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## Clarence Muse

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## Clarence Muse

FEBRUARY 7, 2019 BY [PAMELA G SMITH](#)

**185**  
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Clarence Muse was born on October 7, 1889. He grew up in Baltimore, and at his mother's urging, entered Dickinson Law in 1908, as Dickinson Law's first African American student. Muse, however,



felt the theater calling, and left his pursuit of a career in the law to pursue acting. He performed first in New York and later in Chicago before he was lured by Hollywood with an offer to appear in the film *Hearts in Dixie*, one of the first full-length feature films with sound and one of the first, if not *the* first, to feature a predominantly African American cast. Muse loved theater and he was not initially sold on the idea of appearing in a "talkie" or going to Hollywood. Therefore, he demanded what was an "outrageous" sum of money at the time, \$1,250.00 per week. He got it, so Muse went to Hollywood.

Earning the nickname, "The Dean of Black Actors," Muse appeared in over 200 films during his career. His film credits include *Huckleberry Finn* (1931), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934), *Way Down South* (1939), *Invisible Ghost* (1941), *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), *Porgy and Bess* (1959), and *The Black Stallion* (1979), which would be his last film appearance. Although Muse was criticized later in life for having taken on stereotypical servant roles during his acting career, the criticism did not seem to bother him. "I have no sad story to tell," he was quoted as saying, in reference to his life. Furthermore, contrary to his critics, Muse was a strong advocate for better roles for African Americans, often suggesting roles to the writers he worked with.

In addition to his successful acting career, Muse was a writer, composer, director, and singer. Muse's best known song, "When It's Sleepy Time Down South," was made famous by Louis Armstrong. Muse also worked with the likes of Frank Capra, Bing Crosby and Bela Lugosi, just to name a few. Of his Hollywood connections, Muse said, "Me and Frank Capra were as close as father and son. I had a cup of coffee and doughnut with John Wayne every morning. Wallace Beery was a tough son-of-a-gun with everybody, but we were friends." Over the course of his life, Muse received numerous awards and commendations for his contributions to the arts and humanities. In 1972, Muse received an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from Bishop College in Dallas, Texas for his contributions. Among his other achievements, Muse was also one of the founders of the Screen Actors' Guild, and he was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1973.

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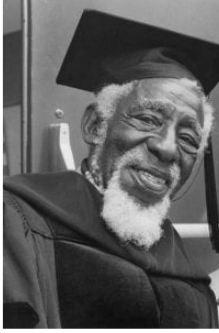
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Muse was 88 years old, on June 3, 1978, when The Dickinson School of Law presented him with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. Muse traveled to Carlisle to accept the degree. He attended the annual alumni/senior class dinner where he entertained the audience with tales from his days as a student at Dickinson Law, before singing "When It's Sleepy Time Down South."

Muse, in multiple interviews, credited his time at Dickinson Law, and [Dean Trickett](#) in particular, with this phrase, which became his philosophy in life: "I never met a man or woman who had enough intelligence to insult me."

Clarence Muse passed away in October 1979, shortly after his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Law Library maintains a framed display of photos of Clarence Muse at the circulation desk.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Clarence Muse is also featured in another *Keeping It Brief!* post from 2017, and in Burton Laub's book, *The Dickinson School of Law - Proud and Independent*.

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