

Lue Anna Brown Sanders Clark (1892-1992)

In 1984, a group of local citizens realized how important it was to preserve the history of African Americans in Bloomington-Normal. Thus, the **Bloomington-Normal Black History Project** was born. Five years later, this group partnered with the McLean County Museum of History to gather and preserve materials relating to the stories of African Americans in the area. Lue Anna Brown Sanders Clark was a founding member of that group. Her life story, told through five oral history interviews, was preserved by this project. Below is the story that she told.

Lue Anna Brown was born on January 26, 1892 in the rural area of Bandana, Kentucky, to William and Laura Brown. She was the third of four children born to the couple. Her father had been born into slavery and had served as a **houseboy** on his **enslaver's** Tennessee plantation. He had few memories of his mother, as she was sold away when he was very young. William was ten years old when slavery ended in 1865.

Anna, as Lue Anna was commonly called, was born in a two-room house. It had no electricity or running water, so the family used kerosene lamps, a well, and an **outhouse**. One room was used as a kitchen, the other served as the bedroom. It also had an upstairs, which was used for storage. Anna's mother passed away when she was five years old. Her older sister, Hattie, helped her father raise Anna. Anna remembered her father was a strict man who emphasized the value of work. William Brown worked as a **sharecropper** on ten acres of land outside of town. For extra income, he also worked for other nearby farmers **hoeing** tobacco and making **lard**. Despite the fact that he could not read or write, William always had enough money to support his family and owned his own home.

While living in Bandana, Anna attended a one-room **segregated** school. The school year was only six months so children could help on the farms. Anna didn't like her teacher, who she remembered liked music, but "outside of that, he didn't care whether you learned or not."

Anna later moved in with her sister's family in Pulaski County, Illinois, where she again attended school. She remembered that during her first year there she didn't have any books. Anna said that she "just had to copy off some of the kids' books at school." She was a very good student and received an award from the Pulaski County Public Schools for being a "wide awake" student and for "regular attendance and punctuality." She attended school until the eighth grade, but did not continue on to high school. It wasn't until years later in 1936, that Anna received her diploma stating that she had "completed the Course of Study prescribed by Law for the Common Schools of Illinois."

In 1916, a 24-year-old Anna boarded a train for Bloomington to take a housekeeping job that a friend had arranged for her. "I got off the train and went right to my job," she recalled. She cooked, cleaned, and did a little washing and ironing for Albert and Anna Kitchell, who lived on Washington Street. She worked every day, with a half-day off on Thursday and Sunday.

Then in 1917, Anna married her first husband, Isaac "Ike" Sanders. Ike was from Arkansas and moved to Bloomington in the 1890s. Throughout his life in Bloomington, he owned and operated several businesses. The year before their marriage, he had opened a restaurant called The Working Man's Club of the City of Bloomington. It was also known as The Working Men's Social Club or Colored Men's Club. The Club was open seven days a week from 7:00 a.m. until midnight, and provided "rooms, recreation and food." At first, men had to join for \$1.00 per year, but later everyone just came. It had a barbershop, and pool hall, as well as food and rooms for overnight guests. Anna and Ike worked as partners. They worked long hours at the Club, which left them precious little time just for the two of them. What time they did have was usually spent during early mornings taking walks together. Ike was well-liked and everyone knew him. He served both black and white customers, and people came from all over time to **patronize** his establishment. Unfortunately, late in 1919, the building the restaurant was in was sold, and the new owner did not want to renew their lease. So the Club closed, which Anna remembered saddened Ike greatly. He died in 1929.

After the Club closed, Anna went to work as a women's **restroom attendant** at Livingstons, a department store in downtown Bloomington, where she worked until 1931. Her job there was to maintain the restroom, keep it stocked with supplies, and even sometimes watch the children of shoppers.

Unfortunately, Anna was **laid off** from her job, along with many other employees, when the **Great Depression** occurred, as there was no money to pay them for their work.

Around 1936, Anna began working at the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School in Normal. This home was for needy children whose fathers had served in the Army or Navy of the United States military during any war. She worked there for 22 years in different positions including the laundry, kitchen, and hospital areas. She retired from the Home in 1958.

In 1934, Anna began renting a home near Illinois State Normal University. While she rented this home, she also began **boarding** African American students who were attending ISNU. At the time, black students could not live on campus or eat in any campus dining facilities. Anna housed up to eight students at a time, usually men. She didn't allow girls around when the men were there because she said, "they made a lot of trouble if the girls were around." The young men that stayed with Anna managed for themselves. They shopped, cooked, and cleaned according to a rotating schedule that they hung above the stove. They paid her \$2.50 a week for rent (which in 2017 would be equivalent to \$43.86).

Anna's boarding house career ended in the early days of World War II when all her boarders left for the military around the same time. Fortunately, they all survived the war and went on to become physicians, teachers, artists, and community leaders. As Anna remembered, "They all made good. They had it hard, but they made good." Perhaps it was Anna's help that made that possible.

During the war, Anna was a member of the Fred Hutchinson Club, which supported overseas troops. She remembered writing to a young soldier named John White, who was from Bloomington and stationed in North Africa. She recalled him being "just a youngster" who would "tell me about how beautiful the flowers were there and how everything was." The club met monthly, and shipped candies and cookies to soldiers at Christmas time. The club also served as chaperones for a group of 50 girls, whom they accompanied to a military base in western Illinois for a party and dance. In 1943, Anna was elected the group **chaplain**.

In 1949, Anna married Alonzo Clark, who had worked as a janitor and had previously been a railroad **porter** for the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio Railroad. Ironically, he had been a daily customer at the Working Man's Club 30 years earlier. The couple moved into his home on Taylor Street in Bloomington. In 1964, the house caught fire and was badly damaged. During repairs, Anna and Alonzo moved in with a neighbor. Sadly, the night before they were to move back into their own home, Alonzo died. Anna remained in the Taylor Street home until shortly before her death in 1992.

Retirement didn't slow Anna down. She called it the best part of her life. She traveled and visited almost every state. She opened a small chair **upholstery** business in the basement of her home after learning how to upholster by taking classes at the YWCA. She took hat-making classes at Bloomington High School, assisted a 4-H group of girls, and—at the age of 89—competed in her first cooking competition at College Hills Mall. She was a member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, and a member of the Order of the Eastern Star, a **masonic** organization.

Lue Anna Brown Sanders Clark passed away at the age of 100 on April 4, 1992 at Heritage Manor in Normal. Her funeral was held at Mt. Pisgah, and she is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What differences do you see between life as Anna experienced it and how life is experienced today? What has changed and what is still the same? Be specific.