possible, the project team and I were soon coasting through *Weirton Steel Bulletins* and finding references to the Illig family in a number of places. Tragically, this includes a February 1949 memorial service for Weirton Steel war dead, wherein father George is listed as Wilbert's next of kin. George Illig himself would pass away only two weeks after that service.

Wilbert Illig's story illustrates the complex web of historical connections that bind us all together—and the equally complex network of supportive relationships between West Virginia organizations carrying out the arduous work of preservation.

To browse the *Weirton Steel Bulletins* online, visit:

<https://weirtonareamuseum.advantage-preservation.com>

EVENTS FEBRUARY-MARCH 2024

- Until Feb 10** **Born of Rebellion - Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit at the Clarksburg-Harrison County Public Library. Open during library's public hours.**
- Until Feb 15** **American Blood Feud - Hatfield-McCoy Feud traveling exhibit, Harrison County Recreation Complex, Clarksburg. M-F, 8:30am-4:30pm**
- Feb 3** **Bessie Smith - History Alive!, Raleigh County Public Library, Beckley. 1pm**
- Feb 17** **Ruby Bradley - History Alive!, Edgewood Summit Retirement Community, Charleston. 11:30am**
- Late Feb** **Born of Rebellion - Traveling exhibit opens at the Drinko Library, Marshall University, Huntington.**

- Feb 22** **The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Igniting of the Modern Civil Rights Movement- Amicus Curiae lecture by the Honorable Richard Gergel, U.S. District Court judge for the District of South Carolina, Erickson Alumni Center, Marshall University, Huntington. 7pm**
- Feb 24** **Theodore Roosevelt - History Alive!, Craik-Patton House, Charleston. 1pm**
- Mar 14** **Mother Jones - History Alive!, Robert F. Kidd Library, Glenville State University. 4pm**
- Mar 24** **Dunmore's War: The Last Conflict of America's Colonial Era - Little Lecture by author and historian Glenn F. Williams, MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm**

- Mar 27** **Thomas Ingles - History Alive!, Cacapon Resort State Park, Berkeley Springs. 5:30pm**
- Mar 28** **Too Weak to Govern: Majority Party Power in the U.S. Senate - Amicus Curiae lecture by author Dr. Peter Hanson, Erickson Alumni Center, Marshall University, Huntington. 7pm**

It's our 50th anniversary! We'll be announcing special programs and events in the coming months, so stay tuned to wvhumanities.org for announcements!

The Council advises contacting the venue if you have questions about an event, as dates or details may change without the Council's prior knowledge.

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is ©2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved. Copyright of individual articles is retained by their respective authors. Images used with permission. Additional graphics and linear obtained from Vecteezy.com.

1310 Kanawha Blvd. E
Charleston WV 25301
304.346.8500

