

Her name was Hattie Ellis and she was, like so many of the women who came to the Goree State Prison Farm in the thirties, a mystery. All that can be known about her comes from meagre scraps of information—a trial transcript, the few references to her in the



transcripts of the WBAP radio show *Thirty Minutes behind the Walls*, and some vague references to her in the *Echo*, the newspaper written and edited by Texas prison inmates.

Hattie was a black woman living in Dallas she has been described as ‘a bootlegging sister’—which probably meant that she worked for a bootlegger or was a bootlegger herself.

Another indication of her lifestyle comes from a statement she once made in court: ‘I never have paid any fines for being a prostitute’

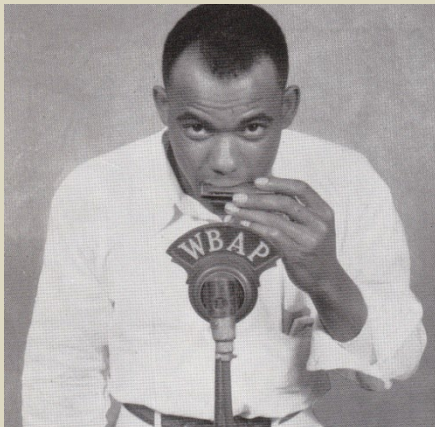
When she was just twenty years old, Hattie was sentenced to thirty years at Goree for murdering another black woman named Henrietta Murphy. Henrietta and some other women had shown up at Hattie’s house, wanting to buy whiskey for a dollar from Hattie’s boyfriend. Hattie wouldn’t sell them whiskey, and she and Henrietta got into an argument. Hattie allegedly drove up to Henrietta’s home talked to her for a few minutes while sitting in Hattie’s car, Hattie then drew a pistol, and shot her in the stomach and then in the back

The black inmates at Goree, there were twice as many black women as white women in the prison; they were kept in their own dormitory. They ate their meals there, away from the white women, and during church services and on movie nights, they had to sit in their own area. Black women who were given the harder jobs—tending to the crops, working the dairy cattle, picking the fruit from the



orchard—while the white women were given the jobs in the main office or in the prison’s garment factory

Soon after the March 1938 and the unveiling of *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, the WBAP radio show featuring musical acts by Texas prison inmates, Hattie Ellis was brought onstage to sing the



blues. The show’s announcer would introduce her as the ‘Blues singing Negro girl’ or occasionally, ‘The dusky Goree vocalist’;

The fact that she was featured week after week is one indication of how good she was. (There were numerous inmates trying out for one of the slots on the show.) One

of the writers in the *Echo* complimented her for her Ella Fitzgerald imitations. Another columnist wrote, *her voice makes you wish a million times you hadn’t done it’* or hadn’t got caught, maybe

Hattie singing is truly beautiful, haunting, and ethereal. The songs are classic pieces from blues history: *I Ain’t Got Nobody*, *Desert Blues*, accompanied on guitar by ‘Cowboy’ Jack Ramsey, a white inmate, and *It’s a Blessin’ Jes’ to Call My Saviour’s Name* and perhaps her most well known track, *Cap’n Don’t ‘low No Truckin’-round in Here*. This one could well have been her own composition about life at Goree and the notorious manager who ran the prison.

You can’t help but listen to these songs and wonder what Hattie could have been if her own life had turned a different way. But that’s another part of the mystery about her. On May 6, 1940, she received a conditional pardon, which was the term used for a parole. She was released from prison to begin her life again as a free woman

At some point Hattie was returned to prison, apparently for a parole violation. She was never allowed again to appear on the radio show. She stayed at Goree, unseen and unheard, until March 22, 1956, when she was finally discharged. Hattie was by then 43 years old;

beyond this date there is simply no record what happened to her,
she literally disappeared.

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