Alma Jacobs

November 21, 1916 - December 18, 1997

Have you ever been to your local library? Anyone can borrow books there for free! This is the story of Alma Jacobs, the first African-American State Librarian of Montana.

Alma Jacobs was born in Montana. When she was old enough to go to college, she went to Alabama and studied to be a social worker. She wanted to help people who have troubles in their lives. But Alma got a job as an assistant librarian, and after a few years, she decided to learn more about libraries and how they work. That is when she went to New York to study library science.

After that, Alma became a librarian in Great Falls, Montana. She worked hard and became the library director of the Great Falls Public Library in 1954. One of her big achievements in there was a new library building. In the old one, there were so many books, they ran out of room. They had to put books everywhere - even in front of the windows. In 1965, after five years of discussions, the voters of Great Falls finally agreed to build a new library. Alma and her team made sure to have enough room for all the books and lots of people in the new library.

In 1973 Alma got a new job: she became the head librarian of the Montana State Library in Helena, Montana. She was the first African-American who was president of that library.

Alma’s work didn’t stop in the library. She was also working for civil rights. It was important to her that everyone has the same rights so that everyone can be protected equally. Alma also did something that was not common to do in her time: she spoke up when she found injustice.
Charley Pride

March 18, 1938 - present

Have you ever listened to Blues, Gospel or Country Music? Or do you love baseball? This story is about a man who loves both - music and baseball.

Charley Pride was born in Mississippi and spent much of his childhood listening to music. His father turned on the radio just for him, and when Charley was 14 years old, he bought his very own guitar. He played along with the radio and taught himself to play the guitar.

All along, Charley also really liked baseball. He even played professional games. But during the season, Charley injured his shoulder and he couldn’t pitch as well. While playing baseball, he had many more injuries, including a cracked bone in his elbow, but he had a strong will and his injuries healed quickly.

In 1956, Charley was 22 years old and he had to go to Arkansas for basic military training. While serving in the military, Charley sang in the barracks and sometimes he even performed at the officers’ club. That was very unusual for a man of color at that time.

After two years in the US Army, Charley was discharged. He tried to make it into major league baseball, but he couldn’t. Even after he moved to Montana, he could only play in a semi-pro baseball team for the Anaconda Mining Company, where he worked as a smelter operator.

Charley then also tried to start his music career, but his first attempts didn’t really work out. He started out singing the national anthem at baseball games and performed in churches and nightclubs in Helena, Great Falls, and Anaconda areas.

Then, one day he got really lucky and met Jack Johnson in Nashville, Tennessee. Jack produced a recording of Charley and became his manager. It took two years, before Charley could really perform and produce music, but then he became successful very quickly. Charley became the first black superstar of Country Music.
Wilmot Collins

October 15, 1963 - present

Wilmot was born in Liberia on the continent of Africa. When he was 26 years old, a war broke out in Liberia. People were fighting and Wilmot lost two brothers. He couldn’t stay there any longer and fled to Ghana, another country in Africa. He went there together with his future wife, Maddie. In Ghana, Maddie had the idea to go to far away Helena, Montana, where she was as an exchange student in high school.

Maddie could enter the United States, but Wilmot was kept out. Maddie was pregnant with a little girl, so it was extra tough for Wilmot to let his wife go to the United States by herself.

In the meantime, he had to undergo a refugee vetting process, where the government has a very close look at the person who wants to enter the country. Because that took such a long time, Wilmot went back to Liberia, where he wanted to be a teacher again. But there was still too much violence, so he could not stay there.

This time he fled to the Ivory Coast. Which is the country between Liberia and Ghana. Wilmot did not have a good time there. He was even homeless for some time. But he did not give up. Wilmot was working with the United Nations, a big organization that helped him get out of the war and reunite with his wife and his little daughter Jaymie.

In 1994, when Wilmot was 31 years old, he was finally allowed to enter the United States, where he was united with his wife and daughter in Helena, Montana.

Some of the people in Helena didn’t like the fact that the Collins family was there. Someone even spray-painted on their home “Go back to Africa” and other, more offensive words. But Wilmot didn’t give in. He was strong. He worked hard, especially for children, so that they would be protected and could grow up in a safe place.

In 2017 Wilmot made a bold move. He ran for mayor. On the 1st of January, 2018, he then assumed office to be the first black elected mayor of Helena.
William McNorton
August 22, 1866 - July 17, 1938

Have you ever had grapes from Montana? If so, you are very lucky, because the weather is not ideal for grapes to grow here. But there was a man called William, who found a place where the sweetest grapes would grow.

William was born in Montgomery County, Virginia. His family was enslaved. They were owned by a white man and his father could not even learn how to read and write, because he had to work and work all the time. But in 1870, when William was 14 years old, the family managed to be free.

Suddenly they could own things and live their own life. But William was not too happy in Virginia. He wanted to have the same rights as every other man, regardless of the color of his skin, and when he was 20 years old, he decided to move to Sanders County, Montana.

William had enough money to buy a bit of land and some livestock there and he became a rancher.

As the only black man in the community, it was hard for William to fit into society. By the time he lived, there were still rules separating black and white people. But William was a good fellow, as they called him in newspapers. He was also a good businessman and he took very good care of his livestock. He sold land to the Montana Mammoth Company for mining and William also made two inventions. All of that together made him a very wealthy man.

But then, William had bad luck. He lost most of his wealth, because of some poor decisions he made and William decided to move to Thompson Falls, Montana. There he found deep faith in God and cultivated land on a hill, next to a river, and he called it “The Hill of the Lord”. This piece of land was unique. The weather in Montana is very cold and most fruits and vegetables cannot grow very well because of the frost. But the land William had there, was just in the right spot and protected by the mountains, so that after a few years and very hard work, he offered apples, berries, plums, apricots, lots of vegetables, and also grapes to the people of the community and often he did not want any money from the people, especially those who were poor.

William showed that you can reach about anything with hard work and faith in what you do. Even after he lost nearly everything, he got up and kept on working and creating. And what he created was an incredibly lush garden.
You have surely heard about Martin Luther King Jr. already. But this story is not about him. It is about a man who worked with Martin Luther King Jr.

After Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1967, Ulysses needed a break and he took his first vacation as an adult in 1968. The destination he chose was Missoula, Montana, where a good friend of his was the campus minister of the University of Montana.

While Ulysses spent time in Missoula, something happened in the university president’s office. The Black Students Union marched in to demand a black faculty member. Now, it has to be mentioned, that there were only eight black students studying at the university at that time. And they wanted a black professor they could learn from, besides all their white professors.

Since Ulysses was an activist already, he knew a lot about history and racism, and the university president offered him a job. That was the moment when the Black Studies Program at the University of Montana was born.

Ulysses worked hard to recruit black students from all over the nation, especially from big cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Seattle. He promised them three things: an education, an opportunity and a challenge. He promised them that they would not be alone.

Already in the first year, Ulysses managed to get 37 black students into the University of Montana. And even more students were interested in his classes. It went so far, that there were more students than chairs in the classroom. Twenty students were sitting on the floor, while Ulysses was teaching them.

Not everyone was happy with the work Ulysses did. Suddenly the people in Montana were shaken awake and had to realize that there are people of color and that they are the same as white people. Ulysses had to face attacks from a radio announcer who wanted to stop his work. But of course, that did not stop him.

He continued his work for 25 years and did not only teach. He supported black students to reach their goals, and he made Montana a place that is more open to people of color. His job is by far not done, but it got started and it still continues.
Gloria Conyers Hewitt

October 26th, 1935 - present

Gloria loved to teach. She was also very persistent. She graduated with a math degree while also becoming a new mom. She and her husband, Ronald Hewitt, had a son named Randy while Gloria was still going to school. She managed to still do her schoolwork with her new baby and graduated in 1956. She wanted to teach high school math.

But instead, Gloria went on to get an even more advanced degree in mathematics, and came to teach in Montana at the University of Montana in Missoula. She taught math at the university, raised her son, and worked on her third degree, a Ph.D in mathematics all at the same time. She was the third African-American woman to ever earn this degree.

Gloria taught math at the University of Montana for 33 years, inspiring people to enjoy math. Her goal was to make math less intimidating for people who didn’t like it, and she was good at it. She won awards for her engaging teaching style and also helped to develop tests for math of all levels.

Gloria helped countless people become comfortable with math and inspired many women and people of color to enter the science and math fields. She was a shining example of how you can work hard for something you love and make a difference to everyone who meets you.
Sarah Gammon Bickford

Born Christmas day, 1855
Died March 22nd, 1931

Sarah Bickford was born into slavery in North Carolina. After the civil war, Sarah was offered a job in Montana caring for Judge John Murphy’s children, a career that was hard to come by for many young women at the time. At the age of only 15 she left everything and everyone she knew to take this job. She arrived in Virginia City, Montana, in January of 1871.

Within a year of arriving, Sarah fell in love and married William Leonard Brown and had two sons and a daughter. But within just a few years, both her husband and her sons died of diphtheria. Sarah was heartbroken and moved to Laurin, Montana, with her daughter. Her daughter Eva then fell sick with pneumonia and died at the age of 9.

Sarah suffered through all of this and remained a strong presence in her community. Two years after the death of her daughter, she married Steven Bickford, a white man from Maine in one of the first few legal interracial marriages in Montana. Just twenty years later, Montana would pass a law saying that it was illegal to marry anyone that was from a different race than you. Nevertheless, Sarah and Steven had four children and managed several successful businesses together. Sarah had a talent for growing the businesses she managed, and together she and Steven bought a farm and part of the water utility that supplied her old hometown of Virginia City with drinking water.

Over the years Sarah became the manager of both the water utility and the farm, and both flourished and grew under her careful management. Eventually in 1917 Sarah was able to buy the rest of the water utility, making her the first African-American and former slave to own a water company in the entire nation.

She managed the water for the town, making sure everyone had some! She also still ran the farm and expanded both businesses. She also did all the bookkeeping and billing, and oversaw the payroll for all of her employees each month. She continued up until her death on March 22, 1931, at 76 years of age.
Mille Ringold

born in 1845 in Virginia

died 1906 on Yogo, Montana

Millie was born into slavery in 1845. After the civil war when she could be free, she traveled to Montana to work for a general and his family. She lived at Fort Benton with them and cooked and cleaned for the family. The family remembers her as one of their favorite people: the children ran home everyday to see Millie and hear her sing and tell them stories. People often said that Millie was musical, and could play things like washboards, dishpans, oil drums and hand saws better than most people could play the piano. Her favorite songs became well known to everyone in the town as she loved to play for anyone. Millie was even shown in a famous painting by Charlie Russell called Utica.

When the general was transferred back to Washington DC, Millie chose to stay in Montana. She loaded up an old wagon with supplies and a little bit of money and traveled to Yogo, a town that was booming because people thought there might be gold there.

Millie used her little stash of money to open a hotel and restaurant, the only ones in the town. Millie became one of the most well-known people in the town of Yogo, and she eventually also opened a saloon for the tired miners. Millie quickly became one of the most well-liked people in town, as she ran the saloon and hotel and loved to sing and play music for people.

She also was a miner herself - she had several gold claims, all named after US presidents and would either have someone mine for gold for her or do it herself.

There was never much gold in Yogo though, and eventually the town began to grow smaller as people went in search of richer gold claims. Millie never left, even when her many businesses suffered because there weren’t enough people in the town to support them. Millie loved her town no matter what, and always believed that Yogo had gold hidden somewhere that she could find, and she never stopped looking. Sadly, Millie found a lot of blue rocks that she thought were useless, but were actually Yogo sapphires, some of the most lovely in the world.

Still, Millie was a pillar of her tiny community to the end of her life. For many years she kept the town alive single handedly, maintaining the only businesses in town and never giving up her optimism about her home. In 1906, Millie fell sick and was taken to a hospital in Great Falls, but her love for Yogo was so strong that she refused to stay in the hospital and went back home to Yogo. Millie passed away in her beloved town that same year.

Millie’s optimism about her home and her hard work and musical talent made Yogo a place that was welcoming and unforgettable.
Mingo Sanders

Born 1958 in South Carolina
Died 1929 in Washington DC

Mingo Sanders joined the army in 1881, and at that time there were very few people of color in the military at all. Because of segregation, Mingo was assigned to a segregated company called the 25th infantry, or the buffalo soldiers. Mingo served for 26 years in the military, and had already been to war more than once by the time he came to Montana.

These soldiers were assigned to Missoula for a time, and they nearly single handedly built the fort. In addition, they performed all of their duties with care and pride, often serving with distinction. The 25th infantry had the lowest desertion rates and highest re-enlistment of any military company in America at the time. These men were often called on to settle disputes fairly here in Montana, and people trusted their judgement. In addition, the men of the 25th infantry often put on impromptu parades or concerts, and their presence was a happy sight at gatherings around the town.

This company, and Mingo Sanders in particular, were chosen to test whether bikes could be used in war. Mingo and his fellow soldiers rode almost 1900 miles from Missoula to St. Louis in Missouri. This trip took almost 41 days, and Mingo was the second in command for this operation. In the end, although the trip was grueling, they proved that bicycles could be used by the military.

The 25th infantry was also sent to Cuba to fight there. These soldiers are considered to be the most responsible for the US victory in Cuba, but a group of white men that included Teddy Roosevelt took most of the credit. Roosevelt, after leaving most of the work of war to the 25th infantry also had asked Mingo to share his own food with the white soldiers. Mingo did.

Some time later, Mingo was stationed in Texas and Teddy Roosevelt had become president. There was a fight, and someone was killed. The government assumed that it had to be a soldier from the 25th infantry, as they were the only people of color in the town. Teddy Roosevelt dishonorably discharged almost 125 of the soldiers of the 25th infantry as punishment. These men lost their income and their pensions with no trial to prove their guilt or innocence. Roosevelt had ruined the career of the man who had given his own food up for him years ago.

Mingo by this time was partially blind and had suffered many injuries in the wars he had fought for this country. He couldn’t find other work at his age either, and so travelled to Washington DC to protest how he had been treated.

Mingo passed away in Washington, DC, never having gotten his pension or his medals back from the government. However, he led a life that any soldier could be proud of, a life full of courage and integrity.
Geraldine Washington Travis

Born in Georgia in 1931

Geraldine married her sweetheart, an air force cadet, in 1949 and together they had 5 kids. For a time they lived in New Orleans and Geraldine attended Xavier University while there, earning her degree.

When Geraldine’s husband was stationed in Great Falls, Geraldine and her family moved to Montana with him. Geraldine saw politics as a way to make the future better for all people of color, and quickly became involved in local politics in their new city. In 1968 Geraldine became one of the founding members of the NAACP in Great Falls. She served as the president of several political groups and even helped run a campaign for president. Geraldine became a delegate at the Democratic national conference later that year. Geraldine then got an important position as a member of the committee on civil rights, which advised the government on issues of social justice and rights for people of color.

In 1974 Geraldine was elected to the Montana House of Representatives. Geraldine was the first African American to serve in such a position.

Representative Travis successfully sponsored five bills, all of which passed through the House, and two of those five bills then passed in the Senate, becoming law.

Geraldine stayed active in politics when she lost her re-election in 1976. Geraldine Washington Travis now lives in Arizona, where she continues to stay active in politics as a way of leaving a better place for future generations of children.
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