

# Georgia Ann Hill Robinson

The LAPD's First African American Policewoman

IN MAY 1928, policewoman Georgia Robinson stepped between two drunken women in the city jail and attempted to break up their fight. She remembers little about what happened next. One of her colleagues remembered that one of the girls grabbed Robinson and smashed her head repeatedly against the bars of the cell. A newspaper report said that an inmate shoved keys into her eyes. Whatever the case, Robinson—"Robbie," as her coworkers always called her—suffered a detached retina, for which there was no surgery available at that time. She went blind in her left eye, but she went back to work as usual. Within months, though, Robinson lost sight in her right eye as well. Doctors called it "sympathetic blindness." She later told a reporter that she had no regrets about the loss of her sight. "I didn't need my eyes any longer," Robinson said. "I had seen all there was to see."

And she had. Georgia Ann Hill Robinson was the first African American woman hired by the LAPD, and one of the first hired by a formal police force in the United States. She was sworn into the force in November 1916, as a jail matron. There were only four other women on the force at that time, all white. While acquiring this position on the LAPD would be Robinson's best-known achievement, it was just the first of many "firsts" for her; it was another one of those inaugural missions that brought her to LAPD's attention in the first place.

Born in 1875 to a struggling family in Landry Parish, Louisiana, Robinson was raised by her mother and then, after her mother died, by an older sister. Later, when the sister could no longer support her, she boarded at a convent school. She got a ride west with a white family when she was eighteen and landed in Kansas, where she worked as a governess. There she met Morgan Robinson.<sup>1</sup> We don't know how they met, but Georgia later recalled that they had married two weeks after becoming acquainted. Shortly thereafter, the pair moved to Leadville, Colorado, where Morgan got a job with Carbonate National Bank. Daughter Marian was born in 1906. The (Topeka, Kansas) *Plaindealer* wrote about the young couple:

Mr. Morgan Robinson holds a responsible position in the leading bank of the town. He is a Leavenworth boy, and his wife enjoys the distinction of being the first woman delegate from that portion of

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**FIGURE 1** Georgia Ann Hill Robinson with her daughter, Marian, c. 1914. Robinson and her husband built this house at 969 S. Mariposa Avenue in Los Angeles.

Photo from personal collection of Nancy Rene.

the state to a political convention. She is a Creole by birth, well versed in political economy—courageous and stands for clean politics. Mrs. Robinson defends the rights of all and is quick to resent a distinction on color. She believes in fostering good and wholesome [*sic*] thoughts for the uplift of humanity. We wish there were thousands like her in all parts of this country and the race would be greatly benefitted by their presence, and suffer [fewer] outrages.<sup>2</sup>

The family moved to Los Angeles in 1912, where Morgan landed a coveted job at Los Angeles Trust and Savings as a porter—one who walked cash deposits between bank branches. He came with excellent references, having done similarly in Colorado, bringing silver straight from the mines to the bank. That job required him to carry a sidearm, which was almost unheard of for a black man at that time.<sup>3</sup> The Robinsons rented a few houses before building one at 969 S. Mariposa Avenue, which remained their family home for the rest of their lives. Morgan eventually became a cashier at Los Angeles Trust and Savings, and then a manager.

Even though Morgan earned consistent pay, Georgia had no interest in staying home all day and immediately set about creating and volunteering with several African American women's cultural and civic clubs (she would eventually rise to prominent levels in the NAACP and Sojourner Truth, among others). "She knew," says granddaughter Nancy Rene, "that they had to keep doing things to make themselves—and the lives of other black women—better." One of these organizations was the Phys-Art-Lit-Mor Club, which was in its third year of existence in 1915. "When some LAPD officers came out to ask members for help," said Rene,

“they asked who would be interested in becoming a matron at the city jail, and my grandmother simply raised her hand and that was that.”<sup>4</sup> At that time, policewomen were expected to be thirty to forty-four years of age (Robinson was thirty-six), to be married, and to hold a college degree in teaching or nursing (Robinson held one in nursing). But at first, Robinson was neither paid nor trained—the matron position was strictly a volunteer one. And yet she felt that this was her opportunity to help young girls and women before they lost all chance of becoming useful and happy members of society. She did start receiving pay a year later, and on June 10, 1919, she was sworn in as a “regular policewoman.”

**LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT**

**Juvenile Report**

One Copy Each For the  
Commanding Officer and  
Identification bureau.  
Two copies for Juvenile  
bureau.

MAKE THREE EXTRA Carbon Copies and deliver all four to office of Captain Commanding Division.  
Give detailed account, giving names and addresses of witnesses, etc.

It is important that the following blanks are filled in.  
Pay particular attention to spelling of names.

**OFFICE COPY**

To Captain Murray Los Angeles, Cal., 416- 1918  
Division Commander

I respectfully report as follows, in regard to:

Grace Marshall of No. 228 Hewett St.  
Name of Child (Get Correct spelling from child) Address of Child

Age 16 years, on March 30 1918 Lives with Mamie Corrales Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Last Birthday Name of Guardian

Father's Name Henry C. Marshall of No. Phonix Ariz St.  
Address of Father

Mother's Name Ella Corrales of No. Ariz St.  
Address of Mother

Party Wronged \_\_\_\_\_ of No. \_\_\_\_\_ St.  
Owner of goods stolen, Premises burglarized, Etc. Address of party wronged

This child, on April 10th 1918 at 11 P.M., did  
Date of Offense Hour of offense

in company with Elizabeth Miller went to a show and when she returned this girl stood out in the sign of her house and disturbed the peace of the neighborhood. found her there when I got there this girl has received letters from boys telling her they want to marry her. she thinks they had done.

Value of Property stolen \$ \_\_\_\_\_ This child is not Confessed or Denied \_\_\_\_\_ the charge in this report.

This child says is not now on Probation to \_\_\_\_\_ Name of Probation Officer

In custody Jew Hall Signed Edward G. Robinson  
Where Arresting Officer.

14004

**FIGURE 2** While working as a matron for the LAPD, Robinson often wrote reports such as this one, which concerned a young girl who may have been without proper supervision.

Photo from personal collection of Nancy Rene.

John Thomas, chief of the Department of Safety at the University of Southern California and a retired veteran LAPD officer, came across the story of Georgia Robinson while working as an aide to former chief Bernard C. Parks (1997–2002). Parks tasked Thomas with finding photos of notable African American officers who had served on the force. This project led Thomas to the Police Historical Museum, where he found curled, dusty photos of officers going back as far as the turn of the twentieth century. There was little information accompanying the images of these officers, and in some cases the information there was wrong. For example, it was once common knowledge that the first African American officer slain on the job was Oscar Joe Bryant, who was killed in the line of duty on May 13, 1968. While researching more about Bryant in old *California Eagle* and *Los Angeles Times* articles, Thomas discovered that this distinction actually belonged to a man killed forty-five years earlier: Charles P. Williams was shot to death while working Central Vice on January 13, 1923. Thomas also came across a story about Gail Ryan in a 2001 *Los Angeles Times* article. Ryan, a thirty-two-year veteran of LAPD, started as a jail bookings officer and retired as an auto theft detective. She then took it upon herself to become the unofficial historian for the LAPD. The story about Ryan mentioned that she had interviewed Nancy Rene about her grandmother's experiences as America's first sworn, black, female officer.

Thomas was dismayed to find that there was no accompanying information about these officers, and he became determined to find their stories. He headed to the Los Angeles Library's Special Collections department and started interviewing colleagues and retired LAPD members. Thomas interviewed Rene as well, and pored through departmental archives to find out more about what Robinson's working environment must have been like. "Back then," he said, "the department was segregated along racial lines, just like everywhere else. (Black officers) could not drive patrol cars at night. They worked in the same offices (as white officers), but those white colleagues would not speak to them outside the building. They were well respected in their communities, but not so much in their own department." Though not always followed, there were laws on the books in the State of California that prohibited black officers from arresting white people.<sup>5</sup> Robinson was not allowed to carry a firearm or handcuffs—and always maintained that she had no desire to do so. She spoke with such authority and physicality that she never had a problem showing her badge and asking a man or woman to get on a streetcar with her so that she could take them to jail, since she was not allowed to drive.<sup>6</sup>

Robinson's bosses tasked her, specifically or tacitly, with investigating juvenile homicide and abuse cases on her own. "My grandmother was most certainly hired to deal with the rising number of black prostitutes in Los Angeles," says Rene. "The LAPD did not want white officers, male or female, to have to directly deal with black juvenile or adult female offenders. But that was okay with her. She saw herself in these girls and women, not because she was once like them, but because she so easily could have been." Robinson felt lucky, Rene says, because she had received such a strict and complete education, by way of her Sisters of Mercy schooling back in Louisiana.

For the next dozen years, Robinson dealt with both commonplace and horrific crimes. She returned countless runaways to their homes—except in those cases when she felt it was too awful to subject the child to that home anymore. There were plenty of orphanages at that time—places where both white and black children would languish forever—but



**FIGURE 3** Officer Georgia Ann Hill Robinson, c. 1920.

Source: Photo from personal collection of Nancy Rene.

there was no foster care system. Thus, Robinson would sometimes simply bring arrestees home with her, to live with her family until a suitable home could be found among friends or until the girl or young woman could find a job and get back on her feet. Additionally, Robinson coached children, teens, and women about how to be more articulate if they had to testify on their own behalf in court. On more trying days, the policewoman

had to separate women and children from violent relatives or figure out a safe way for those on drugs and alcohol to detox.

Unlike present-day members of the force, who are organized into carefully structured specialties and response units for specific kinds of crimes, Robinson was responsible for any number of situations that might arise on a given day, and she even pushed the boundaries of her informal job description. At midnight on September 18, 1918, Robinson was the first person on the scene when two streetcars crashed head-on into each other at Main Street and Broadway. She singlehandedly carried two injured women to an automobile she had commandeered (which hurried the women to a nearby hospital) and then continued helping others rescue injured passengers.<sup>7</sup> On June 13, 1919, near Pershing Square, the policewoman noticed a young (white) lady who fit the description of a purported kidnapping victim, thought to be in the possession of “white-slavers.” She followed the girl to an apartment building, whereupon Robinson made some inquiries and discovered that the youth was living as a married woman and claiming her age as twenty. Robinson took her and the young man posing as her husband into custody, after which they were returned to juvenile authorities in their hometown.<sup>8</sup>

It was Robinson who administered first aid to a juror who collapsed in court on September 7, 1927. A month later, she made her fourth “rescue” of a baby from a Boyle Heights home—the kidnapper being eight-year-old Hazel Oden. Robinson finally got Oden into juvenile hall for treatment of what she knew to be some form of “mother complex.”<sup>9</sup> And until the day she died, Robinson had nightmares about searching for the kidnapped Marion Parker, twelve-year-old daughter of the prominent banker Perry Parker. The details are not clear (this was not the type of information discussed freely with young children in the 1920s), but Robinson was said to be one of the police officers who found Parker’s naked and butchered body.

Robinson always managed to keep her home life on track as well. In June 1922, a week before daughter Marian was set to graduate from Los Angeles High, Georgia found out that black students were not allowed to walk through the ceremony and processional with their peers but, instead, had to pick up their diplomas from the school office. Robinson went to the office of Principal W. H. Housh, and although her daughter never found out exactly what transpired there, Marian and her friends not only were invited to walk the processional—Marian was asked to lead it.

When Marian was subsequently admitted to UCLA along with a few other black teens, Robinson could see immediately that these young people would need extra support to make it through not only the rigors of academics, but also the challenges of being black in a mostly white university. She formed the Delta Mothers to make sure these young students got the emotional, nutritional, and academic reinforcements they needed to succeed in college. Somehow, she also found time to serve as the first treasurer of the local NAACP.

After collecting her pension in 1929, Robinson threw herself back into her club activities and was active in anti-segregation efforts. For example, she spearheaded the campaign to end “The Inkspot,” a place on Venice Beach designated for blacks only (working closely with H. Claude Hudson, head of the nation’s second-largest black savings and loan association and

first president of the NAACP's Los Angeles chapter). She redoubled her volunteerism with Sojourner Truth and with the Eastside Shelter for Women and Girls, which she had founded.

Thomas adds that the LAPD, and Los Angeles in general, changed quite a bit during Robinson's career. There was a rise in black nationalism, led in large part by W. E. B. Du Bois, who pronounced that Los Angeles was a place of greater opportunity than cities in the South. But L.A.'s attempts at diversity still had major challenges. For example, by the time Robinson retired, the LAPD had a quota for one hundred black officers. But no matter how many openings the force had at any given time, and no matter how many qualified people of color applied for those openings, the number of black officers hired never changed—it remained at one hundred or fewer until the late 1950s.

By hiring Georgia Robinson, the LAPD (purposefully or not) opened doors for many more women—especially those of color—to join a department that eventually would be one of the most diverse law-enforcement bodies in the world. In 1958, Robinson was given a plaque by Vivian Strange, the LAPD's first black female sergeant (promoted to that rank in 1950 and inspired by Robinson). For the most part, though, Robinson was focused less on enlarging the ranks of the LAPD and more on encouraging black women to become educated, to take



**FIGURE 4** Georgia Ann Hill Robinson was appointed to the force on July 25, 1916. On April 23, 1923, she and a group of policewomen from LAPD's Juvenile Division celebrated Chief Louis Oaks's first year in office. A number of other notable women stand behind her, including Alice Stebbins Wells, the nation's first female, regular patrol officer, and Claudia Proffitt, supervisor of girls in the LAPD's crime-prevention bureau.

Source: Los Angeles Police Museum.



**FIGURE 5** Georgia Ann Hill Robinson, c. 1950. Robinson’s civic-affairs workload remained ever high, even after she lost her eyesight and retired from the LAPD.

Source: Los Angeles Public Library.

care of their community, and to immerse themselves in civic and cultural affairs. Historian Gail Ryan, author of *Legendary Ladies of the LAPD: 100 Years of Women in Law Enforcement*, notes that Robinson was a unique woman who came along at the right time in history—when women were beginning to voice their rights openly—but was also ready to use her space in the public light to help lift those women and children in less fortunate situations. “From an orphan in a convent in Louisiana,” Ryan said, “to a teacher in Kansas, a mother in Colorado, a community leader in Los Angeles, a policewoman on the LAPD, and back to community leader later in life when blind, Georgia Ann Hill Robinson left her mark on her community and family by the time she died in 1961.”<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Interviews between the author and Nancy Rene, December 6, 2016, and September 26, 2017.
2. *Plainedealer* (Topeka, Kansas), August 14, 1903, 1. At this time, Robinson was a Silver Republican—one who supported a bimetalism economy, not uncommon in the western United States, where mining of silver and other metals was prevalent.
3. Morgan Robinson’s father had been a policeman in Kansas; it’s not clear whether he was allowed to have a weapon, but, in any case, the family was held in a position of esteem.
4. Interviews between the author and Nancy Rene, December 6, 2016, and September 26, 2017.
5. Interview between the author and John Thomas, December 19, 2017.
6. Interviews between the author and Nancy Rene, December 6, 2016, and September 26, 2017.
7. “Car Crash: Faulty Switch Cause of Main Street Wreck,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1918, 11.
8. “Vanished War Widow Found,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1919, 111.
9. “Fourth Kidnapping of Babies Traced to 8-Year-Old Girl,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1927, A1.
10. Written correspondence between Ryan and author, February 23, 2018. Gail Ryan, *Legendary Ladies of the LAPD: 100 Years of Women in Law Enforcement* (Tampa, FL: Faircount Media, 2010).