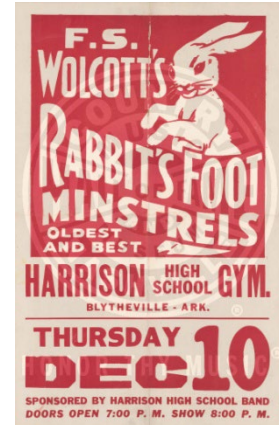


Rabbit Foot Minstrels

During the first half of the 20th century, the African American entertainers of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels played a major role in spreading the blues [via tours across the South]. Founded in 1900, the 'Foots' were headquartered in Port Gibson between 1918 and 1950 under the ownership of F.S. Wolcott. Notable members at that time included Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Ida Cox, Louis Jordan, and Rufus Thomas.



By the mid-1910s entertainers in tent shows were spreading the blues across the South, and one of most popular groups was the Port Gibson-based Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Minstrel shows presented a wide range of comedy routines, skits, and song-and-dance numbers, and always featured a marching band. In the 1910s they added blues to their existing repertoire of classical, ragtime, and popular music, playing it both instrumentally and in support of vaudeville-style female singers. Many performers later known for other styles of blues also spent time in minstrel troupes, including rhythm and blues pioneer Louis Jordan and Rufus Thomas, who worked as a comedian.



White performers including Dan Emmett and T. D. Rice pioneered blackface minstrels, the first distinctively American theatrical format, in the 1830s and 1840s. African Americans soon followed them, particularly following the Civil War, and, like their white counterparts, they 'blackened up' with makeup and enacted caricatures of black life that many whites believed to be authentic.

The 'Foot' shows were all initially operated by white managers, enjoyed by both black and white audiences, although in the South, seating was segregated. While the famous travelling vaudeville and minstrel troupe featured highly popular Black musicians, Jim Crow laws enforced strict racial separation. Black and white audience members both crowded into the entertainment tents, but they were kept in entirely separate sections. By the beginning of the 20th century, African Americans had begun organising their own companies. Minstrel shows were often staged at large urban theatres,

and in tandem with the growth of the railway system troupes began travelling to rural areas as well, staging their shows under canvas tents.

In 1900, Patrick Henry Chappelle, an African American from Florida, produced a musical comedy called '*A Rabbit's Foot*' and by 1902 his Rabbit's Foot Company was touring as a tent show, though the popular attraction was billed as too good for a tent. Following Chappelle's death in 1911, the company was taken over by F. S. (Fred Swift) Wolcott, a white entrepreneur from Michigan who had been running a small minstrel company. In the spring of 1918 Wolcott moved the company's headquarters to Port Gibson, where troupe members stayed in the winter, either in train cars or in the homes of locals, and rehearsed on a covered stage at Wolcott's home. The show remained popular through the 1940s, and records suggest that its final performances were in 1959.



The story goes, Bessie Smith and her entourage were staying in her personal railroad car and for whatever reason the local people chose to show up with their guns and shoot hell out of the car. Fortunately, Bessie and her group suffered no injuries. This is just

one of the unfortunate instances where, although the shows were enjoyed by everyone, not everyone approved of the performers and subscribed to Mr Crows views and laws.

Among the ranks of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels were many blues singers and musicians who at some point lived in Mississippi, including Big Joe Williams, Sid Hemphill, Willie Nix, Maxwell Street Jimmy, Jim Jackson, Bogus Ben Covington, Dwight 'Gatemouth' Moore, Johnny 'Daddy Stovepipe' Watson, and trombonist Leon 'Pee Wee' Whittaker.

PD Productions