



## **Douglass Roach**

*Douglass Roach was an African American in a town where there were few people of color, but what really distinguished him, besides his athletic prowess, was his integrity.*

Harriet Jerusha Korim wrote a wonderful article about him in Provincetown Arts magazine in 1995. Much of the information here is based upon her research. Many of the people she interviewed are now gone. Without her work we would not know as much as we do about this local hero.

Douglass Roach was born in Provincetown in the family home on Conwell Street on June 1, 1909. According to Ms. Korim, the spelling of his name is probably a tribute to Frederick Douglass, the African American abolitionist leader and, "At Provincetown High School, Doug Roach shone as an athlete, and was chosen for the All Cape Team. His best friend, Chet Pfeiffer, was an exceptional wood carver and the two worked together on many projects, including the construction of at least two dune shacks.

After graduation in 1928, Doug attended Massachusetts Agricultural College, where he became an outstanding amateur wrestler. Returning to Provincetown, he gave at least one wrestling exhibition at Town Hall and traveled the county fair circuit. He had jobs as a carpenter, handyman, and merchant marine.”

### **The Spanish Civil War Breaks Out**

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936 many Americans were sympathetic. More than two thousand U. S. Citizens signed up to fight, one of these was Douglas Roach. Ms. Korim interviewed Alex Roach, Doug’s brother, and he recalled the feeling at the time, “That if they stopped it over there, it would save a lot of lives and save the Second World War from starting. A lot of people were on that side, but they wouldn’t go and fight. They didn’t have that strong a conviction.” Douglass Roach was one of those who felt strongly about the war and was willing to fight for his beliefs. He was among the first Americans to volunteer to defend the Spanish Republic against General Franco by joining the International Brigade as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in 1937.

Strong and quick, Doug Roach impressed those who served with him. Harriet Jerusha Korim quotes Oscar Hunter, a fellow member of Roach’s machine gun company who remembered digging trenches with him, “They said that when you’d get to the part of the trenches where Douglass and Oscar had dug, be sure to have a ladder, because you’re going to have to climb down.” Korim writes, “Roach often went for water and supplies for his comrades under heavy fire.” Roach suffered serious shrapnel wounds in the battle at Brunete, was treated at a makeshift Brigade hospital and furloughed to the States. When he got to New York, the State Department interrogated him and confiscated his passport before allowing him to return home to Provincetown. His brother Alex told Ms. Korim that he remembered when Doug returned home he was frail and that the shoulder and chest wounds he received from mortar fire at Brunete never completely healed.



“He died of pneumonia July 13, 1938, at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City. After a memorial service at the Mother AME Zion Church conducted by Benjamin Robeson, Paul Robeson’s brother, two Lincoln vets, Walter Garland and Paul Burns brought his body home to Provincetown,” Ms. Korim concludes. A memorial service was held in Provincetown in the Church of the Pilgrims, once located next to Town Hall. The church was crowded with friends, family, journalists and visiting dignitaries. Douglass Roach was buried with full military honors in the private family cemetery in back of the house where he was born. Doug Roach fought bravely for what he believed in and deserves to be remembered and honored.

The Roach family has a long history in the area. Alexander Roach, Douglass Roach’s father, came to Provincetown from St. Vincent, British West Indies, on a whaling vessel, as did many blacks that settled in Provincetown in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Members of his family still live in the area.