



Episode 5, Nora Holt Autograph Book, Harlem and Westchester, NY and Westport, CT

Gwen Wright: Our next story investigates an unusual compilation of signatures from a forgotten figure of the Harlem Renaissance. By the 1920's, the population of African Americans in cities like New York, Detroit and Chicago has increased dramatically. Drawn north by the promise of economic opportunity, the newcomers find a variety of jobs, including some in flourishing world of arts and entertainment. The music, literature and art of this so called "New Negro", helps demolish the racial stereotypes of the 19th Century and gives birth to an extraordinary moment in American cultural history. Now, a man from Los Angeles, California, has discovered a puzzling autograph book from this period.... with a most unusual collection of names.

Avery Clayton: Well, at first I wondered, some of these names in this book are so famous, that I wonder how all of them got here.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright. Avery Clayton has asked me to meet him and take a look at what he's found. Nice to meet you.

Avery: Come on in.

Gwen: Thanks. Well, you told me you had an autograph book, but it looks like you have a number of things.

Avery: Well, I do. It's part of a collection that my mother, Dr. Mayme A. Clayton, assembled and it's a huge collection of African American history materials.

Gwen: Avery tells me that over her lifetime, the California librarian collected documents, photos, films, recording, books and an assortment of ordinary objects. Well, tell me what you have here.

Avery: This is from 1838. A report on a petition to provide the right to trial by jury for persons of color. This is a souvenir program of Ray Charles from the early 60s.

Gwen: Well, how many objects?

Avery: There are about 3.5 million.

Gwen: Oh, my goodness. [Chuckles]

Avery: Yeah. Yeah.



Gwen: This must be one of the one of the more... As Avery describes the collection, it's clear to me that it's the range of material that his mother assembled that makes it so valuable. We have all kinds of objects that tell us about ordinary African American's live throughout the history of this country. So let's look at the autograph book. Now, how did you come cross this?

Avery: You know, we recently moved my mother's collection out of her garage and I came across it in the bottom of a box.

Gwen: Nora Douglas Holt. She must be the owner. Do you know who she was?

Avery: I have no idea who she is, but I tell you something, when I recognized some of the names in that book...Take a look at this.

Gwen: Woodrow Wilson?

Avery: Yes. I mean, this is amazing. Warren G. Harding. Calvin Coolidge.

Gwen: Oh. These are presidents of the United States.

Avery: Yes! Theodore Dreiser.

Gwen: He's a major American novelist.

Avery: Andrew Mellon.

Gwen: The financier.

Avery: These are captains of industry. These are the men who are the powerbrokers of the world.

Gwen: It is an extraordinary collection of names. But I don't recognize Nora Holt either. Tell me, Avery, what would you like me to find out about this book?

Avery: First I'd like to find out who Nora Douglas Holt was, was she African American? And how did she happen to have access to people like this in 1921?

Gwen: Well, I'm excited to find out what's the story behind this book. I'm assuming this book belonged to Nora. Her name is on the inside front page. And it looks like a married name too – Nora Douglas Holt Ray. This address is in Harlem, in New York City. Let's take a look at the other names. Woodrow Wilson was president



after World War I. Warren Harding followed him into the White House. Most of these signatures appear to be politicians. And the majority are dated 1921. Let's see what I can find that might have connected this group of men. Here it is! Harding is president. Calvin Coolidge is his vice president. And the rest of the names – Charles Evans Hughes, Andrew Mellon, John Weeks – these are members of Harding's cabinet. Here are two very different names – Theodore Dreiser and Carl Van Vechten are well known writers. Both are dated 1928, and they're the only names from that year. What an incongruous group. Who was the person who might have met them all? I'm in New York City at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. If Nora Douglas Holt was African American and well known, I ought to find her here. Here she is, in the Encyclopedia of Black Women in America. "Music critic, composer and performer, Nora Douglas Holt lived by a creed that said, 'music is one of the greatest refiners of the race'." It seems that Nora grew up in Kansas. Her father was a minister. She started taking piano at four and went to a historically black college. She was trained at Western University in Kansas and the Chicago Musical College, where she's credited with being the first black musician to earn a masters degree in music. So she was a very accomplished woman. But there's certainly nothing here to suggest that she was mixing with the Harding cabinet. So, John, here is the autograph book I told you about. John Reznikoff of University Archives in Westport, Connecticut, specializes in authenticating presidential signatures. He suggests we examine a couple of the most famous names. Okay, here's our Wilson signature.

John Reznikoff: So now we have this letter on original White House stationary in 1917, middle of World War I.

Gwen: John compares a known Wilson signature with ours. He uses a fiber optic viewer that blows up the image without distortion.

John: You can see that "W" and then you could see the "W" here.

Gwen: Oh, they're exactly the same.

John: So I'd say this is an authentic Woodrow Wilson signature, provided it's not printed which we'll look at a little bit later. Well, let's go right to Calvin Coolidge.

Gwen: Coolidge has a distinctive signature. Once again, John looks for idiosyncrasies to compare.

John: You see that figure eight, and that's very unusual in a signature. And, this is dead on match.

Gwen: The signatures look the same, but it's possible they're printed. So we're going to examine them under different light frequencies and magnification.

John: And at first glance we're struck with the speed of the signature.



Gwen: John explains that forgers often hesitate as they sign, allowing ink to pool and collect. But here, the movement of the ink is uniform.

John: When we blow it up, we can see what is called feathering. And that is the little lines coming from the ink, because the paper has a certain porosity to it and it spreads.

Gwen: Whoever signed Woodrow Wilson's signature did so smoothly. So what's your overall impression, John? John has no doubt the two presidential signatures are the real thing.

John: And, those would be the most prominent signatures in the book.

Gwen: And he has no reason to question the other names.

John: So I'd have to say definitively that this is an authentic autograph book.

Gwen: How and why did this African American woman collect all these signatures? Helen Walker Hill is an authority on black women composers and one of only a handful of historians knowledgeable about Nora Holt. Well, most of the signatures in this book are from 1921 to 1928, so what was she doing during those years?

Helen Walker Hill: At least for the first part she was in Chicago. She was writing for the Chicago Defender, one of the largest black newspapers in the country, as a music critic. Probably one of the first female music critics.

Gwen: As a young woman in Chicago, Nora was part of something called the Racial Uplift Movement.

Helen: The Racial Uplift Movement emphasized being educated and aware of the European tradition, so that African Americans could prove their equality with whites.

Gwen: Nora used her knowledge of classical traditions to create unique American compositions.

Helen: She was a composer of extraordinary ability. As a musician, she was brilliant.

Gwen: Nora wrote over 200 orchestral chamber and vocal works. But, Helen explains, she put all her music in storage during a trip to Europe. Tragically, all were stolen, except for two pieces she had published, including one for piano called Negro Dance. Oh, I'd love to hear them. Is that possible?

Helen: It just portrays her personality to me.



Gwen: I'm beginning to get a sense of a woman who has an extraordinary range of talents. She handles them all with aplomb. She can do anything she sets herself to. Music criticism and composing were only part of Nora's story. She was beautiful, married four times before she was 30 and a celebrated cabaret singer too.

Helen: I know that she sang at parties, private parties, mostly in Chicago.

Gwen: Is it possible that senators and presidents could have attended parties like this?

Helen: Yes. And in Europe she met royalty, the Prince of Wales in London. It's entirely possible that she met all kinds of celebrities.

Gwen: But Helen's not so sure that Nora gathered the signatures. Can you see her collecting autographs at events like that?

Helen: I can imagine her more likely signing autographs than asking for autographs.

Gwen: Yes. She was the celebrity.

Helen: Right.

Gwen: Did Nora meet all these famous people? There's one date I see in the book again and again – May 10th, 1921. I'm searching the Washington Post, and sure enough, there is a big event in the Capitol on that day. Calvin Coolidge attends a May Day party in Washington on May 10th, 1921. Coolidge is the guest of honor at a party given by the American Legion Post. Some 2,000 guests attended, including cabinet members, diplomats and members of congress. Was Nora there? It certainly possible, but there's no reference in the newspaper to her being a guest or a performer. And a party for Calvin Coolidge, hosted by the conservative American Legion? I'm not sure that's Nora Holt's scene. As I search for anything to connect Nora to these names, I make an interesting discovery. It's the wedding announcement for her fifth and final marriage. "July 1923, Ray weds Nora Holt in the most brilliant wedding of the season". So Nora Holt is marrying Joseph L. Ray of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, confidential secretary to Charles M. Schwab. Charles Schwab, he's the founder of Bethlehem Steel. He's one of the most important financiers and industrialists in the country. As secretary to the steel baron, Charles Schwab, Joseph L. Ray was one of the most highly placed African Americans in the business world. Schwab, and possibly Nora's husband, could have had connections to Harding and his inner circle. But the marriage was in 1923 and most of these signatures are from 1921. Nora even signs herself Nora Holt Ray in the book. I'm putting in a call to the National Canal Museum at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which handles some of Bethlehem Steel's papers. I want to know what they can tell me about Nora's husband. It's a long shot, but perhaps Joseph Ray, or Charles Schwab, attended the May 10th Washington event. So far, I haven't



been able to connect Nora to any of the signatures while she lived in Chicago. But the address in the book is in New York, where Helen said Nora also spent a lot of time. So that's where I'm heading.

Gwen: Hi, Herb, How are you doing?

Herb Boyd: How are you?

Gwen: Very well. Good to see you. I'm hoping Herb Boyd, an expert on the Harlem Renaissance can help me. Now, I want to know, did Nora Holt Ray live in Harlem?

Herb: Indeed she did. She immediately established herself as one of the leading artists, writers, hanging out in the clubs and the cabarets with all of the denizens, you know, of Harlem.

Gwen: So Nora had a really exciting life in Chicago. What brought her to New York?

Herb: Well, if you're going to make it big as an artist, you've got to come to New York.

Gwen: That's right.

Herb: This is the place to be.

Gwen: Herb describes the Harlem Renaissance as a spectacular flowering of African American cultural and political freedoms. Where new ideas in literature, music and politics coursed through the mecca of black America.

Herb: There was a notion that art would be a way to deal with racism. We can't do the political thing, we can't do the economic thing, we can't get the place in the academy, so we'll take the stage. And so you have this here, just a preponderance of artistic explosion.

Gwen: Where's Nora in all this?

Herb: She fit quite comfortably into this world. I mean, you talk about someone who was a part of the cultural elite.

Gwen: As I told you, I have an autograph book that belonged to Nora.

Herb: Wow.



Gwen: We have Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding... political figures. But does it make sense that Nora, as an artist, would have been mixing with people like this?

Herb: It's highly unlikely because she spun in different circles. I mean, she was in an artistic circle. This was a political circle, and in a political circle on the right at that.

Gwen: Nora's circle in New York was very different. Flamboyant and energetic, Herb says Nora would have found in Harlem a group of like minded artists who nurtured and sustained each other's work and ambitions.

Herb: Carl Van Vechten. Oh, my goodness. Yeah.

Gwen: Herb says, even though Van Vechten was white, he was a fixture of the Harlem Renaissance scene.

Herb: But that would make a lot of sense, you know, that she would have his autograph, because they were very close.

Gwen: As a writer and photographer, Van Vechten was fascinated by black culture. One of his books features a sexually adventurous character based on Nora Holt.

Gwen: Well, there's another signature in here and that's Theodore Dreiser.

Herb: Theo Dreiser, I mean, Sister Carrie, An American Tragedy, those are the great novels from him.

Gwen: Now, Dreiser was primarily a leftwing social conscious novelist in Chicago, does it makes sense to you that they could have known each other here in New York in 1928?

Herb: Well, it's not absolutely impossible, because you have Theodore Dreiser having a relationship with people like Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten. And possibly through that relationship, she may have some contact with Theodore Dreiser.

Gwen: I've connected Nora to one, and possibly two of the signatures in the book. But I've got nothing to link her to the other names. I'm not sure what to make of our autograph book. As I'm leaving Harlem, however, I get an e-mail. It's from a researcher at the Canal Museum in Pittsburgh. Seems they have made a curious discovery about someone linked to Nora's past. This should certainly interest Avery.

Gwen: Well, Avery, the autographs in this book are all real.

Avery: That's fantastic.



Gwen: I tell him how this talented, prolific and beautiful woman was part of the African American cultural renaissance of the 1920's.

Avery: That's amazing. She was gorgeous.

Gwen: Absolutely.

Avery: Wow. So, she was at these events where all these amazing people were? These presidents and....

Gwen: That I'm not sure of. I explained that Theodore Dreiser and Carl Van Vechten were in Nora's circle. She almost certainly got those signatures herself. But the Washington politicians maybe have been a different story. I don't think that she would have been at the major event that's documented with these names. Nora's husband, Joseph Ray, worked for Charles Schwab, the founder of Bethlehem Steel. And this final marriage may account for the mystery signatures. The e-mail from the researcher at the Canal Museum had given me some surprising information about one of the most powerful men in America: "Schwab was a maniac autograph collector. He spent much time and effort to assemble a large collection".

Avery: Did Charles Schwab collect the autographs?

Gwen: We may never know the answer to that. But it makes sense to me that Schwab either collected those autographs himself or he bought the book as a souvenir and then gave it to Nora, or Ray, as a present. And Nora added those last two autographs in 1928.

Avery: Wow. Wow, that's amazing.

Gwen: And in some ways, the most important one is this one. Nora Douglas Holt Ray. She was one of the most extraordinary and accomplished American musicians and writers on music that we've have.

Avery: Yeah, ain't that something?

Gwen: Nora Holt had helped fire a cultural explosion in New York and Chicago. In saving this book, Avery's mother, Mayme Clayton, had recognized her extraordinary contribution to history.