

## **Julia Duff (1895 – 1984)**

Julia Edith Duff was born on June 5, 1895 in Normal, Illinois, 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). Julia 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.

People described Julia as strict, **proper**, and **precise**. She was also known to be happy, funny, and to smile a lot, but was more **reserved** than her sister Alverta. Education was important to the Duff family. After graduating from Normal High School, Julia enrolled at ISNU in 1912 **intending** to do a three-year program in **home economics**. However, Julia left school after earning a two-year teaching certificate, but did return years later to complete her bachelor's degree. At ISNU Julia was a member of the YWCA and the Wrightonia.

During Julia's childhood, **hostilities** towards African Americans began to grow locally and nationally. In 1890, 293 African Americans lived in Normal making up nine percent of the population. After 1900 the number began to decline. Prejudice caricatures began appearing in the pages of *The Pantagraph*, and the Klu Klux Klan was very active in McLean County, setting a large cross on fire along the railroad tracks in an effort to scare Black railroad workers in Bloomington. African American students could not even live on the ISNU campus and had to board at houses around campus like the Duffs'. 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, the Duff children were forced to leave town in search of work.

After spending one year as a **domestic science** teacher at the Kansas State Industrial and Educational Institute in Topeka, Kansas, Julia moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma and began teaching home economics at the Booker T. Washington High School (located in the city's segregated Greenwood section) in September 1918. She recalled that during her 15 years teaching at the high school, she had the pleasure of "trying to **implant** ideals and help direct" the training of economic usefulness into her female students. However, Julia found that too few of her students were willing to approach the work in the domestic sciences "as a science, but rather as **drudgery**."

In late October 1918, Julia's sisters Alverta and Janie were **summoned** to Tulsa where Julia had become ill with influenza during the **Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919**. Alverta and Janie went to care for Julia and nursed her back to health. However, while Julia recovered, Janie contracted the flu and later developed **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.

Several years later, Julia became a witness to the many tragedies of the **Tulsa Race Massacre**. 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.”*

Despite this horrific experience, the massacre 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 of 1935, she finally earned her four-year degree from ISNU.

In 1941, Julia was living in Sandsprings, Oklahoma, located outside of Tulsa. She may have also been a teacher while living there. From 1958 to 1959 Julia was the matron at the Illinois State Training School for Girls in Geneva, Illinois. 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 on Poplar Street in Normal until Alverta died in 1968.

Julia was a member of Third Christian Church in Normal, 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, and remained a member until her death.

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. She was residing at Shamel Manor Nursing and Retirement Home, located at 509 N. Adelaide Street in Normal shortly before she died. She is buried in the Duff family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

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