



SHORT STAY, LASTING IMPACT

Madam C.J. Walker's Legacy Endures

By Brenda L. Holmes

Madam C.J. Walker, an entrepreneur ahead of her time, arrived in Indianapolis in 1910 to grow her company. She pioneered the use of direct sales of hair care products, building a legacy of success and philanthropy.

Great-great-granddaughter A'Lelia Bundles wrote *On Her Own Ground*, the first comprehensive biography of Walker in 2001, which will soon be a Netflix series starring Octavia Spencer.

"I grew up (in Indianapolis) on Grandview Drive," Bundles recalls. "I write and talk about Madam Walker because she was my great-great-grandmother and her daughter, A'Lelia, my namesake, is my great-grandmother. But for me, the more lasting legacy is that she empowered people and that she used her money to make a difference in her community."

A conversation with Bundles from her home in Washington, D.C., revives the story of her ancestor, who has become a symbol of prosperity and charity in the black community.

Early years

Born Sarah Breedlove in Delta, Louisiana, on December 23, 1867, Walker was a child of sharecroppers. Orphaned at age 7, Walker survived by working in the cotton fields with her sister. She married Moses McWilliam when she was 14.

"She was the first born free in her family; even her older brothers and sisters had been enslaved. . . . People got married much younger during that period of time," Bundles explains. "But she was trying to get away from a bad situation. She had her daughter when she was 17 and named her Lelia (later known as A'Lelia Walker)."

Living in rural areas such as Delta, Louisiana and Vicksburg, Mississippi, Walker experienced racism in a way that affected every aspect of her life.

"The Klan and the Knights of the White Camelia had suppressed the African American political power that had developed during Reconstruction. So, there was a great deal of essentially racial terrorism that was going on in that area. Going to a bigger city was something that opened up a lot of doors," Bundles offers.

City life

The family moved to St. Louis in search of a better life. Her brothers were barbers and she was a washerwoman. The black community in the city was vibrant, with educated people who were starting businesses.

"In particular, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church became a touch point for



A group gathers at the Indianapolis airport to greet the ambassador of Ghana, the keynote speaker for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company (Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Indiana Historical Society).



By 1911, Walker had purchased this house at 640 North West Street and turned it into her home, office, salon and factory.

improving her life," Bundles recounts. "She was able to have some role models and the women of the church, in particular, were instrumental in helping give her a vision of herself as something other than an uneducated washerwoman."

Walker had a revelation and decided she wanted to enhance her situation by improving the way she earned money. How the idea for

creating her own hair care products started may forever be a mystery, but she was exposed to the industry by her brothers and she went to work for Annie Malone, who developed and patented the pressing comb.

"You go back in time, and you realize most Americans didn't have indoor plumbing. People didn't bathe very often, and they washed their hair even less. In the early part



Willard Ransom (far right) followed in his father’s footsteps and worked for the Walker company, first as assistant manager and later as general manager. He explains a product being used on a hairstyle model during the filming of a commercial. This advertisement was created to show off several products including face powder, cleansing cream, lipstick, skin freshener and liquid makeup (*Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Indiana Historical Society*).

of the 20th century, there were just basic medical and hygiene issues people were addressing,” Bundles details.

Most people used home remedies to clear up scalp issues, including Walker. She went to work for Malone in St. Louis, then moved to Denver after ending her marriage to her second husband, John Davis.

“It was a way to escape a bad marriage and sort of start over, in the great American tradition of starting over,” Bundles shares. “She had a sister-in-law and four nieces in Denver. . . . They were also members of the St. Paul AME Church.”

Walker marries Charles Joseph “C.J.” Walker in the spring of 1906 and starts working on her own formulas for hair care products and home remedies, first calling herself “Mrs. C.J. Walker” in her advertising. She was selling the Annie Malone products part time, but her main income came from being a cook for E.L. Scholtz.

Scholtz, a prominent pharmacist and owner of the Scholtz Drug Company, often billed his operation as the largest pharmacy west of the Mississippi River.

“He said he could analyze her formula and help her,” Bundles adds. “They called it Madam C.J. Walker’s Wonderful Hair Grower.”

On the road

Her time in Denver was one of renewal and progress, but it wasn’t the best place to sell her products. Walker knew she needed to headquarter her company in an area with a larger black community. She and C.J. went on the road, looking at locations in Kansas, Texas,

Missouri and Oklahoma.

“Everywhere they traveled, town to town, they used the churches as their networks. They would do product demonstrations and send orders back to her daughter, who had moved to Denver at that point. She would mix the products up and mail them to the new customers,” she reveals.

“They briefly settled in Pittsburgh in 1908. But at that point, Pittsburgh didn’t have the thriving black business community that Indianapolis did. And Indianapolis, of course, is the crossroads of America,” Bundles elaborates. “When she visited Indianapolis, she was impressed. There were black businesses along Indiana Avenue, three black newspapers that were weekly, including the *Indianapolis Freeman*.”

Welcome to the Circle City

Her company’s first building was at 640 N. West St. She would later build a factory, hair salon and beauty school to train her sales agents.

C.J. had been a newspaper advertising salesman and could help his wife perfect her marketing strategies. The *Indianapolis Freeman* was a national newspaper and the Walker Company began purchasing advertising to spread the word about the hair products.

“She had a real genius to hiring a smart executive team,” Bundles says. “Her decision to hire F.B. Ransom as her attorney and general manager meant that she had somebody who would make sure all of the business records were in order. She also had a great skill for identifying leadership in people.”

Walker crisscrosses the country training new agents and starting

beauty schools. Traveling with a stereopticon, a slide projector, she holds public events where she talks about African Americans in business, politics and education to attract a crowd. She then holds a smaller gathering of women who were interested in becoming sales agents.

“She would be drawn to the woman who had the best questions, who had some charisma. . . . She would make her the main local representative, who would manage the others.”

Giving back to the community

By 1917, the company reports there are 20,000 black women trained to sell the Madam C.J. Walker hair care products and cosmetics. Much of the success is attributed to philanthropic activities, including a \$1,000 donation to the new YMCA in Indianapolis.

Walker’s fame grew as she becomes interested in the National Negro Business League. In 1912, she addresses the crowd from the convention floor as she declares, “I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there, I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there, I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations. I have built my own factory on my own ground.”

The following year she was the keynote speaker.

Inspired by the National Association of Colored Women, Walker begins organizing sales agents into local and state clubs. In 1917, with 200 attendees, the establishment of the National Beauty Culturists and Benevolent Association of Madam C. J. Walker Agents (predecessor to the Madam C. J. Walker Beauty Culturists Union of America) had its first national convention.

The gathering is designed to reward the agents for their business success and encourage political activism. “This is the greatest country under the sun. But we must not let our love of country, our patriotic loyalty, cause us to abate one whit in our protest against wrong and injustice,” she declares at the time.

Bundles says, “I think the real key of her story is that she is a woman who was helped by other women. You know what people say, ‘Empowered.’ And once she began to be successful, she turned around and empowered other women.”

Death and legacy

The height of Walker’s career came between 1911 and her death on May 25, 1919.

In 1915, she moved to New York where her daughter, A’Lelia Walker, lived to set up a new homestead and salon. The company’s headquarters remained in Indianapolis.

Before she passed, she pledged \$5,000 (the equivalent of \$72,700 today) to the NAACP’s anti-lynching fund. At the time, it was the largest gift from an individual in the organization’s history.

Her name and products become even more recognizable in the 1920s, after her death, as the company’s business market expands beyond the United States to Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Panama and Costa Rica. The company realized one of Walker’s dreams in 1928 when it opened the Madam Walker Theatre Center in Indianapolis. It included the company’s offices, factory, theater, beauty school, hair salon and barbershop, restaurant, drug store and ballroom.

“She never really went out of business,” Bundles explains. “The company was thriving into the 1950s and was one of the three major black-owned hair care companies.”

The company began to decline as innovations in the industry changed consumers’ buying habits.

In a revival in 2016, the Madam C.J. Walker Beauty Culture line was launched by Sundial Brands and is sold exclusively in Sephora stores and at Sephora.com.

The Madam Walker Theatre Center, now known as the Madam Walker Legacy Center, went through major repairs in the 1980s and is currently experiencing a complete renovation to be unveiled January 20, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, with a special dedication.

A life well lived

Walker died when she was just 51 years old and had amassed an estimated fortune of \$600,000. Nevertheless, she is often referred to as the “first female self-made millionaire.”

She was an entrepreneur, a philanthropist and an activist who gave back to her beloved black community.

“She really promoted this idea that women should make their own income, but that they should be giving back to their community. She said, ‘As a Walker agent, your first duty is to humanity.’ They were an army of economically independent women who she encouraged to be involved in politics and civil rights issues of the day,” Bundles concludes.

Step Into 1915 With Madam Walker

There is time remaining to “visit” Madam C.J. Walker at the Indiana History Center, 640 N. West St. in Indianapolis, which is currently hosting the “You Are There 1915: Madam C.J. Walker, Empowering Women” exhibit through January 23, 2021.

The date is Dec. 6, 1915, as visitors enter a replica of her factory office. Actors portray Walker and several of her staff members, who are present to introduce products being sold across the country by thousands of Walker agents.

The interactive exhibit is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, visit indianahistory.org/events/you-are-there-1915.



Jason Housley (left) portrays F.B. Ransom at the Indiana Historical Society exhibit “You Are There 1915: Madam C.J. Walker, Empowering Women.” He demonstrates the mimeograph machine to Tracey Wynn, one of several actresses who brings Walker to life within the exhibit.