

# DEADWOOD WALL OF FAME

2012

## Matilda Champion Hill

**Born:** July 29, 1870, in Mountville, Fairfax County, Virginia

**Died:** May 11, 1954, in Deadwood (Buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery)

Matilda “Mattie” Champion Hill was born in Virginia to an African-American family just five years after the end of slavery. In 1900 she moved West to work as a cook and child nurse for a military family at Fort Meade near Sturgis. A short time later, she made her home in Deadwood. Over the next five decades Mattie Hill established a reputation as a wonderful cook, hard worker, caring foster mother, tireless volunteer and important part of the Black Hills’ tiny African American community.

“She epitomized the South Dakota pioneer spirit – independent, frugal, hard-working, community-minded and charitable to all, regardless of race or creed,” wrote historian Lilah Morton Pengra, one of the people who nominated Mrs. Hill for the Deadwood Hall of Fame.

Back in Virginia, Mattie Champion attended the Wayland Seminary and Hartshorn College in Richmond, Va., the earliest black colleges. At Fort Meade, because of her education and trustworthiness, she was a “living out” domestic worker, with her own quarters, control of her free time and more independence than the “live-in” help at the time.

She was in Deadwood as early as 1903. She appears in a photo taken that year at Calamity Jane’s Mount Moriah funeral. In September 1904 she married Isaac Alexander Hill in Deadwood. They had two children, Amy Hill born in 1907 and James Hill born in 1908.

Mattie Hill kept a large garden and raised 50 Rhode Island Red chickens every summer. She sold produce and eggs in Deadwood, Lead and Pluma. She also worked as a cook at the Moosecamp Restaurant, the Tomahawk Country Club and private homes. Ever frugal and hard-working, Mattie Hill made her own soap and kept her house spotless, recalled her grandson, Clifford Melrose. Regarding laundry, he said, his grandmother believed “... that if she didn’t boil it, it wasn’t clean.”

Melrose, born in 1935, lived with his grandmother for much of his childhood. She frequently sent him around the neighborhood to do chores for elderly neighbors. Mattie Hill took in a number of orphaned children. “My grandmother said there would never be a black child in the state of South Dakota that didn’t have a home,” Melrose recalled.

Mattie Hill organized and often hosted gatherings for the small, far-flung Black Hills African American community. Her grandson recalled celebrations such as the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving and Freedom Day, which commemorates the end of slavery.

Late in her life, family members tried to persuade Mrs. Hill to join them in Seattle or Chicago. However, she preferred her independence. She maintained her own home in Deadwood until the day she died in 1954, at age 83.

DEADWOOD  
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Landmark

