Sisters from Normal endured Tulsa Race Massacre, wrote account
Candace Summers
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Julia Duff (left) Born and raised in Normal, Illinois, Julia moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma by November 1918 and began teaching home economics at the Booker T. Washington High School in the Greenwood District of Tulsa. Alverta Duff (right) was Julia’s older sister. She is believed to have been visiting in Tulsa when the race massacre occurred.

Residents of McLean County have witnessed many salient moments in history, including tragedies. One truly horrific blemish on our nation’s history—the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, which happened 100 years ago this week—was experienced by two sisters, Julia and Alverta Duff, both born and raised in Normal, Illinois.

Julia and Alverta were daughters of Peter and Fannie Duff. Peter was born into slavery and came to Normal from Kentucky in the years following the United States Civil War to seek a better life. When he arrived in Normal in the early 1870s, he was hired by Jesse Fell, a well-known and respected member of the Bloomington-Normal community. The Duff family was one of the earliest Black families to establish themselves in Normal.

Education was important to the Duffs. Julia enrolled at Illinois State Normal University in 1912 intending to complete a three-year program in home economics. Alverta attended Brown’s Business College and, upon completion of her training, became a bookkeeper at Casey Brother’s Dyeing and Cleaning in Bloomington. Alverta was the only one of her brothers and sisters who was able to find a job in Bloomington-Normal because racial discrimination against African Americans was strong.

Because she was Black, Julia was not allowed to teach in white classrooms in McLean County. So, she left Bloomington-Normal to find opportunities that were greater in larger cities for African Americans. Julia moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma by November 1918 and began teaching home economics at the Booker T. Washington High School (located in the city’s segregated Greenwood section, so named for the main street that ran through it).
After the First World War, Tulsa was recognized nationally for its affluent African American community known as the Greenwood District. This thriving business district and surrounding residential area (with some 15,000 residents) was referred to as “Black Wall Street.” The events that took place from May 31 to June 1, 1921 nearly destroyed the entire district.

On May 30, a 19-year-old Black man named Dick Rowland was accused of violating 17-year-old Sarah Page, a white girl who operated an elevator in the Drexel Building in Tulsa. Details of the incident remain unclear as to whether Rowland simply stumbled into her, or worse. Accounts of the incident 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 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 sheriff and his men tried to protect Rowland from a lynching mob of 1,000 white men outside the building. Shots were fired and the outnumbered African Americans began retreating to the Greenwood District, followed by the white mob.

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, looted hundreds of homes and businesses, and killed as many as 300 Black citizens. And the attack on “Black Wall Street” included the first aerial bombing of a U.S. city. Many residents of Greenwood were herded into the streets, including Julia Duff. It has also been thought that her sister Alverta was visiting when the massacre occurred, but that remains unclear.

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 family member in Chicago. Fortunately, the wealth of details contained in the letter made it possible to identify the authors. “E.A.,” the main author, was Alverta Duff. Her sister, only identified as “Julia,” was Julia Duff. According to the letter, Julia, who was too shaken to document the account herself, provided two short emotional postscripts. 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 she stayed in, which belonged to the Smart family. White rioters ordered Julia at gunpoint to put down her traveling bags, but she refused. They made Julia march away from her home and then proceeded to raid the building for sellable items. 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.” 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.”

Despite this horrific experience, the rioters did not scare Julia away and she continued to teach at Booker T. Washington High School when it reopened that fall. After having taught in Tulsa for 15 years, Julia resigned from her position in 1934 and returned to Normal. In June 1935 she earned her degree from ISNU.

Julia and Alverta’s eyewitness accounts of this disaster will be featured on the 27th annual *Evergreen Cemetery Walk* this fall, in honor of the 100th anniversary of this tragedy. Dates for the Walk are Saturdays and Sundays, September 25-26 and October 2-3 with performances at
11:00 a.m. and 2 p.m. each day. For the most up-to-date information on the Walk, visit mchistory.org.

The Museum and our community owe a debt of gratitude to filmmaker, historian, and freelance writer, Paul Lee; local Black history historian Jack Muirhead; and Greg Koos, who was Executive Director of the Museum at the time of the discovery. Without their efforts, the story of Julia and Alverta Duff’s experiences during the Tulsa Massacre would have remained hidden.

Lee was working on a documentary about Black pioneers of the West when he found the Duff sisters’ letter published in the Chicago Defender. Lee’s search for these unnamed witnesses to the Tulsa Massacre provided the Museum and McLean County with a rare glimpse into the life of one family, and the life of a community, region, people, and time.