

Alverta Duff (1885-1968)

Alverta Duff was the oldest child of Peter Charles and Fannie E. Walker Duff. She was born on August 25, 1885 at 107 W. Poplar in Normal, IL. Her father Peter Charles Duff was born in Irwin, Perry County, Kentucky on July 15, 1856 to John and Edith Duff who were slaves. Peter, like most of his brothers and sisters, was born into slavery. Sometime in the early 1870s, a 14 year old Peter (and later some of his brothers and sisters) came to Normal, IL as part of the Kentucky Exodus after the Civil War. When he came to Normal, Jesse Fell, a well known and respected member of the Bloomington-Normal community, hired him. Duff would remain in Normal the rest of his life because of the opportunities he made with Fell.¹

Duff also learned the carpenter's trade in the 1880s.² He developed considerable skills as a carpenter and continued this career for the remainder of his life. In 1880 Duff purchased two lots of land from Fell and proceeded to build a house for his family in 1883.³ The house he built was located at 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal. It was a modified shotgun style house. As his family continued to grow (and also to reflect the latest styles and use of space), over the years he made significant renovations to the house which included adding indoor plumbing and a cistern pump in the kitchen.⁴

On Nov 22, 1883, he married Fannie E. Walker, who was born on January 31, 1865 in Madison County, KY. She was the daughter of Charles Walker and Julia Ann Hawkins Walker Green Handy, also both former slaves. Peter and Fannie Duff were one of the earliest African American families to establish themselves in Normal.

Alverta had been a sickly child and suffered from asthma all her life. She also learned to play piano and loved to sing. She graduated from Normal High School and attended Brown's Business College. After receiving training at Brown's, she became a bookkeeper at Casey Brother's Dyeing and Cleaning, located at 610 N. Main Street in Bloomington.

On November 1, 1918 Alverta and her sister Janie were summoned to Tulsa, Oklahoma where their sister Julia was a teacher. Julia had become ill with influenza during the time of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919. Alverta and Janie went to care for Julia and nursed her back to health. While Julia recovered, their sister Janie contracted the flu and later developed typhoid fever. Janie died on December 4, 1918 in Tulsa.

It has also been thought that Alverta was visiting Julia in Tulsa when the Tulsa Race Riot occurred in 1921. The three-day massacre began on May 31, 1921 mainly in the prosperous black neighborhood of Greenwood. Greenwood's population was about 15,000 and was famous for its cultural and financial achievements. It rivaled New York City as a national center of urban black life. A well-armed white mob had "razed thirty-six square blocks, burned to the ground more than 3,000 homes and killed as many as 300

¹ "Peter Duff," People Gallery, *Encounter on the Prairie* exhibit

² John Muirhead. *A History of African Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington, IL: Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, 1998) 23-24

³ Peter Duff vertical file, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁴ Muirhead, 23-24

people, many of whom were buried in mass graves or simply dumped anonymously into the Arkansas River.”⁵

In a letter written to a family member in Chicago, Illinois (and published in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper) a few weeks after the riot a woman, thought to be Julia’s sister Alverta, wrote about Julia Duff’s experiences during the riot. She stated that Julia came to her looking for a place to stay. The woman mentioned how Julia spoke of getting driven out of the home in which she was staying, which belonged to the Smart family. White rioters ordered her at gunpoint to put down her traveling bags but out of nervousness, Julia refused. They made her march away from her home and then proceeded to raid the building for sellable items. The woman wrote that after being awoken at 4am to the sound and sight of the rioters with their guns, Julia said that “her legs gave way from under her and she had to crawl about her room, taking things from her closet, putting them in her trunk, for she thought if anything happened, she’d have her trunk packed, and before she got everything in, they heard footsteps on their steps and there were six out there, and ordered Mr. Smart to march, hands up, out of the house.”⁶ Later, Julia wrote a letter that said, “I don’t know what would be best for me—to express my feelings, running like someone mad or screaming. All I can say is it is horrible! Not a decent home left in Tulsa, and the men look so forsaken! All those fine churches are destroyed.”⁷ Photos of the event taken by Julia were later found and donated to the McLean County Historical Society.

Alverta began working for the Adlai Stevenson II’s mother, Helen Davis Stevenson, when Adlai was a young boy, sometime between 1910 and 1915. Helen was Jesse Fell’s granddaughter and her father was William O. Davis. Alverta looked after the two Stevenson children, Adlai and his sister Elizabeth (Buffie). She worked for Mrs. Stevenson for 25 years off and on. She then continued her service as a housekeeper for Buffie until her retirement in the early 1960s.

Adlai mentions Alverta in his correspondence and letters even writing to her on occasion. Alverta also appears to have been very fond of Adlai having kept newspaper clippings and photos all throughout his political career.

Alverta was also very active in the communities of Bloomington and Normal. She was a member of various clubs and organizations throughout her life; the most famous of those clubs was the Three C Club of which she was a founding member. The Three C Club was founded on August 8, 1908 by a group of twelve African American women in Bloomington and Normal. The purpose of this social club was to have meetings and invite their friends to discuss issues that African American women dealt with everyday. The twelve-member club was based on Christian service and sought to inspire younger women who would follow them. The Three C Club was one of the oldest social clubs for women established in this area.

In the later years of her life she kept close track of Adlai’s political career even changing her vote from Republican to Democratic when Adlai ran for president against Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. Alverta was so confident that he would win; she was

⁵ “Tulsa, 1921,” *The Nation*, August 23, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20010820/1921tulsa>

⁶ “Personal Letter Describes Suffering of Women in Riot,” *Chicago Defender*, May 25, 1918, page 14, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁷ Julia Duff Evergreen Cemetery Walk folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives

quoted to have said to Adlai “if they don’t make a good cup of coffee at the White House, you let me know and I’ll come make some coffee for you.”

Not long after Adlai died in 1965 Alverta’s health began to deteriorate even more than it had been for the past few years. Since Alverta had never married nor had children of her own, her sister Julia moved back home the last few years of her life, most likely to help care for her. Alverta passed away on November 16, 1968 at the age of 83 in the same home where she grew up, 107 W. Poplar. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

Alverta had six brothers and sisters. The following information is a brief biography on her brothers and sisters who were also quite outstanding members of the African American community of Bloomington and Normal.

John Walker Duff—Walker, as he was known, was born on March 15, 1888. He had been an outstanding athlete in high school and had attended Illinois State Normal University for a short time. He served in World War I at the Battle of Meuse-Argonne in the 802nd Pioneer Infantry, Company F of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. He held the rank of Private 1st Class during this battle and when he was discharged on July 1919 he was a Corporal. He married Rea Portia Harris. Following the war, he worked as a clothes cleaner and then a headwaiter at an exclusive club in Ohio. He died on March 5, 1931.

Jane “Janie” May Duff-- Janie was born on November 7, 1891. She also attended Normal schools and received two diplomas from the American Red Cross for First Aid and Elementary Hygiene and Home Care of the Sick. She and Alverta went to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1918 to care for their sister Julia, who had contracted the flu during the 1918-1919 Flu Pandemic. After Julia had recovered, Janie contracted the same flu, and later developed typhoid fever. She died several weeks later on December 4, 1918 and was buried in Normal.

Rollie C. Duff—Rollie was born on October 17, 1893. He was a prominent and promising athlete and attended Normal schools and ISNU for a time. He worked at Ward’s Grocery Store. He contracted typhoid fever and died on April 3, 1912 in Normal.

Julia Edith Duff—Julia was born on June 5, 1895. She attended ISNU studying to be a teacher. She taught in Kansas and Oklahoma schools for 25 years as a domestic science teacher. She was captain of the women’s faculty basketball team in Tulsa, where she did the majority of her teaching. Later in her life, she was also matron of the Geneva Girls School in Geneva, Illinois. In 1921 Julia was in Tulsa, Oklahoma when organized white mobs burned down the African-American neighborhood of Greenwood. Her letter and a letter purported to have been written by her sister Alverta were published in the *Chicago Defender*. The letter recounted Julia’s experiences during this horrific event. Julia retired from teaching in 1965, and moved back to live in Normal to care for her sister Alverta. She died on July 18, 1984 at the Shamel Manor Nursing and Retirement Home in Normal.

George T. Duff—George was born on September 6, 1896. He was a basketball and football player while attending Normal High School. He was a skilled plumber and lived most of the time in Chicago, Illinois. He was also a basketball player for the Wabash Basketball Five in Chicago. He died on August 7, 1941.

Cordelia A. Duff—was born on August 30, 1899 and died the same day. The cause of her death is not known.

By: Candace Summers, 2005