

'Nickle And Prayer' Tells Story Of South Carolinian Jane Hunter

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Winthrop College Archives

Jane Hunter, a native South Carolinian and prominent black social worker, thought of herself as a realist who had to work within the context of segregated early 20th century America.

Read her autobiography, "A Nickel and A Prayer," and one sees that she didn't want to alter the status quo. Hunter accepted the slogan "separate but equal" without question. She believed that was what blacks wanted and needed.

In her autobiography, Hunter used the educational system as an example: "In the groupings of people on a basis of nationality and race, there exists an opportunity for the development of group and race consciousness."

Jane Hunter was interested in the plight of black working girls, and she thought it best that they have a separate home of their own rather than seek admittance to a white establishment where they were not wanted.

She had left Charleston in 1905 for Cleveland, Ohio, and upon arriving, was immediately appalled by the bad housing and living conditions facing the city's young black females. She wrote in her autobiography about "The dark little rooms under the eaves, lumpy straw mattresses, dim gas lights, which had to be turned off at ten o'clock."

Hunter was worried that the lack of decent living quarters would affect the girls' health and lead to their exploitation. She was determined to provide them with a better life and applied herself totally to her goal.

Determination was a characteristic Jane Hunter had almost from the day she was born in 1882 on a plantation six miles from Pendleton. Her father, the son of a white plantation overseer and a black woman, was a South Carolina sharecropper.

Jane's father wanted her to have a good education, so he sold his farm to be near a school. He was even willing to work as a ditch digger and hog carrier.

Jane was 10 years old when her father died. Soon after, her life took a turn for the worse. She had to cook, clean, wash and iron for a white family of six.

By age 14, she had had three scant years of schooling, but Presbyterian missionaries gave her the opportunity to attend Ferguson and Williams College in Abbeville in 1895. Her autobiography revealed that her mother forced

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her into a loveless marriage with Edward Hunter, who was 40 years her senior.

But after 15 months she left him and began a life that took her from nursing in Charleston to social reform in Cleveland. She was just 17 and family friends found her a place as a nurse's aide in the home of attorney Benjamin Rutledge of Charleston.

Hunter took two years of nurse's training with some of the leading physicians in Charleston. Wanting to continue her training at a larger institution, she entered the Dixie Hospital and Training School for Nurses at the Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1904.

Hunter then migrated north in search of a job. She had difficulty finding a satisfactory position until she met the secretary to the physician of John D. Rockefeller.

By this time Hunter was very aware of the need for an institution to help other black women coming to Cleveland looking for work. So she called a meeting that led to the organization of a Working Girls' Home Association (later renamed Phyllis Wheatley Association) in 1911.

At first the institution's work was supported by the small contributions of its 80 sponsors and by the faith and hard work of Jane Hunter. By January 1913, it looked as though the entire program would fail. Hunter had managed to raise only \$500.

But she did obtain a large grant from John D. Rockefeller and the association's work accelerated.

In 1924 for example, the Phyllis Wheatley Association gave 27,247 nights of lodging to 1,201 girls in Cleveland; found employment for 7,239; enrolled 7,815 in cooking, sewing, gymnastics and study classes; and served 46,170 meals in the dining room and cafeteria.

Hunter eventually founded several similar organizations in other American cities.

Although consumed by the association's work, Hunter managed to study law for four years at Baldwin-Wallace College and was admitted to the bar in 1925.

Jane Hunter died in Cleveland in January 1971 at age 89. In her will, she bequeathed \$427,107 to aid young women in South Carolina.