

**DRUSILLA
DUNJEE
HOUSTON**
1876-1941



**WRITER,
HISTORIAN,
AND
EDUCATOR**

Much has been written about New York's Harlem Renaissance, and its black literary and visual artists. The reality is that the black renaissance occurred throughout the country, including Oklahoma City where Drusilla Houston made writing her life. She was a writer, historian, educator, journalist, musician, and screenwriter – and the first Black woman to write about ancient Africa.

Drusilla Dunjee was born in January 1876 at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Her father, Reverend John William Dunjee, was a minister with the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, who traveled around the country to establish Baptist congregations in rural areas inhabited by poor Blacks. Drusilla never attended college but she did attend finishing school in the North and studied classical piano at the Northwestern Conservatory of Music in Minnesota. Despite earning more than \$3,000 a concert, she forsook this promising career and began teaching in Oklahoma City, after settling there with her family in 1892.

When her father died in 1903, the family struggled financially. Her brother Roscoe expanded their family farm to produce vegetables and other produce for sale. Then, Irving left Oklahoma for Chicago and New York City to become managing editor of the Chicago Enterprise and editor of The Negro Champion.

In 1899 Drusilla eloped with Price Houston, and settled in McAlester. Dissatisfied with public education's offerings for black girls, Drusilla founded McAlester Seminary for Girls, leading it for twelve years. She was hired by the Baptists in 1917 to serve as principal of the Oklahoma Baptist College for Girls, and moved to Sapulpa, serving as principal for six years. When Drusilla returned to Oklahoma City after this, she started the Oklahoma Vocational Institute of Fine Arts and Crafts.

In 1915 Roscoe founded the Oklahoma Black Dispatch newspaper and Drusilla, a self-trained historian and journalist, served as a contributing editor and columnist, writing over 3,000 columns over thirty years, including ones on the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, 1917 Houston Riots, and the East St. Louis Massacre. Many of her ideas on racial vindication – elevating Blacks out of a life of inferiority – were acquired from her father, but later she put her own unique stamp on them.

Angered by D. W. Griffith's 1915 motion picture "Birth of a Nation", based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 racist novel and subsequent play "The Clansman", Drusilla wrote a screenplay called "Spirit of the Old South: The Maddened Mob". It may be that she was the first and only African American – male or female – to write a blow-by-blow refutation of the controversial film. While never produced as a motion picture, the screenplay represented an early attempt to refute not just the racist themes in the film but also an attack on all of Dixon's works that contributed to the film. It was also, perhaps, the first screenplay written by a black person.

In 1933, Drusilla broke her silence about the screenplay she had written more than two decades earlier. Fearing threats to her life and danger to her family because the Ku Klux Klan was active in Oklahoma at the time, she had kept the play a secret. In 1938, still furious with the widespread support of Dixon's racist works, Drusilla wrote, "the Negro must produce plays to answer and undo the work of The Clansman".

In 1901, Drusilla had begun research on the origins of civilization with links among the ancient Black populations in Arabia, Persia, Babylonia, and India because Western scholars saw the Greeks as the fountainhead of civilization. She had been inspired by W. E. B. DuBois' 1915 book "The Negro", which discredited the white racist idea that Africans had no history. In 1926, she published the multi-volume history "Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire". Afterwards she wrote DuBois thanking him for inspiring her. Regrettably, four volumes in the series appear lost, but Volume II was rediscovered in 1998.

Drusilla died of tuberculosis in February 1941 at age 65 in Phoenix. She had moved there for her health, as the dry climate was believed to benefit people with lung disease, and tuberculosis was incurable at the time.