

Films tell two poignant stories

TWO VIDEOCASSETTES landed on my desk recently, courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.

Titled, respectively, *Speakers for the Dead* and *Journey to Justice*, they address forgotten and sometimes hidden episodes of Canadian history. They also elicit an emotion of indignation that still, all is not right even today in the promised land.

Given that these are productions of quality and accuracy, it is also appropriate that they have come out in February, Black History Month.

Canada reinvents itself regularly before the rest of the world, that this has always been a place of haven, of harmony, a place to raise children away from the turmoil of civil war, which seems to wrack much of today's world. And undoubtedly much of this is true.

But behind this façade of Canadian civility, there has always been a subtle homegrown racism, of denial and depravation that

many of you in the readership can identify. We have come a long way from the early years of the 20th century, when a person of colour was close to being a non-entity, both in the civil body, and in the eyes of the law.

Except of course when that person of colour transgressed said law, then the full weight of the judiciary would come down with the wrath of an angry white God in heaven to demand restitution.

Speakers for the Dead which premiered on Vision TV last week is a challenge to long held assumptions about an Ontario town, Priceville settled almost two hundred years ago.

Driving through its bucolic setting today you would think that it was always the Scottish and Irish that lived here. But a black community thrived there too, long before Confederation.

Though they cleared the terrain to make it productive, they were never given title, as other white incoming settlers received from Provincial authorities. Even-



A scene from the documentary *Journey to Justice*

tually, these black pioneers were forced off their property, and one by one they settled elsewhere. All that remained was a cemetery.

But in the end, even that was dug up to create a potato field. Some tombstones were thrown into a municipal heap, while others were made into flooring for a barn, and eventually cemented

over.

A few years ago, local residents, all white, struck a committee to find these tombstones, and rededicate the cemetery.

Speakers for the Dead is the story about the original Priceville, and about the emotions of the black descendants of the original Priceville residents who are still alive. The Black Film and Video Network at the Reel Black Awards named the film the Best Documentary last September.

Journey to Justice is a tribute to the men and women who took racism to court in the middle years of the last century. It champions the many unsung heroes in Canada's civil rights movement. Perhaps the most moving story is that of Viola Desmond in 1946. She is generally described as Canada's equivalent of Rosa Parks.

Desmond, a native of Halifax, was refused permission to sit in a cinema section reserved for whites. She ignored the usher's directions, and sat where she

wished, only to be dragged out by the cinema owner and a police officer.

Ignoring the damage to her hips when she was manhandled, they made her spend the night in jail.

A coalition of community leaders, and local civil rights groups took the matter all the way up to the Nova Scotia Supreme Court.

Desmond lost the case on a technicality in that she did not pay the "extra one cent tax on tickets for downstairs." But one of the Justices did remark that the matter was also a racist issue.

There are other recognizable faces in this documentary, such as Bromley Armstrong, Donald Willard Moore, Ray Lewis who won an Olympic bronze medal at the 1932 San Francisco games, and Stanley Grizzle around whom much of the film is wrought.

Interestingly, all except Moore are still alive. What gives this film poignancy, is the rare archival footage that is a delight to watch, in as much as the subject matter is



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so grave and depressing.

This so especially about the town of Dresden, Ontario where in a local referendum, segregation was to be still maintained.

Journey to Justice was produced by Karen King-Chigbo and directed by Roger McTair, both born in Trinidad.

McTair is a veteran documentary producer with 20 years experience under his belt, and it shows in the flawless sequence of scenes and events. This film will premiere on Thursday, February 22nd at the Sheraton Centre on Queen Street, followed by a reception across the road at Ontario Law Society offices.

I strongly recommend that you purchase these videos for home or classroom projects. Call the NFB at 1-800-267-7710, or log on to www.nfb.ca/homevideo.