

Alverta Duff (1885-1968)

Alverta Duff was born on August 25, 1885, the daughter of Peter and Fannie (Walker) Duff. Her parents came to Normal from Kentucky in the years following the United States Civil War to seek a better life. In Normal, Peter worked as a carpenter for Jesse Fell and also attended Illinois State Normal University (today called ISU). Alverta had three brothers and two sisters, and one sister who died at birth. The family lived at 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal, a house that Peter built himself in 1883 on a lot he had **obtained** from Jesse Fell. 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. Then, sometime between 1910 and 1915 Alverta began working for Helen Davis Stevenson, mother of Adlai Stevenson II, when Adlai was a young boy. 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.

In late 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. However, while Julia recovered, Janie contracted the flu, which developed into **typhoid fever**. Janie died on December 4, 1918 in Tulsa. 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.

In the early morning hours of June 1, Greenwood was **looted** and burned by white rioters. The well-armed white mob destroyed 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. Many residents of Greenwood were **herded** into the streets, including Julia.

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 amount 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. In the letter, Alverta wrote that Julia came to her looking for a place to stay. She mentioned how Julia spoke of being forced 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.

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.”*

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 mentioned Alverta in his letters and wrote directly to her on occasion. Additionally, Adlai never failed to visit Alverta when he returned to 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.”

In the later years of her life, Alverta kept close track of Adlai’s political career, even changing her vote from Republican to Democratic when Adlai ran for president against 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 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.”

Not long after Adlai Stevenson died in 1965, Alverta’s health began to fail. 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 Christian Church in Normal, where she served as clerk and Sunday school superintendent for several years. She was also a member of various clubs and organizations—the most famous of those clubs being the Three C Club. 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.

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. She is buried in the Duff family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

By: Candace Summers, 2005, edits and additions 2021.