Julia Duff (1895 – 1984)

Julia Edith Duff was born on June 5, 1895 in Normal, Illinois the daughter of Peter Charles and Fannie Walker Duff. Her parents came to Normal from Kentucky in the years following the American Civil War to seek a better life. In Normal, Peter worked as a carpenter for Jesse Fell and also attended Illinois State Normal University. Julia had three brothers: John Walker, Rollie C., and George T, and two sisters: Alverta and Jannie May. One sister, Cordelia A., died at birth. The family resided at 107 West Poplar Street in Normal, a house that Peter built himself in 1883 on a lot which he had obtained from Jesse Fell.

People described Julia as strict, proper, and precise. She was also known to be jolly, witty, and to smile a lot but was more reserved than her sister Alverta. Education was important to the Duff family and Julia enrolled at ISNU in 1912 intending to do a three-year program in home economics. However, she did not graduate from ISNU until later in her life. At ISNU Julia was a member of the YWCA and Wrightonia. In the 1915 ISNU yearbook the quote next to her name stated: “Her brothers are some athletes and she’s some student, believe me, always thinking!”

During her childhood, hostilities towards African Americans began to grow locally and nationally. In 1890 293 African Americans lived in Normal making up 9 percent of the population. After 1900 the number began to decline. Reginauld Whitaker, a close friend and distant relative of Julia’s, recalled walking down the street in the 1930s and hearing rude, racist remarks directed towards him. Prejudice caricatures began appearing in the pages of the Daily Pantagraph, and the Ku Klux Klan was very active in McLean County, setting a large cross on fire along the railroad tracks in an effort to scare black rail workers. African American students could not even live on the ISNU campus and had to board at houses around campus like the Duff’s. It was hard for Julia and her brothers and sisters to find work in the community as it steadily grew more segregated. Except for Alverta, they all left town in search of work.

On June 18, 1918 Julia was a domestic science teacher in Topeka, Kansas. She then moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma sometime after this but before November, 1918 and began teaching home economics at the Carver School. On November 1, 1918 Alverta and her sister Janie were summoned to Tulsa, Oklahoma where 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. However, while Julia recovered their sister Janie contracted the flu and later developed typhoid fever; Janie died on December 4, 1918 in Tulsa.

Several years later, Julia became a witness to the many tragedies of the Tulsa Race Riot. The three-day massacre began on May 31, 1921 mainly in the prosperous black neighborhood of Greenwood which numbered 15,000 people. This neighborhood was famous for its cultural and financial achievements, rivaling 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 people, many of whom were buried in mass graves or simply dumped anonymously into the Arkansas River.”

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, probably Julia’s

---

1 The Index, 1915, page 66, McLean County Museum of History Archives
sister Alverta, described her experience 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. The home 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.”3 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.”4 Photos of the event taken by Julia were donated to the McLean County Museum of History as part of the Duff Family Collection.

The riots did not scare Julia away and she continued to teach at Booker T. Washington High School. After having taught in Tulsa for 15 years, Julia resigned from her position in 1934 and returned to Normal. In June of 1935 she finally earned her 4-year degree from ISNU. It was noted that Julia was a life member of the Omicron Sigma chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority. She was a Pioneer Sponsor of the sorority and had helped establish their national headquarters in 1953. On April 8, 1962 she made a $100 contribution to the sorority which would equal about $685 in 2008.

In 1941 Julia was back living in Oklahoma in the town of Sandsprings, located outside of Tulsa. She may have also been a teacher while living there. Then from 1958 to 1959 Julia was the matron at the Illinois State Training School for Girls in Geneva, IL. However, after only teaching there for a year, she resigned her position to return to Normal to care for her sister Alverta who had become ill. She continued to live with her sister in the family home until Alverta died in 1968.

Julia was also a member of Third Christian Church which her father had helped build. At the church, Julia taught Sunday School and played organ for some time. After Third Christian Church disbanded in the 1960s, Julia became a member of the University Christian Church, also in Normal, IL and remained a member until she died some years later.

On July 18, 1984 Julia died at the age of 89 at Brokaw Hospital in Normal. It was noted that her mind had been failing and she had been relying on others to give her a good deal of help. She was residing at Shamel Manor Nursing and Retirement Home, located at 509 North Adelaide Street in Normal shortly before she died. Reverend James H. Turner officiated the graveside service which was held at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on July 21 of that year. She was buried in the family plot.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008
Edits and Revisions: Candace Summers, 2010

3 “Personal Letter Describes Suffering of Women in Riot,” Chicago Defender, May 25, 1918, page 14, McLean County Museum of History Archives
4 Julia Duff Evergreen Cemetery Walk folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives