

Jacksonville's Angel of Mercy

By Robyn N. Smith

One cousin argued that the new baby girl should be named Eartha. "Everything you get good comes from the Earth," the cousin proclaimed, and this child will "be a storehouse for the people." The grandfather, however, argued that she should be called Mary Magdalene, "after that woman in the Bible...that done so much good for everybody and anointed the body of our Lord Jesus Christ for His glorification." So in the effort to please her loved ones, Clara English White compromised and named her daughter Eartha Mary Magdalene White.¹ Little did she know how prophetic that name would prove.

Eartha M.M. White was born November 8, 1876, in Jacksonville, Florida, the youngest of thirteen children, but the only one to survive to adulthood.² Her mother Clara was born a slave in

1845 on the Harrison Plantation in Amelia Island, Florida.³ Clara's husband, Lafayette White, died only five years after Eartha's birth.⁴ But Clara was a tenacious woman, and she supported herself and her young daughter by working as a maid, a house nurse and an expert stewardess on the steamships that cruised up and down the St. Johns River.⁵ She worked for prominent families and companies, and was well-supported financially in her future endeavors by many of them.⁶ Young Eartha was indelibly influenced by her fervently religious mother and instilled with the values of education, Christian service and community service. Those ideals would go on to shape her entire life.



Eartha and her mother Clara

Roots of Knowledge

Jacksonville by 1900 was Florida's largest city, but most of the over 16,000 blacks in the city lived in poverty⁷. Life was not much different for blacks than in

¹ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," University of North Florida, *Selected Resources from the Collection* (<http://www.unf.edu/library/per/earsel.html>; accessed 30 Sep 2008), souvenir program, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance of the Useful Life of Eartha M.M. White", program by the Birthday Observance Committee of the Florida State Federation of Colored Women's Club's.

² "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance."

³ Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour of the Eartha M.M. White Historical Museum and Resource Center* (<http://www.clarawhitemission.org/history.html>; accessed 10 August 2008).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance."

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Crooks, James B., "Changing Face of Jacksonville: 1900-1910," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 62 (April 1984): 440-464, digitized copy courtesy of the State University System of Florida, Florida Historical

other Southern cities; racism and segregation were the order of the day. Power was in the hands of a white minority after a brief taste of political success by a few blacks during Reconstruction.⁸ Most blacks were employed in lower-class service occupations, but there existed a small middle class of teachers, ministers, some skilled workers and small businessmen. The Church was the cornerstone of black life and Eartha and her mother belonged to Bethel Baptist Institutional Church, the oldest black church in Jacksonville. Clara, in fact, had been one of its founding members.⁹

Eartha received her early education in Jacksonville.¹⁰ At the time, there were several segregated elementary schools, but there were no public high schools for blacks. However, four private schools for higher learning existed: Edward Waters College, Cookman Institute, Boylan Industrial School for Girls, and Florida Baptist Academy.¹¹ Eartha attended the Stanton school, the Cookman Institute (which later became Bethune-Cookman College) and the Florida Baptist Academy.¹²



Eartha in the Opera Co. (center bottom)

As a young woman, James Lloyd Jordan was the love of Eartha's life. James was a native of South Carolina and the two were engaged to be married when still in their teens. Sadly, James suddenly died in 1896, one month before their nuptials. Eartha was attending Florida Baptist Academy at the time. The pain of that early loss caused Eartha to be "married to the cause of Christ and His Kingdom, building for God and humanity at large."¹³

During a yellow fever epidemic of 1893, Eartha was sent to New

York City where she studied at Madam Hall's Beauty Culture School. She also studied music at the National Conservatory of Music. She even landed a job touring for a year with the Oriental American Opera Company and singing as a lyric soprano under the direction of James Weldon Johnson's brother, J. Rosamond Johnson.¹⁴ In 1896, she moved back to Jacksonville and subsequently

Quarterly Website (<http://fulltext10.fcla.edu/DLData/SN/SN00154113/0062-004/62no4.pdf>: accessed 6 Aug and 30 Sep 2008).

⁸ Bartley, Abel A. *Keeping the Faith: Race, Politics and Social Development in Jacksonville, Florida, 1940-1970*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 1, 7 and 8..

⁹ Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour*. See information about Clara and Eartha's church membership.

¹⁰ Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bartley, *Keeping the Faith*, p. 11.

¹³ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance". The entire story of Eartha's early lost love is recounted in these materials.

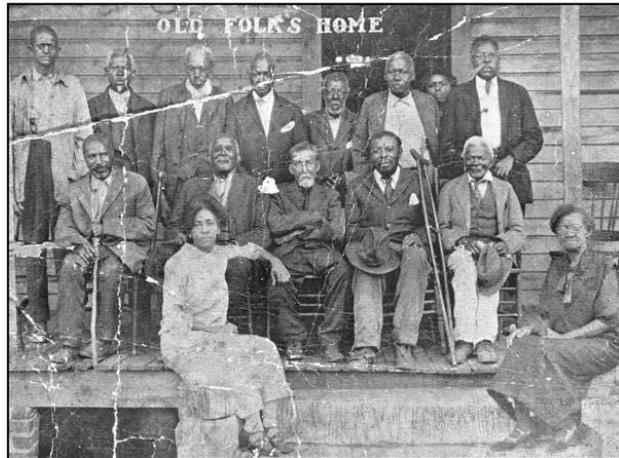
¹⁴ Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour*. The materials discuss Eartha's years in New York.

taught in the public schools for sixteen years.¹⁵ She later would become a Principal of Stanton High School.¹⁶

With this strong underpinning of education, Eartha became a savvy businesswoman. She would buy small operations, improve them and then sell them for a profit. Eartha bought and later sold a dry goods store, a taxi company, a steam company and a house cleaning operation, just to name a few of the businesses.¹⁷ She was even a licensed realtor.¹⁸ Although a successful businesswoman, her driving desire was to serve the community and much of the profits from her business dealings were poured into her numerous philanthropic activities.

A Life Well-Lived

A large fire devastated downtown Jacksonville in 1901; over 2000 buildings were destroyed and 10,000 people were left homeless.¹⁹ The downtown offices of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company, owned by the enterprising Abraham Lincoln (A.L.) Lewis, were right in the midst of the blaze. Eartha, the first female employee at the company, is credited with saving the company's



Eartha at the Old Folk's Home

records during the fire. She instructed a drayman to carry the records to her home outside the city. In gratitude, Mr. Lewis sold Eartha a very profitable piece of land at a reduced rate. Several of her businesses reside on that land today. A.L. Lewis would also prove a central figure to black Jacksonville, and he would go on to his own lasting fame and fortune.²⁰

Eartha's commitment and dedication to the poor and underserved seemed never-ending. Eartha reinvigorated the Union Benevolent Association, became President of the organization and began soliciting friends for donations. In 1902, Eartha and her mother Clara used those funds to build the Old Folks Home, a nursing home for the city's poor blacks.²¹ The Old Folks Home was the

¹⁵ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," University of North Florida, *Biography* (<http://www.unf.edu/library/sc/earbio.html>: accessed 30 Sep 2008).

¹⁶ Bartley, *Keeping the Faith*, p. 3.

¹⁷ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Biography*.

¹⁸ Bartley, *Keeping the Faith*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville."

²⁰ Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour*. The materials discuss Eartha's role in the rescue of A.L. Lewis company records.

²¹ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance." Materials cover the genesis of the Old Folks Home in depth with pictures.

predecessor of today's 125-bed Eartha M.M. White Health Care facility.²² In 1904, Eartha and Clara began doing mission work together, building on a soup kitchen Clara operated from her home starting in the 1880s. Shortly, the mission work had outgrown the residential home and was moved to a larger building on Ashley Street in Jacksonville. By 1932, it was renamed the Clara White Mission in honor of Eartha's mother who had died in 1920.²³ There's a wonderful story about when Eartha first went to a loan company to borrow \$300 to acquire the existing structure. The loan was approved but when she went to pick up the funds, since she was unmarried, she was told she needed a responsible male to endorse the loan. She quickly went to Bethel Church and got the janitor, William Bryant, to sign the loan papers for her.²⁴

A Lasting Legacy



The Clara White Mission

The Clara White Mission played an important role in Jacksonville's African-American community and though it was home to many different services over the years, Eartha was always most closely associated with its soup kitchen. The mission was located right in the middle of a poor and crime-ridden section of Jacksonville and provided an invaluable service to its community. In 1944, fire

destroyed the first building, so Eartha replaced it with a modern

structure. She paid the building off with the help of donations from friends and quietly expanded it to provide even more humanitarian services such as an orphanage, a home for unwed mothers, and a tuberculosis rest home. The mission also provided job training and Eartha provided rooms for homeless persons as well as released prisoners. Many black businesses resided in the building in the late 1940s; the owners of the Pittsburgh Courier published their Florida Edition from a room there. Many famous people, such as Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, Mary MacLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt visited Eartha at the Mission. Consistent with her selfless philosophy,

²² Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour*.

²³ *Ibid.* Materials cover the history of the Mission. Also see "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance" for more in-depth coverage as well as pictures.

²⁴ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance". The story of the Mission loan is recounted.

Eartha lived in a small room on the second floor of the building until her later years.²⁵

There were few service, social, political or professional institutions in black Jacksonville that Eartha was not a part of. She served on the Board of Directors for the Negro Welfare League, and was an active and influential member of the National Association of Colored Women, the Republican National Executive Committee and the Negro State Business League of Florida. She was active in both World Wars through the Red Cross and management of the War Camp Community Services. Beginning in 1926, Eartha did fundraising for Jacksonville's Community Chest, an organization focused on serving the homeless and ill. Eartha acted as financial agent for the Florida Normal and Industrial College in the 1930s and donated supplies to its students her entire life. In 1936, the College awarded her an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humanities degree. In 1941, she joined with A. Philip Randolph to protest job discrimination.

For over 40 years, Eartha counseled and served black men in prison in Duval County. Eartha established a program for delinquent boys and established the first public park for African Americans in Jacksonville. She was Florida's first black census taker and Jacksonville's first black social worker. In 1951, the Florida State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs threw a 75th Diamond Birthday extravaganza for Dr. Eartha M.M. White, celebrating her life's work. Testimonials came in from such luminaries as Senator Claude Pepper, Mayor Hayden Burns, Governor Fuller Warren, Mrs. Alfred DuPont and others. Amazingly, this is still only a partial list of Eartha White's accomplishments. Her only limit seemed to be her imagination, and her imagination seemed to be without limit. As can be seen, she earned the nickname, "Angel of Mercy."²⁶

By the end of her long life, at the age of ninety-seven on January 18, 1974, Eartha M.M. White was known as one of Jacksonville's premiere black educational citadels, humanitarians and one of its most successful businesswomen.²⁷ She garnered numerous awards and honors, even appointment to the President's National Center for Voluntary Action where she was received at the White House by President Nixon.²⁸ She became a one-woman powerhouse, whose impact on education, politics, the religious community, and society at-large was undeniable. Former Jacksonville Mayor, Hans Tanzier, said of Eartha: "At least



Eartha M.M. White

²⁵ Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour*. Materials cover various details of the Mission. Also see "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance."

²⁶ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Biography*; Clara White Mission, *A Self-Guided Tour*; "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Selected Resources*, "75th Diamond Birthday Observance". All of these resurces contain details of Dr. White's various activities through the years.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

once a month, she'd come to my office at City Hall...she would not be denied. She only came up to my waist, but she'd point that little finger at me and she'd tell me, 'God, has chosen you and you must do this, that and the other thing.' I called her my black angel...she lived for other people. Every nickel she could get went to help others."²⁹

Though Eartha never married nor had children, she used her life to emerge as one of Jacksonville's most cherished and powerful figures of the 20th century. She was an entrepreneur and a philanthropist who lived by her mother Clara's motto which serves as a reminder to us all: "Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, for all the people you can, while you can."³⁰

²⁹ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," University of North Florida, *Quotes From the Collection* (<http://www.unf.edu/library/sc/earquo.html>: accessed 30 Sep 2008).

³⁰ "Eartha M.M. White Collection," *Quotes*.