

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 U.S. 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: 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 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 jolly, witty, 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.¹ However, for financial reasons, Julia left school after earning a two-year teaching certificate, but did return years later to complete her bachelor's degree.² At ISNU Julia was a member of the YWCA and Wrightonia. In the 1915 ISNU yearbook, the quote next to her name states: "Her brothers are some athletes and she's some student, believe me, always thinking!"³

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. Reginald 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 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.⁴ 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.

In September 1917, Julia became a domestic science teacher at the Kansas State Industrial and Educational Institute in Topeka, Kansas.⁵ She taught there for about one year and then moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma 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) in September 1918.⁶ Julia 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."⁷

¹ ISNU Admission Data for Julia Duff, September 9, 1912, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

² Julia Duff oral history, May 1972, Duff Family Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

³ *The Index*, 1915, page 66, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

⁴ John Muirhead. *A History of African Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington, IL: Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, 1998), 41.

⁵ "Gets Good Position," *The Pantagraph*, September 5, 1917.

⁶ "Gets Good Position," *The Pantagraph*, September 16, 1918.

⁷ Resignation Letter of Julia Duff to Dr. Merle Prunty, Superintendent of Tulsa City Schools, March 19, 1934, Duff Family Collection McLean County Museum of History Archives.

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 1918-1919.⁸ Alverta and Janie went to care for Julia and nursed her back to health.⁹ However, while Julia recovered, Janie contracted the flu and later developed typhoid fever. Janie died on December 4, 1918 in Tulsa.¹⁰ 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.

On May 30, a 19-year-old Black man named Dick Rowland was accused of assaulting 17-year-old Sarah Page, a white girl who operated an elevator in the Drexel Building in Tulsa. Details of the incident remain unclear, but accounts of the event 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 published 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 local sheriff and his men tried to protect Rowland from a lynch mob of 1,000 white men who had gathered outside. Shots were fired and the outnumbered African Americans began retreating to the Greenwood District, followed by the white mob.¹¹

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 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.¹² Many residents of Greenwood were herded into the streets, including Alverta's sister, Julia.

As a result of the massacre, about 10,000 Black people were left homeless, and property damage amounted to more than \$1.5 million in real estate and \$750,000 in personal property (equivalent to \$32.65 million in 2020). Between June 14, 1921 and June 6, 1922, Tulsa residents filed riot-related claims against the city for over \$1.8 million dollars (which would be over \$27 million in 2021).¹³ All of these claims, with the exception of one, were denied by the city commission. The only claim that was obtained was by a white resident who received compensation for guns taken from his shop.¹⁴

⁸ "Normal Notes," *The Pantagraph*, October 28, 1918.

⁹ "Untitled," *Chicago Defender*, November 2, 1918.

¹⁰ "Death of Jane Duff," *The Pantagraph*, December 6, 1918.

¹¹ Scott Richardson, "Witness to Disaster," *The Pantagraph*, February 11, 2011; Paul Lee, "The Day Greenwood Burned," *Essence Magazine*, May 2001.

¹² "Tulsa, 1921," *The Nation*, August 23, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20010820/1921tulsa>; Brakkton Booker, "Tulsa Searches for Victims of 1921 Race Massacre at New Site," <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/10/19/925351263/tulsa-searches-for-victims-of-1921-race-massacre-at-new-site>, Date Accessed, January 5, 2021.

¹³ Andre Perry, Anthony Barr, and Carl Romer, "The true costs of the Tulsa race massacre," <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-true-costs-of-the-tulsa-race-massacre-100-years-later/>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

¹⁴ Larry O'Dell, "Riot Property Loss," *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 145, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

Many survivors left Tulsa, while Black and white residents who stayed in the city largely kept silent about the terror, violence, and resulting losses for decades. The massacre was largely omitted from local, state, and national histories until recently.

In 1997, 75 years after the massacre, a bipartisan group in the state legislature authorized the formation of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.¹⁵ The commission's final report, published in 2001, states that the city had conspired with the mob of white citizens against Black citizens; it recommended establishing a program of reparations to survivors and their descendants, establishing a scholarship fund to students affected by the Tulsa Massacre, establishing an economic development zone in the historic area of the Greenwood District, and the creation of a memorial for the reburial of any human remains found in the search for unmarked graves of massacre victims.¹⁶

Since this report was published, several of the recommendations have come to fruition. In 2018, the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park was dedicated in the Greenwood District in Tulsa. The park is named after Dr. John Hope Franklin, a distinguished historian, educator, and civil rights advocate whose father witnessed the massacre and survived.¹⁷ In 2001, the Oklahoma legislature passed the "1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconciliation Act," which created the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship program. This act authorized each Tulsa public high school to nominate annually up to two high school seniors who meet certain eligibility criteria. The scholarships are intended to help preserve awareness of the history and meaning of the civil unrest that occurred in Tulsa in 1921.¹⁸ Schools in Oklahoma added the Tulsa Race Massacre to the state academic standards in 2002, but the reference was vague and did not guarantee that teachers would include the topic in their classroom instruction. Finally, in 2020, teachings on the massacre officially became a part of the Oklahoma school curriculum.¹⁹

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 make 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 getting driven 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

¹⁵ Compiled by Danney Goble, "Final Report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921," *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 1, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

¹⁶ "Official Recommendations of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission," *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 20a-b, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

¹⁷ "John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/places/oklahoma-john-hope-franklin-reconciliation-park.htm>, Accessed August 12, 2021; "About Us," The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation, <https://www.jhfccenter.org/reconciliation-park>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

¹⁸ "Tulsa Reconciliation Scholarship Program Nomination Form 2020-21," <https://resources.finalseite.net/images/v1583442482/tulsaschoolsorg/zco82xcpndsowwggqd7a/TulsaReconciliationScholarshipNominationForm.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

¹⁹ Nuria Martinez-Keel, "A Conspiracy of silence: Tulsa Race Massacre was absent from schools for generations," *The Oklahoman*, May 26, 2021.

refused. They made Julia march away from her home and then proceeded to raid the building for sellable items.²⁰

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.*”²¹ 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.*”²² Photos of the event taken by Julia were donated to the McLean County Museum of History as part of the Duff Family Collection.

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.²³ 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 \$904 in 2021.²⁴

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. 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 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 N. 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 is buried in the Duff family plot.

Julia had six brothers and sisters. The following information is a brief biography on her brothers and sisters who were also notable members of the African American community of Bloomington and Normal.

²⁰ “Personal Letter Describes Suffering of Women in Riot,” *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1921, page 14, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Julia Duff Evergreen Cemetery Walk folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

²³ “I.S.N.U. Holds Outdoor Rites,” *The Pantagraph*, June 13, 1935.

²⁴ US Inflation Calculator, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>, Accessed August 12, 2021.

Alverta Duff—Alverta was born on August 25, 1885. She was the first born of the Duffs' seven children. 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 in Bloomington. 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, and then continued her service as a housekeeper for Buffie until her retirement due to health issues in the early 1960s. Adlai Stevenson and Alverta had a special bond, which is evident through Adlai's later correspondences. Alverta was very fond of Adlai, having kept newspaper clippings and photos of his activities all throughout his political career. They remained close friends and correspondents until Adlai's death in 1965. Alverta was very active in the Bloomington-Normal community. She was a longtime member of Third Christian Church in Normal, and was a member of various clubs and organizations—the most famous of those clubs being the Three C Club (of which she was a founding member). Alverta's health had always been fragile, and during the last few years of her life, her health began to deteriorate even more. Her sister Julia moved back to Normal to care for her until her death on November 16, 1968 at the age of 83.

John Walker Duff—Walker, as he was known, was born on March 15, 1888. He had been an outstanding athlete in high school and had attended Illinois State Normal University for a short time. He served in World War I at the Battle of Meuse-Argonne in the 802nd Pioneer Infantry, Company F of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. He held the rank of Private First Class during this battle; and when he was discharged in July 1919, he was a Corporal. He married Rea Portia Harris. Following the war, he worked as a clothes cleaner and then as a headwaiter at an exclusive club in Ohio. He died on March 5, 1931.

Jane "Janie" May Duff—Janie was born on November 7, 1891. She also attended Normal schools and received two diplomas from the American Red Cross for First Aid and Elementary Hygiene, and Home Care of the Sick. Janie and Alverta went to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1918 to care for their sister Julia, who had contracted the flu during the 1918-1919 Flu Pandemic. After Julia had recovered, Janie contracted the same flu, and later developed typhoid fever. She died several weeks later on December 4, 1918 and was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

Rollie C. Duff—Rollie was born on October 17, 1893. He was a prominent and promising athlete and attended Normal schools and ISNU for a time. He worked at Ward's Grocery Store. He contracted typhoid fever and died on April 3, 1912 in Normal.

George T. Duff—George was born on September 6, 1896. He was a basketball and football player while attending Normal High School. He was a skilled plumber and lived most of the time in Chicago, Illinois. He was also a basketball player for the Wabash Basketball Five in Chicago. He died on August 7, 1941.

Cordelia A. Duff—was born on August 30, 1899 and died the same day. The cause of her death is not known.

For more information about the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, please visit the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum's website <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/> or the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>.

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