

Madame

Sarah McWilliams Walker was born on December 23, 1867, in Delta, Louisiana. Her impoverished parents, Minerva and Owen Breedlove, were former slaves and farmers who died when she was six. Sarah was reared by a married sister in Vicksburg, Mississippi. It was there, at the age of fourteen, that Sarah became Mrs. McWilliams and bore a daughter, A'Lelia. After her husband died in 1887, Sarah and A'Lelia moved to St. Louis, where Sarah earned a living as a washerwoman. On only a dollar fifty a day, she

Sarah McWilliams became Madame C.J. Walker, founder of America's beauty industry for blacks.



C.J. Walker's Beauty Empire

by Cynthia Brzykcy

kept a home, sent her daughter to public school, attended night school, and started a business.

For almost thirteen years, Sarah bent over a washtub and washboard scraping and bruising her knuckles as she scrubbed white people's clothes. With her arms buried in soapsuds, she dreamed of a better life for herself and, more importantly, for A'Lelia.

In the early 1900s, black women's naturally curly hair was difficult to style and was not "acceptable" fashion. They often resorted to pressing their hair with an iron until it was straight. Irons were heavy back then, and the temperature was hard to control. Many women scorched their hair and burned themselves.

Determined to solve this common problem and start a business, Sarah invested a day's wages in some special herbs and natural products. Using a trial and error method, she mixed the ingredients in various combinations. After many failed experiments and countless tests on friends and family, Sarah finally discovered the right mixture.

In 1905, she created a hair ointment that made styling easier and hair softer without removing the curl. Sarah also invented and patented a metal heating

comb that was used in conjunction with the conditioner. Packaging her products at home, she sold them door to door. At first she was ridiculed by blacks and whites alike, but she kept working toward her goal.

When Sarah married her second husband, Charles J. Walker, a newspaperman, she took the title "Madame" because it was French and the French were associated with beauty products. Henceforth, Sarah was known as Madame C.J. Walker, and her hair treatment was the Walker System.

Traveling from St. Louis to Denver and Pittsburgh to Indianapolis, Madame Walker sold her cosmetics. Meanwhile, she advertised in all the black newspapers and magazines. She even rode the train in order to toss advertising leaflets to black people standing on the platform. This six-foot-tall, "generously proportioned woman, with a wide and roundish face and open and kindly expression" further promoted her business using demonstrations and lecturing on "cleanliness and loveliness." She believed that these two traits were crucial for self-respect and racial advancement.

The result of her cross-country sales campaign was a steadily growing mail-order business. Madame Walker estab-

lished an office in Pittsburgh in 1908 and put A'Le'lia, now in her twenties, in charge. Madame and A'Le'lia also developed a correspondence course. For twenty-five dollars, women learned about skin and hair care and upon graduation received a diploma and contracts. Each of the graduates received the exclusive rights to the Walker equipment and cosmetics. This was their "passport to prosperity."

As their mentor and as an intelligent businesswoman, Walker organized these new entrepreneurs into community clubs for social, business, and philanthropic (charitable) purposes. Regularly scheduled three-day conventions offered new sales techniques, new products, and Walker's motivational speeches. Cash prizes were awarded to outstanding saleswomen and to those clubs that had done the most for the education and advancement of black people.

Moving the mail-order operation from Pittsburgh to Indianapolis in 1910, Walker established the Madame C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company. Research and production laboratories were headquartered there, along with a training school. "Unquestionably, Madame Walker's proficiency as a businesswoman and organizer laid the foundation of the cosmetics' industry among Blacks." Five years later, hers was the largest black-owned business in Indiana.

By 1919, the Walker Manufacturing Company covered an entire Indianapolis city block and employed more than three thousand people. The annual payroll was in excess of two hundred thousand dollars, and at the business's peak, it had annual sales of approx-

imately half a million dollars. As Madame's health began to fail, A'Le'lia urged her mother to move to New York.

While there, Walker hired Vertner Tandy, a black architect, to design a home for her in New York's Irvington-on-the-Hudson, an exclusive area. A \$250,000 mansion of Indiana limestone was the outcome. Enrico Caruso, a world-famous singer, suggested the name Villa Lewaro based on the first two letters in each of A'Le'lia Walker Robinson's names.

Villa Lewaro was furnished with rich tapestries, enormous oil paintings, a sixty-thousand-dollar pipe organ, a gold-plated piano, and a sweeping white marble staircase. Walker held many dinner parties and musicals there, and famous poets, musicians, and leaders of the day attended.

Yet Walker did not spend all her time and money on material goods. She sponsored black artists and writers, awarded scholarships to women at the Tuskegee and Palmer Memorial institutes, and donated funds to Bethune-Cookman College and the Lucy Laney School. Throughout her life, she donated money to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the YMCA and YWCA of St. Louis, and homes for the aged and the needy. At her death in 1919, her empire was worth more than one million dollars. Her final generous act was to bequeath two-thirds of her company's profits to charitable organizations, such as a girls' academy in West Africa. The other third and all of her real estate holdings were given to A'Le'lia. 