

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 would "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. Little did she know how prophetic that name would prove.

Eartha M.M. White was born November 8, 1876, in Jacksonville, Florida. She was adopted at a young age by Clara White, who was born a slave in 1845 on the Harrison Plantation in Amelia Island, Florida. Clara's husband, Lafayette White, died only five years after Eartha came into their home. 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. She worked for prominent families and companies, and was well-supported financially in her future endeavors by many of them. 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.

Roots of Knowledge

Jacksonville by 1900 was Florida's largest city, but most of the over 16,000 blacks in the city lived in poverty. Life was not much different for blacks here than in 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. Church was the cornerstone of black life and Eartha and her mother belonged to Bethel Baptist Institutional Church, the oldest black church in Jacksonville. Eartha, Clara and her father, in fact, had been some of its founding members.

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. Eartha received her early education in Jacksonville. 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



Eartha and Clara White

Florida Baptist Academy. Eartha attended the Stanton School, the Cookman Institute (which later became Bethune-Cookman College) and the Florida Baptist Academy.

As a young woman, the love of Eartha's life was James Lloyd Jordan. 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". During a yellow fever epidemic of 1893, Eartha was

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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. In 1896, she moved back to Jacksonville and subsequently taught in the public schools for sixteen years.

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. She was even a licensed realtor. 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. 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 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.

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. The Old Folks Home was the predecessor of today's 125-bed Eartha M.M. White Health Care facility, now called Summerbrook Nursing Home.

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. 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.

Lasting Legacy

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 damaged the building and the building was rehabilitated by the renowned architect H. J. Klutho. 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 Mercy Hospital, a tuberculosis rest home. The mission also provided jobs 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

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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, Eartha lived in a small room on the second floor of the building until her death.

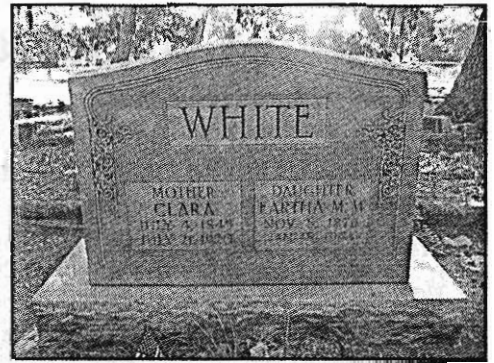
There were few service, social, political or professional institutions in black Jacksonville that Eartha was not a part of. She served on the Board of Directors for the National Negro Welfare League, and was an active and influential member of the National Association of Colored Women, the Republican 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, she 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."

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. 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. She became a one-woman powerhouse, whose impact on education, politics, the religious community, and society at-large was undeniable. Former



Grave marker in Old City Cemetery, Jacksonville, Florida, Section 6, Lot 52, Grave 2.

White; Mother, Clara, July 4, 1845, July 21, 1920; Daughter, Eartha M.M., Nov. 8, 1876, Jan. 18, 1974.

Jacksonville Mayor, Hans Tanzler, said of Eartha: "At least 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." The work of her Clara White Mission continues even to this day.

Though Eartha never married nor had children, she used her life to emerge as one of black 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." ❖