

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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Mr. Postman, look and see / if there's a letter in your bag for me? -- sung by The Marvelettes

These were strong women who faced prejudice in the United States, but still managed to complete their mission, putting the Country ahead of their own trials. . . . This is a true American story that needs to be told. -- Col. David Griffith

A True American Story that Needs to be Told: SUSIE WILLIS AND THE SIX TRIPLE EIGHT

If you haven't seen it yet, stream *The Six Triple Eight* on Netflix. The film offers a fascinating look at the epic accomplishments of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion--the only all-female, mostly black unit deployed overseas during World War II.

Among its members was Montevallo's own Susie Willis. Her service in the 6888th and contributions to her Alabama community can now be honored.



*Susie Irma Nelson Willis
(1909-1998)*

A lifelong resident of Shelby County until her passing in 1998 at age 88, Willis embodied the grit, discipline, bravery, and ingenuity that defined the women of the 6888th. These were "strong women," one Colonel noted, who "managed to complete the mission, putting the Country ahead of their own trials."

Their mission was monumental: to sort and deliver a backlog of military mail--some of it two years old, mildewed, the addresses no longer legible. Sent to England in the winter of 1945, the women were tasked with what seemed impossible--to process millions of undelivered letters.

But leave it to a battalion of Black women. They get the job done. The women of the Six Triple Eight were given six months. They completed the mission in two! And they did it in numbing cold without the benefit of automation and with a host of logistical challenges, to say nothing of the prejudice they encountered as women of color.

Susie Willis took great pride in that achievement, as recalled by her goddaughter, Erma Hill-Pope, now living in Huntsville, who reached out to the Untold Stories team. Otherwise the story of this extraordinary woman might have remained untold.

At the time, Susie served as Pfc Susie Irma Middlebrook. She was one of 24 Black women from Alabama in the battalion, and the only one from Montevallo. (Source: *Birmingham Post-Herald*, Feb 21, 1945.)

She had earned a degree from Knoxville College, an HBCU in Tennessee, and returned home eager to teach. Instead, she had to settle for housekeeping at the University of Montevallo--after completing four years of college.

Many women in her battalion joined because they wanted to fight. Ms. Susie sought wider opportunities. Happily, after the war she found ways to make an impact. Erma remembers her saying that she taught English, social studies and fundamentals of reading and math, grades 1-6. Her favorite subject was English composition, and her greatest joys came from teaching and working with children.

She loved sports--especially baseball--and admired Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, and Joe Louis. For years, she co-led summer recreational activities for Black youth with Mr. Clifford DuBose. She loved her church--Ward Chapel AME--and community. "She was always heading out to one meeting or another," Erma recalled. "She had a keen sense of humor, intuitive and smart. But most of all, she was a caring individual."

Joyce Jones, a board member of the Montevallo Legacy Project, remembers Ms. Susie as a woman of "gusto, gall, and ingenuity," adding that "nothing was ever going to stop her from doing what she wanted to do and she was going to do it right." Joyce didn't know about her service with the 6888th but wasn't surprised: "She dressed with military precession, clean pressed lines. But more than that, she carried herself with the can-do spirit so common among the remarkable women teachers of that era--women who commanded respect and expected excellence."

Erma's fondest memories include sitting on the front porch of the house on Selma Road with Ms. Susie and her husband Mr. Percy, bantering back and forth about current events, sports, family. "They included me in the fray to test my knowledge," she wrote. "Ms. Susie wanted me to be educated, articulate, and thoughtful. I will always treasure the role she played in my life."

Sources: The quote from Col. David Griffith, Director of Freedom Team Salute, appeared in *Our Heritage Magazine*, accessed via <https://www.womenofthe6888th.org/wome-of-courage-tenacity-strength>. This website has some excellent photos of the troops from 1945. The photograph of Susie Willis from her 1998 obituary program was supplied by James Salter. Our greatest thanks go to Erma Hill-Pope who graciously shared her memories of her godmother. You'll find an expanded version of the story at themontevallolegacyproject.com. Do you have stories to share? We would love to hear from you! Write us at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims.