

# Famous Tennesseans: Haley, Rudolph, Parton, Gore, Winfrey

In the 20th century, a number of Tennesseans played prominent roles in politics, sports and the arts. Author Alex Haley brought new light to the experience of African Americans in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, on which he served as ghostwriter, and his groundbreaking novel *Roots*. Wilma Rudolph's story overcoming obstacles to become an Olympian inspired thousands to follow in her footsteps. Dolly Parton found fame as a singer, songwriter and actress, but has never forgotten her roots in East Tennessee. Parton's philanthropy continues to benefit families in Tennessee and children around the world. Al Gore Jr. served as United States Senator and vice-president under Bill Clinton before a controversial loss to George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election. Gore remains politically active particularly on the issue of climate change. Like Gore, Oprah Winfrey began her career as a journalist. Winfrey's empathy propelled her to the top of the daytime talk show ratings and made her a household name. Since retiring from daytime television, multibillionaire entrepreneur Winfrey has remained active in numerous social and political causes.

## Alex Haley

Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, N.Y. on August 11, 1921. When he was still young, his family moved to his mother's hometown of Henning, Tennessee. In Henning, Haley was surrounded by family members who often told stories about their ancestors; these stories would later be the inspiration for his bestseller *Roots*. From 1937 to 1939, Haley attended teacher's college in North Carolina before joining the Coast Guard. Haley spent his years in the Coast Guard improving his skills as a writer, and in 1952 he was appointed chief journalist of the Coast Guard. The position was created just for him. As his career progressed, Haley published articles in a number of magazines including *Playboy* and *Reader's Digest*. This exposure led to his selection as the ghostwriter for Malcolm X's autobiography. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* became a bestseller and brought increased attention to Haley's work.

For years Haley had often thought about the family stories he heard as a boy. He decided to research his family's history and use that research as the basis for a book entitled *Roots*. *Roots* was published in 1976 and became an international bestseller and Pulitzer Prize winner. In 1977, a miniseries based on the book became one of the most watched television programs in American history. Haley's story of how he had traced his family back to a village in West Africa inspired thousands of people, particularly African Americans, to

research their own family history.

While *Roots* was well received by the public, historians had reservations about the work. The book had been marketed as non-fiction, but historians found numerous errors in the story. Haley was also sued for plagiarism. He was accused of plagiarizing over eighty passages from a 1967 novel called *The African*. Haley claimed that he had not read the novel and that the passages were based on suggestions he had received from others. The lawsuit went to court, but Haley agreed to a settlement of six hundred and fifty thousand dollars before the judge made his ruling. Other criticisms followed, and it was revealed that many passages in *Roots* were written by Murray Fisher, Haley's editor at Playboy.

One of the most moving and remarkable moments of the novel was Haley's meeting with a West African griot who claimed to know an oral history of Haley's ancestor Kunta Kinte. Upon further investigation it was revealed that story was a fabrication created by Haley and the government of Gambia. The Gambian authorities realized the potential for tourism that the book would create and arranged for Haley to meet a griot who would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear. After these facts were revealed, Haley began to refer to *Roots* as "faction" a mixture of fact and fiction. Haley lived in Knoxville for many years and continued to write for the remainder of his life, but the criticisms of *Roots* continue to linger. Haley on February 10, 1992 and was buried on the grounds of his childhood home in Henning, Tennessee.

## Wilma Rudolph

Wilma Rudolph was born in St. Bethlehem, Tennessee on June 23, 1940. She was the twentieth of her father's twenty-two children. Rudolph was a small and sickly child; during her childhood she contracted double pneumonia, scarlet fever, measles, whooping cough and polio. Her left leg was weakened by polio and she was forced to wear a brace for many years. Once a week her mother drove her ninety miles to and from Nashville so that Rudolph could receive physical therapy. The therapy, love, and support from her family, and Rudolph's own determination paid off.

By the time she was nine; she was out of the braces and had begun to play basketball. Rudolph became a basketball star and was recruited by the track coach, Ed Temple, from nearby Tennessee State University. Rudolph began attending his track practices while she was still in high school. In 1956, sixteen-year-old Rudolph competed in the Melbourne Olympics where she won a bronze medal in the 400 meter relay. In the 1960 Rome Olympics Rudolph took gold in the 100 meter, 200 meter, and 4X100 meter relay becoming the first American woman to win three gold medals in a single Olympics. European crowds adored Rudolph and the press dubbed her "The Black Pearl" and "The Black Gazelle." When Rudolph returned to the United States, she learned that Tennessee's

segregationist governor, Buford Ellington, planned to head the delegation welcoming her home. Rudolph flatly refused to attend a segregated event. As a result, her victory parade and banquet were the first integrated events in her hometown of Clarksville.

Following her Olympic career, Rudolph became a track coach at DePauw University and served as a mentor to other African American athletes, including Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Rudolph died in 1994 after a battle with brain cancer. Rudolph believed her greatest accomplishment was the Wilma Rudolph Foundation, a non-profit organization she created that promotes community based amateur sports programs. Rudolph understood the importance of overcoming adversity to achieve her goals; she once said, "Winning is great, sure, but if you are really going to do something in life, the secret is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick up after a crushing defeat, and go on to win again, you are going to be a champion someday."

## Dolly Parton

Dolly Rebecca Parton was born on January 19, 1946, in Sevier County, Tennessee. Parton grew up surrounded by traditional Appalachian music. Her professional career began at age ten when her Uncle Bill Owens helped her land a spot on Cas Walker's radio show in Knoxville; only a year later Parton recorded her first single, "Puppy Love." In 1959, Parton made her first appearance at the Grand Ole Opry. Parton moved to Nashville after graduating from Sevier County High School in 1964.

In Nashville, Parton found success as a singer and songwriter. Unlike many artists, Parton understood the importance of protecting the rights to the songs she wrote or co-wrote. The U.S. Copyright Office has over eight hundred sixty two copyrights registered to Parton. Parton gained fame in 1967 with the release of her first full length album *Hello, I'm Dolly* and her addition to the cast of the popular Porter Wagoner Show. The mid 1970s saw Parton reach new heights of success with hits such as "Jolene," "I Will Always Love You," and "Love is Like a Butterfly."<sup>201</sup> In the 1980s Parton appeared in a number of films, including the hit *9 to 5*, which also featured Parton singing the title track. During this period, Parton's music shifted from its country roots and she had several crossover hits in the pop charts. Parton became an investor in a theme park, Dollywood, in Pigeon Forge. Parton's career as a songwriter had an unexpected boost when Whitney Houston recorded Parton's song "I Will Always Love You" for the film *The Bodyguard*. In the 1990s Parton returned to her country roots and recorded several critically acclaimed bluegrass albums.

Throughout her career Parton has generously supported a number of charities in her local community; most notably, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which provides free books for children in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. Since its creation in 1995, the Imagination Library has mailed over one hundred and seven million

free books to children. Parton also serves as the honorary chairperson of the Dr. Robert F. Thomas Foundation which seeks to improve access to high quality medical care for Sevier County residents. The foundation assisted in the creation of a state-of-the-art hospital in 2010 which includes the Dolly Parton Birthing Unit. Following the wildfires that devastated parts of Sevier County in 2016, Parton created the Mountain Tough Recovery Team which provided financial assistance for those affected by the wildfires.

In 2004 Parton accepted the Living Legend Medal from the Library of Congress and in 2006 she was recognized for her achievements in the arts by the Kennedy Center. Parton received the Willie Nelson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Country Music Association and she continues to write and record songs as well as playing an active role in a number of charities.

## Al Gore Jr.

Albert Arnold Gore Jr. was born on March 31, 1948 in Washington, D.C. His father, Albert Gore Sr., served as a United States Senator from Tennessee. As a child, Gore spent most of the year in Washington, but spent his summers on the family farm near Carthage, Tennessee. Gore graduated from Harvard University in 1969 and volunteered for military service. He served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971. After returning to Tennessee in 1971, Gore spent five years working as an investigative reporter for the Nashville Tennessean.

In 1976 Gore was elected to the United States House of Representatives; he was reelected in 1978, 1980, and 1982. In 1985, Gore was elected to the Senate seat vacated by Howard Barker. Gore ran for president in 1988, but lost the nomination to Michael Dukakis. While in the Senate, Gore pushed for the passage of the High Performance Computer and Communication Act which greatly helped to expand the Internet. Gore remained in the Senate until Bill Clinton chose him as his running mate in 1992; that same year Gore also published *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. Gore served two terms as Clinton's vice president and announced his intention to run for president in 2000.

The election was marked by a number of controversies particularly in Florida where Gore's opponent George W. Bush's brother Jeb was governor. Gore clearly won the popular vote, but not the Electoral College. After the Supreme Court ruled that it would not order another recount of the vote in Florida, Gore conceded the election to Bush.

Since the 2000 presidential election, Gore has been involved with a number of media and technology ventures. He serves as an advisor to Google and serves on the Board of Directors of Apple Computers. In 2005 Gore's television network, Current TV debuted, and the network was sold to Al-Jazeera in 2013 for a reported five hundred million dollars. In 2006, Gore's crusade against global warming was featured in the book *An Inconvenient*

*Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It* and the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The following year, Gore testified before Congress on the need to stop global warming. He was also co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in global warming in 2007. Gore has continued to remain active in politics and environmental causes. He met with President Trump in 2017 to discuss climate change issues. He also issued a new edition of his book *The Assault on Reason: Our Information Ecosystem, From the Age of Print to the Age of Trump*.

## Oprah Winfrey

Oprah Winfrey was born in rural Kosciusko, Mississippi on January 29, 1954. Winfrey's teenage mother could not care for her, so Oprah lived on a farm with her grandmother until she was six. Winfrey was sexually abused by several family members beginning at the age of nine. At fourteen, she became pregnant as a result of the abuse and gave birth to a son who died shortly after his birth; Winfrey was then sent to live with her father in Nashville where she excelled in speech and drama and won a scholarship to Tennessee State University.

Just before starting college, Winfrey began her broadcasting career reading the news on a local radio station. Winfrey dropped out of college to take a job as a news anchor at WLAC in Nashville. In 1976, Winfrey moved to Baltimore where she hosted *People Are Talking*, a daytime talk show. Her success in Baltimore led to a move to Chicago in 1984 where she took over *AM Chicago* which was quickly renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and nationally syndicated. The show became a phenomenon and spawned careers for many people associated with it including Dr. Phil McGraw. Oprah's Book Club pushed many books to the top of the bestseller list and brought about a renewed interest in book clubs nationwide.

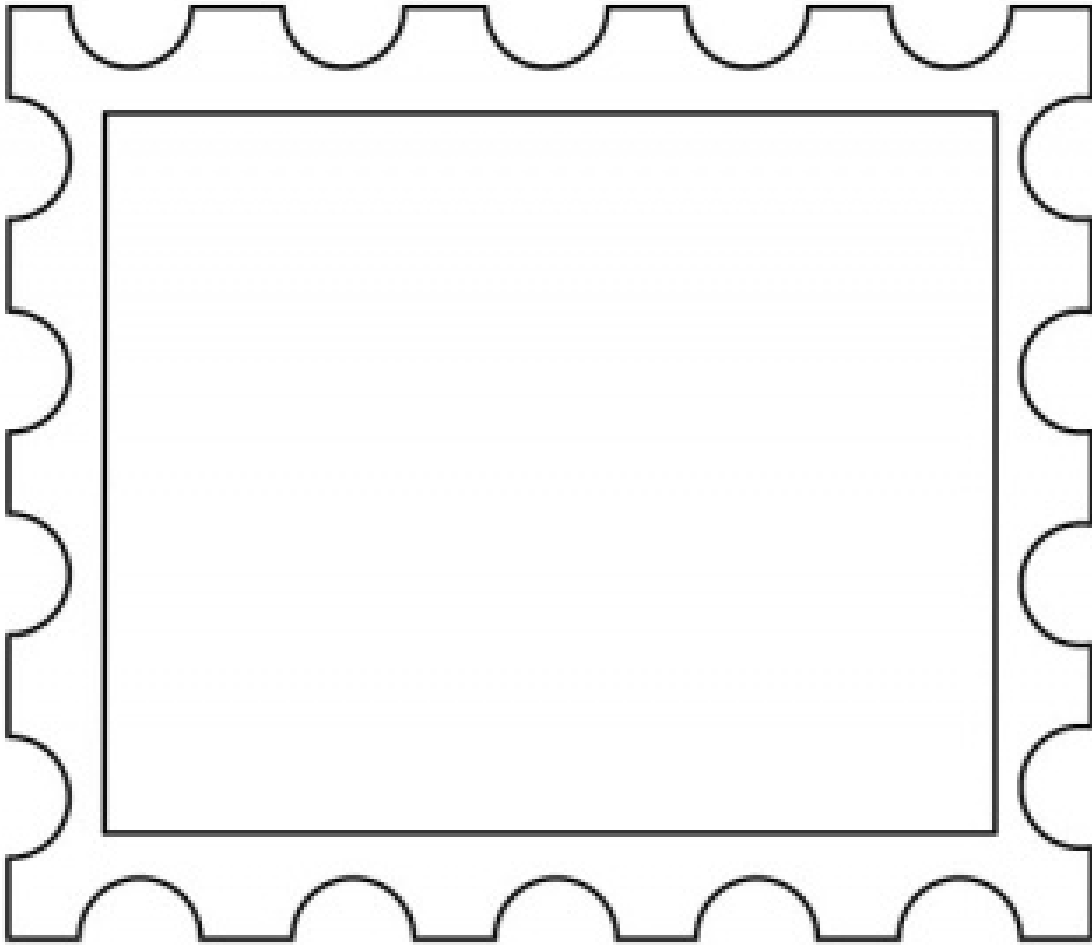
Winfrey ended her successful talk show in 2011 in order to pursue other projects including OWN television network and her acting career. Winfrey has appeared in a number of films including 1985's *The Color Purple* for which Winfrey received an academy Award Nomination for Best Supporting Actress. Most recently Winfrey has acted in *The Butler*, *Selma*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Winfrey, a multi-billionaire, has donated over fifty million dollars to a variety of charitable programs. Most recently, Winfrey donated five hundred thousand dollars to the "March for Our Lives" rally organized by students from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School following the shooting that took seventeen lives. Winfrey tweeted "These inspiring young people remind me of the Freedom Riders of the '60s who also said we've had ENOUGH and our voices will be heard." Winfrey has also become involved in politics. She campaigned for Barack Obama during his successful run for the presidency. At the

University of South Carolina, over twenty-nine thousand supporters filled the football stadium to hear Winfrey speak. In 2018, Winfrey sparked rumors about a possible political career of her own following the response to her powerful speech at the Golden Globes Awards.

# Famous Tennesseans

Select the Tennessean from the essay you believe most deserves to have a postage stamp created in his or her honor. Create the stamp below. Below the image, explain why the person deserves to have a stamp in his or her honor.



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