

## A life well-lived, on stage, at war and at home

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The other day I was watching my favorite TV channel, Turner Classic Movies (Comcast 169) when I came across an incredibly compelling movie from 1949 that I had never heard of before.

It was called "Pinky," and was the story of a light-skinned black woman (played by the white actress Jeane Crain) who struggles with widespread bigotry - and her own sense of identity - when she returns to her hometown in the deep South.

In addition to Crain, the cast included two famous Ethels: The brilliant African American jazz vocalist Ethel Waters and the equally brilliant actress Ethel Barrymore, member of the famous Barrymore acting family that included her brothers John and Lionel Barrymore; nephew John Drew Barrymore and great-niece Drew Barrymore.

Right about now you're probably asking yourself, "What in heaven's name does this have to do with Lock Haven history?" Give me a minute, gentle reader. I'm getting to that.

As compelling as "Pinky" is - and I highly recommend it - I had a little trouble keeping my mind on the plot as I watched it the other night. I kept wondering about the two legendary Ethels in the cast, and what they might have talked about when they were between takes and the cameras weren't running.

Did either of them bring up a mutual acquaintance, the noted opera singer and stage performer Billy Raymond? As part of the Hall Johnson Choir, Raymond appeared on stage with Ethel Waters in one of her myriad musical performances of the era. Earlier, Raymond befriended Barrymore while the two worked together in her production of "Scarlet Sister Mary." Barrymore and Raymond would remain lifelong friends.

Interestingly enough, as the two Ethels were completing "Pinky," their friend Billy Raymond was likely preparing for a kind of "art-imitates life" moment from the film. Raymond's sister was increasingly ill, and by 1950 - the year Ethel Waters, Ethel Barrymore and Jeane Crain would all be nominated for Oscars for their roles in "Pinky" - Raymond would return to his own largely Caucasian hometown to care for her.

The difference, however, is that while the Jeane Crain character faces widespread prejudice on her return home, Billy Raymond would always say he never experienced racism in his own hometown of Lock Haven.

Born in 1892 to William Raymond - an employee of the old clayworks that later became the site of American Color and Chemical and Mary Peoples Raymond, a domestic cook, William Raymond lived in the family home at 911 E. Church St. for much of his life, though a substantial part of the middle section, from the outset of World War I through his sister's illness in 1950, was spent away from home.

These years "away" must have been a truly fascinating time for the young man, during which he made a bit of history and appeared on some of the great stages of the world.

His show business career effectively started in Lock Haven at the age of 15, when he was asked to sing publicly for the first time at a dedication for a new water fountain once located opposite the Clinton County Courthouse, near where the Grafius House stands today.

A decade later, when the U.S. entered World War I, Raymond enlisted in the 305th Ambulance Corps., organized in Lock Haven and made up entirely of volunteers from Clinton County.

Incredibly, Billy Raymond therefore became the first African American soldier serving in a white unit in the U.S. Army during World War I. This was fully three decades before Pres. Harry Truman officially integrated the U.S. armed services. Hard to believe, but it appears to be true.

It was all accomplished with a lot of fortitude, a bit of subterfuge, and as a result of Raymond's own modest and well-regarded personality, but it was indeed accomplished.

Evidence of this extraordinary circumstance can be found in newspaper articles about Raymond dating as early as 1919, the year after the war concluded, in addition to Hunt Frasier's "Blown in by the Draft: Camp Yarns Collected at One of the Great National Army Cantonments by an Amateur War Correspondent" and the original "Peek at the Past" book, authored by Rebecca Gross and Elizabeth Achenbach.

Testimony about Raymond's military service was also given at a tribute in his honor several years after his death, in which the Caucasian Ambulance Corps colleagues discussed his service.

According to Gross and Achenbach, the 305th began their training at Camp Upton, N.Y., where within days questions about Raymond's status in the unit were raised. The commanding officer, Lock Haven physician Dr. George Green, was called into the commandant's office to explain.

"Where did you get that black boy?" the colonel asked, according to Gross and Achenbach.

"He's one of us," Green replied. "We are all volunteer recruits. He volunteered and we recruited him. We're all in this together and we're all from Clinton County, Pa."

"Well it won't do," said the commander. "You'll have to send him to a black unit."

Green, to his enormous credit, refused to do so, and brought the issue all the way to Chief of Staff Charles Summerall, who finally relented when, according to the Gross and Achenbach account, Green said he would risk a court martial for insubordination before he moved Billy Raymond into a segregated unit.

Decades later, Raymond's unit compadres talked about how they waved off questions as to why the 305th had a "Negro soldier" serving beside them. When pressed, they would sometimes simply lie about Raymond's status, saying he was actually a paid employee of the outfit rather than an employee of Uncle Sam. Each of the men paid out of their own pockets for Raymond's skills as a chef, they fibbed.

While at Camp Upton, Raymond put his deep baritone to good use in a musical revue called "Yip Yip Yaphank," written and produced by a young recruit by the name of Irving Berlin.

That's the same Irving Berlin, by the way, who went on to become America's greatest songwriter, penning such tunes as "God Bless America" "White Christmas" and "Puttin' on the Ritz."

"Mr. Raymond served overseas with the 305th Ambulance Company and was one of its most popular members," wrote the editors of the Clinton County Times in October of 1919, less than a year after Armistice was declared.

When the war was over, Raymond returned to Lock Haven and, at the urging of several locals, applied for a scholarship to the Ithaca Conservatory of Music, which he won, launching his musical education. While at Ithaca, he took special instruction at Cornell, and liked it so much he remained there for six years.

After completing his education, Raymond moved to New York City. There he sang in the famous Ziegfield Follies and auditioned for a role in "Lulubelle," the first mixed-race drama staged by the legendary theatrical producer David Belasco. He landed the role of "Joe" in the play, as well as understudy for the lead. He was also, eventually, put in charge of all the show's music.

When "Lulabelle" completed its two-year run, Raymond continued his remarkable streak of luck by landing a character role in the original production of George and Ira Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess.

Next came a gig as one of the musical directors of "Scarlet Sister Mary," which starred Ethel Barrymore in blackface. It was based on a scandalous 1928 novel about a young girl struggling between remaining a "good girl" or pursuing the life of sin and pleasure. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, but the play was scorned by out of town critics.

Then Barrymore had a minor breakdown over an unauthorized photo of her in her stage makeup, generating a huge run on tickets for the show, which opened in 1930 at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York City and was a substantial hit.

More importantly, the experience cemented a deep and abiding friendship between the theater legend and the Lock Haven native. Until Barrymore's death in 1959, the two remained quite close.

Other Raymond credits include performances at the Metropolitan Opera in "Aida" and "La Africaine" and as a member of the famous Hall Johnson Choir, which appeared on stage with Ethel Waters, among others.

But the Great Depression knocked the wind out of the Great White Way, and roles became more and more scarce. Somehow, however, during the course of his stage career, Raymond became friendly with the fabulously wealthy Westinghouse clan. They hired him as their houseman, placing him in charge of the first floor of their 80-room "big house" and more modest 50-room "cottage."

Now he found himself at the center of upper crust American society, where he came face-to-face with some of the most influential people in the nation. Five years after joining the Westinghouse household, he was hired away by the Ogden Reid family, owners of the now-defunct New York Herald-Tribune newspaper. From there it was on to the households of noted industrialist Kyle Sheffield and real estate multi-millionaire Henry Epstein.

But when his sister, Eva, fell ill in 1950, he returned to the family home on East Church Street to look after her. He filled his house with his collections of antique furniture and artwork as well as show business memorabilia. Sadly, his stage archive - made up largely of contracts, programs and autographed photos - was almost entirely obliterated in the floods.

Still, he continued his love of music, directing the St. John's Lutheran Church choir, performing in the Trinity Episcopal Church choir and accepting almost any other gig at almost any other local venue.

All one needed to do was ask, it seemed, and Raymond would be there to sing, music in hand. And yet this former professional singer never asked for a fee when he took to the stage in Clinton County because, he said, "so many people (here) have been so good to me."

His final performance was as a soloist and performer at a Millbrook Playhouse production of "Inherit the Wind." After being diagnosed with cancer, Raymond sought out treatment at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Altoona.

He died there at age 74 in 1966.

Four years later the Clinton County Historical Society held a tribute to Billy Raymond in which friends and colleagues spoke lovingly of his life and career and the only known recording of his voice - singing "The Seven Last Words of Christ" at Trinity United Methodist Church - was played.

A few extended family members - Raymond seems to have died a bachelor - were present in the audience, but perhaps the most touching moment of the tribute came when Bruce Anderson, an African American friend from Williamsport, stood to make concluding remarks.

Anderson seemed to have been quite moved by the outpouring of affection for his late friend, particularly since he himself seems to have been the victim of racism in his own life, as are so many African Americans.

The Express reported Anderson stood at the podium and "speaking as a 'rank outsider' he wouldn't have missed the experience of hearing such a white tribute to a black man and said such an experience helps change the outlook of those who are 'sort of suspicious of white people.'"

Even 30 years later, minority relations in the U.S. still have miles to go before true equality is achieved. But it's perhaps a bit comforting to know that over 90 years ago, a group of Lock Haven natives defied American military segregation policies in order to stand beside their friend during one of the darkest periods of world history.

And that, indeed, is worth celebrating.

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