

## 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 in the house her father built at 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal, Illinois. Her mother Fannie was born in Madison County, Kentucky on January 31, 1865. She was the daughter of Charles Walker and Julia Ann (Hawkins) Walker, who were both formerly enslaved. Alverta's father Peter was born on July 15, 1856 in Irwin, Perry County, Kentucky to John and Edith Duff who were at the time enslaved. Peter, like most of his brothers and sisters, was born into slavery. But, sometime in the early 1870s, a 14-year-old Peter (and later some of his brothers and sisters) came to Normal as part of the Kentucky Exodus following the U.S. Civil War.

Peter came to Normal by 1873 and was hired by Jesse Fell, a businessman, landowner, and acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln known for helping found a number of Central Illinois communities—including Normal—as well as Illinois State Normal University. Peter would remain in Normal the rest of his life because of the opportunities he had working for Fell.<sup>1</sup> Peter was encouraged to learn the carpenter's trade by Fell and developed considerable skills as a carpenter—a career he continued for the remainder of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Working as a carpenter helped Peter's fortunes improve, which allowed him to purchase two lots of land from Fell in 1880. Three years later, Peter married Fannie Walker on November 22, 1883 and built a house for his family on the land he had purchased.<sup>3</sup> The modified shotgun style house he built is still located at 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal.<sup>4</sup> As his family continued to grow (and also to reflect the latest architectural styles and use of space), Peter made significant renovations to the house over the years, including adding indoor plumbing and a cistern pump in the kitchen.<sup>5</sup> The Duff family was one of the earliest Black families to establish themselves in Normal.

Alverta, the first born of the Duffs' seven children, had been a sickly child and suffered from asthma all her life. But that did not stop her from learning to play the piano and singing. She graduated from Normal High School and then 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. It is not known why Alverta's employment at Casey Brother's Dyeing and Cleaning ended, but sometime between 1910 and 1915 Alverta began working for Helen Davis Stevenson, mother of Adlai Stevenson II, when Adlai was a young boy. Helen was the granddaughter of Jesse Fell, and her father was William O. Davis. Alverta was hired principally as a caregiver for the two Stevenson children—Adlai and his sister Elizabeth (Buffie). In total, Alverta worked for Helen Stevenson off and on for about 25 years. Alverta then continued her service as a housekeeper for Buffie until her retirement due to health issues in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Peter Duff," People Gallery, *Encounter on the Prairie* exhibit; Greg Koos and Marcia Young. "Peter C. Duff: Craft as Biography," in *Material Culture*, Vol. 25. No. 3, 1995, 36.

<sup>2</sup> John Muirhead. *A History of African Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington, IL: Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, 1998) 23-24; Koos and Young, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Duff vertical file, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Muirhead, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Muirhead, 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> "Stevenson Maid Recalls Old Days," *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1965.

Early on in her career working for the Stevensons, in later October 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 Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919, so Alverta and Janie went to care for her and nursed her back to health.<sup>7</sup> However, while Julia recovered, Janie contracted the flu, which developed into typhoid fever. Janie died on December 4, 1918 in Tulsa.<sup>8</sup> Her body was brought back to Bloomington for burial in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in the Duff family plot.

It is also believed that Alverta was visiting Julia in Tulsa in 1921 when the infamous Tulsa Race Massacre occurred. The two-day massacre began on May 31, 1921 in the prosperous Black neighborhood of Greenwood, which numbered 15,000 people. This neighborhood, often referred to as “Black Wall Street,” was famous for its cultural and financial achievements, rivaling New York City as a national center of urban Black life.

On May 30, a 19-year-old Black man named Dick Rowland was accused of assaulting 17-year-old Sarah Page, a white girl who operated an elevator in the Drexel Building in Tulsa. Details of the incident remain unclear, but accounts of the event circulated among the city’s white community throughout that day and became more exaggerated with each telling. Tulsa police arrested Rowland on May 31 and began an investigation. An inflammatory report published in the *Tulsa Tribune* on May 31, stating that a “*black man had tried to rape a white woman,*” fueled a confrontation between crowds of Black and white armed civilians surrounding the courthouse where the local sheriff and his men tried to protect Rowland from a lynch mob of 1,000 white men who had gathered outside. Shots were fired and the outnumbered African Americans began retreating to the Greenwood District, followed by the white mob.<sup>9</sup>

In the early morning hours of June 1, Greenwood was looted and burned by white rioters. The well-armed white mob razed 36 square blocks of buildings, looted hundreds of homes and businesses, and killed as many as 300 Black citizens, many of whom were buried in mass graves or simply dumped anonymously into the Arkansas River.”<sup>10</sup> Many residents of Greenwood were herded into the streets, including Alverta’s sister, Julia.

As a result of the massacre, about 10,000 Black people were left homeless, and property damage amounted to more than \$1.5 million in real estate and \$750,000 in personal property (equivalent to \$32.65 million in 2020). Between June 14, 1921 and June 6, 1922, Tulsa residents filed riot-related claims against the city for over \$1.8 million dollars (which would be over \$27 million in 2021).<sup>11</sup> All of these claims, with the

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<sup>7</sup> “Normal Notes,” *The Pantagraph*, October 28, 1918; “Untitled,” *Chicago Defender*,” November 2, 1918.

<sup>8</sup> “Death of Jane Duff,” *The Pantagraph*, December 6, 1918.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Richardson, “Witness to Disaster,” *The Pantagraph*, February 11, 2011; Paul Lee, “The Day Greenwood Burned,” *Essence Magazine*, May 2001.

<sup>10</sup> “Tulsa, 1921,” *The Nation*, August 23, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20010820/1921tulsa>; Brakkton Booker, “Tulsa Searches for Victims of 1921 Race Massacre at New Site,” <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/10/19/925351263/tulsa-searches-for-victims-of-1921-race-massacre-at-new-site>, Date Accessed, January 5, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Andre Perry, Anthony Barr, and Carl Romer, “The true costs of the Tulsa race massacre,” <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-true-costs-of-the-tulsa-race-massacre-100-years-later/>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

exception of one, were denied by the city commission. The only claim that was obtained was by a white resident who received compensation for guns taken from his shop.<sup>12</sup>

Many survivors left Tulsa, while Black and white residents who stayed in the city largely kept silent about the terror, violence, and resulting losses for decades. The massacre was largely omitted from local, state, and national histories until recently.

In 1997, 75 years after the massacre, a bipartisan group in the state legislature authorized the formation of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.<sup>13</sup> The commission's final report, published in 2001, states that the city had conspired with the mob of white citizens against Black citizens; it recommended establishing a program of reparations to survivors and their descendants, establishing a scholarship fund to students affected by the Tulsa Massacre, establishing an economic development zone in the historic area of the Greenwood District, and the creation of a memorial for the reburial of any human remains found in the search for unmarked graves of massacre victims.<sup>14</sup>

Since this report was published, several of the recommendations have come to fruition. In 2018, the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park was dedicated in the Greenwood District in Tulsa. The park is named after Dr. John Hope Franklin, a distinguished historian, educator, and civil rights advocate whose father witnessed the massacre and survived.<sup>15</sup> In 2001, the Oklahoma legislature passed the "1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconciliation Act," which created the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship program. This act authorized each Tulsa public high school to nominate annually up to two high school seniors who meet certain eligibility criteria. The scholarships are intended to help preserve awareness of the history and meaning of the civil unrest that occurred in Tulsa in 1921.<sup>16</sup> Schools in Oklahoma added the Tulsa Race Massacre to the state academic standards in 2002, but the reference was vague and did not guarantee that teachers would include the topic in their classroom instruction. Finally, in 2020, teachings on the massacre officially became a part of the Oklahoma school curriculum.<sup>17</sup>

Ten days after the massacre, the *Chicago Defender* (a Black newspaper) printed a moving account of the tragedy, a letter written by two Black women to an unidentified

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<sup>12</sup> Larry O'Dell, "Riot Property Loss," *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 145, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Compiled by Danney Goble, "Final Report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921," *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 1, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> "Official Recommendations of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission," *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 20a-b, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> "John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/places/oklahoma-john-hope-franklin-reconciliation-park.htm>, Accessed August 12, 2021; "About Us," The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation, <https://www.jhfccenter.org/reconciliation-park>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> "Tulsa Reconciliation Scholarship Program Nomination Form 2020-21," <https://resources.finalseite.net/images/v1583442482/tulsaschoolsorg/zco82xcpndsowwggqd7a/TulsaReconciliationScholarshipNominationForm.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Nuria Martinez-Keel, "A Conspiracy of silence: Tulsa Race Massacre was absent from schools for generations," *The Oklahoman*, May 26, 2021.

family member in Chicago. Fortunately, the wealth of details contained in the letter make it possible to identify the authors. “E.A.,” the main author, was Alverta Duff. Her sister, only identified as “Julia,” was Julia Duff. In the letter, Alverta wrote that Julia came to her looking for a place to stay. She 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 Julia at gunpoint to put down her traveling bags but out of nervousness, Julia refused. They made Julia march away from her home and then proceeded to raid the building for sellable items.<sup>18</sup>

Alverta wrote that Julia had been awakened at 4:00 a.m. to the sound and sight of the rioters with their guns. Julia reported to her sister 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.*”<sup>19</sup> In the postscript, Julia added, “*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.*”<sup>20</sup> Photos of the event taken by Julia were donated to the McLean County Museum of History as part of the Duff Family Collection.

Alverta’s sister Julia remained in Oklahoma, while Alverta returned to her work for the Stevensons in Normal. Adlai Stevenson and Alverta had a special bond, which is evident through Adlai’s later correspondences. He mentions Alverta in his letters and wrote directly to her on occasion.<sup>21</sup> One particular letter that Adlai wrote to Alverta in 1953 admonished her for not joining the family reunion for the holidays that year. Adlai proclaimed that he was mad at her for not coming, as she would have “made our family reunion complete!”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Adlai never failed to visit Alverta when he visited Bloomington-Normal. His last visit to her was over the Christmas holiday in 1964. Alverta recalled that they sat in her living room and visited for about 45 minutes. She said Adlai brought his two sons, John and Borden, with him, “who were fine boys just like their father.”<sup>23</sup> Alverta was very fond of Adlai, having kept newspaper clippings and photos of his activities all throughout his political career. They remained close friends and correspondents until Adlai’s death in 1965.

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. In a 1965 interview, shortly after Adlai’s funeral, Alverta recalled that when he was running for president, he came to the train station in

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<sup>18</sup> “Personal Letter Describes Suffering of Women in Riot,” *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1921, page 14, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Duff Evergreen Cemetery Walk folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Adlai E. Stevenson II to Mrs. Lewis G. Stevenson and Mrs. Ernest L Ives, July 30, 1934, ed. Walter Johnson and Carol Evans, *The Papers of Adlai E. Stevenson, Volume 1, 1900-1941* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1972) 260.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Adlai E. Stevenson II to Alverta Duff, December 24, 1953, ed. Walter Johnson and Carol Evans, *The Papers of Adlai E. Stevenson, Volume III Governor of Illinois, 1949-1953* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974) 304.

<sup>23</sup> “Stevenson Maid Recalls Old Days.”

Bloomington during a whistle stop tour. “Everyone went down to the station to greet him, and he got me up on the platform and gave me a flower lei to hang around his neck.” Alverta was so confident that Adlai would win; she was quoted to have said to him, “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.”<sup>24</sup>

Not long after Adlai Stevenson died in 1965, Alverta’s health began to deteriorate even more than it had been for the few years before. Since Alverta had never married, nor had children of her own, her sister Julia moved back home the last few years of Alverta’s life, most likely to help care for her.

Before falling ill, Alverta was very active in the Bloomington-Normal community. She was a longtime member of Third Christiaan Church in Normal, where she served as clerk and Sunday school superintendent for several years.<sup>25</sup> She was also a member of various clubs and organizations—the most famous of those clubs being the Three C Club.<sup>26</sup> The Three C Club was founded on August 8, 1908 by a group of twelve African American women (including Alverta) in Bloomington and Normal. The purpose of this social club was to host meetings and invite their friends to discuss issues that African American women dealt with every day. 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.<sup>27</sup>

Alverta Duff passed away on November 16, 1968 at the age of 83, in the same home where she grew up, 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal. Her funeral was held on November 19 at the Stubblefield Funeral Home, with Rev. A. E. Hursey officiating.<sup>28</sup> She is buried in the Duff family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

Alverta had six brothers and sisters. The following information is a brief biography on her brothers and sisters who were also notable 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 802<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Infantry, Company F of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. He held the rank of Private First Class during this battle; and when he was discharged in July 1919, he was a Corporal. He married Rea Portia Harris. Following the war, he worked as a clothes cleaner and then as 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. Janie 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

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<sup>24</sup> “Stevenson Maid Recalls Old Days.”

<sup>25</sup> “Miss Alverta Duff, 83, Dies at Home,” *The Pantagraph*, November 18, 1968.

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Graybill, “Jesse Fell helped a black settler to a better life,” *The Pantagraph*, November 29, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Unknown author, “The History of the Three C Club—Bloomington, Illinois,” Bloomington-Normal Black History Project Collection, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

<sup>28</sup> “Miss Alverta Duff, 83, Dies at Home.”

later developed typhoid fever. She died several weeks later on December 4, 1918 and was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

**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. Julia and her sister Alverta penned a joint letter about their experiences during that horrific event, which was published in the Black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*. Julia retired from teaching in 1960 and moved back to Normal to care for her ailing sister Alverta. Julia 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.

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

*For more information about the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, please visit the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum's website <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/> or the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>.*

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