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THE SUCCESS OF BLANCHE ARMWOOD (1890-1939)

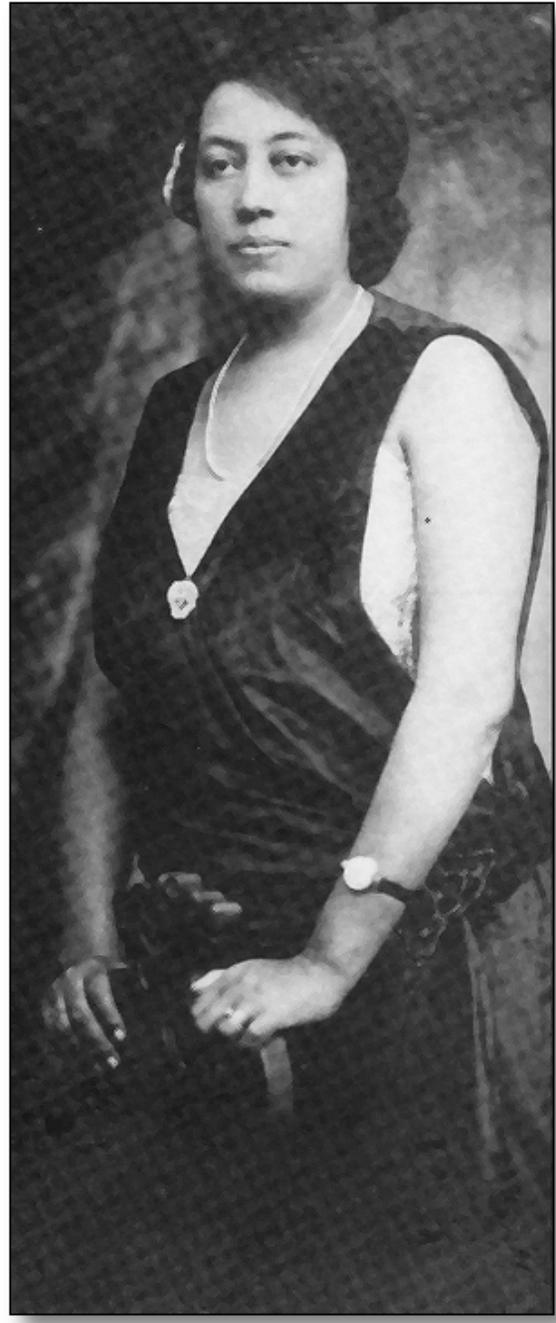
By MARY BURKE

"Success should be measured not by the power, prestige, or wealth that one has attained, but by how many obstacles one has to overcome to achieve a goal."

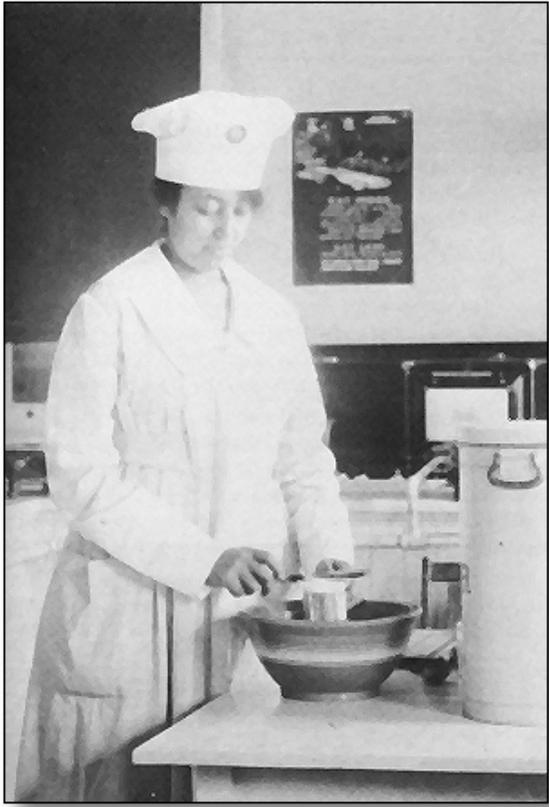
Booker T. Washington

"What you are is God's gift to you; what you make of yourself is your gift to God" reads the inscription at the front of the Armwood family scrapbook. This poetic concept aptly describes the character of Blanche Armwood. An early twentieth century Renaissance woman, Ms. Armwood steadfastly held the values of hard work, religious morality, and judicial equality before the American consciousness. She used diplomacy to present these ideals to the American public. Called a "Female Booker T. Washington," Armwood served as liaison between the black and white races. She was administrator, educator, innovator, writer, and poet. She organized Domestic Science Schools throughout the South, served as Executive Secretary of the Urban League and Supervisor of Negro Schools in Tampa, and in 1938 received a law degree from Howard University. By the time she died in 1939, Blanche Armwood had made herself a "gift", not only to her God, but also to her community, her race, and to all humanity.

Born in Tampa, Florida, Jan. 23, 1890, Blanche was the youngest of five children. Her father, Levin Armwood, Jr. arrived as a boy by wagon train from



Blanche Armwood Beatty as Supervisor of Negro Schools, Hillsborough County. Yearbook photograph from Booker T. Washington's 1926 Excelsior.



Blanche Armwood at 16, upon graduation from Spelman Seminary in Atlanta.

Georgia in 1866.¹ Her mother, Margaret, was the eldest of 12 children born to Adam Holloman, owner of citrus groves and county commissioner. The two married in 1878. Together, Levin and Margaret raised a family which extolled traditional Christian values of hard work, thrift, and love of God. A trusted member of the community, Levin Armwood became Deputy Sheriff, Supervisor of County Roads constructed by prisoners, and Tampa's first black police officer. Margaret earned extra money as a dressmaker. Three children, Walter, Idella, and Blanche survived to adulthood. All became model citizens. Walter, an architect, became principal of Brewer Normal School in South Carolina. Idella, a Home Economics



Mrs. Blanche Armwood Perkins-creator of the Tampa School of Household Arts. Hillsborough County Schools in connection with Tampa Gas Company (1914 or 1915).

teacher in Hillsborough County, officer in the Lilly White Society, and remained active in women's clubs and community activities.

RACISM NO MAJOR PROBLEM

Although the black community into which Blanche was born was largely self-contained, blacks held responsible leadership positions and owned city and county real estate. Blacks established their own businesses, schools, and churches. According to Hazel Orsley, cousin of Blanche Armwood, it was not until the 1920s, when Bay area population began to boom, that racism became

a major problem.² As community focal points, the church and school provided Blanche with her earliest opportunities to exercise leadership ability. She developed oratory skills and sang in the church choir. Although they were not Catholic, the Armwoods enrolled Blanche in Saint Peter Claver, an excellent school available to black children. After graduating with highest honors, Blanche continued her education

In 1913, following a whirlwind love affair, Blanche suspended her teaching career, married attorney Daniel Webster Perkins, and moved to "The Roost" in Knoxville, Tennessee. However, her moral convictions doomed the marriage to failure. Frequently a small boy and his mother would stand near the entrance to the Perkins' Knoxville home. When Blanche discovered that the boy was her husband's illegitimate son, she had the



Levin Armwood family photograph taken in the home of James and Idella Street (1920s). Standing Left to Right: James Street, Idella Street, Blanche Beatty, Dr. John Beatty. Seated Left to Right: Levin Armwood, Jr., Margaret "Maggie" Armwood, Walter Adam Armwood.

at Spelman Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1906, she graduated "summa cum laude", merited a teaching certificate, and at the age of 16 began teaching in the Tampa public schools.

marriage annulled.

WARTIME COOKING

Blanche Armwood Perkins had returned to Tampa by 1914. Recognizing



MARY McLEOD BETHUNE.
... Close Friend of Armwood.

Blanche's popularity with the black community, the Tampa Gas Company solicited her to become their only black domestic science expert. This venture opened many doors. In conjunction with the Tampa Public Schools, a domestic science school was opened. Following the success of the Tampa school, additional domestic arts schools opened in Athens, GA; Roanoke, VA; and Rock Hill, SC. Blanche moved to New Orleans in 1917 where she established the New Orleans School of Domestic Science.

In an effort to keep the home fires burning, Blanche published a 37 page wartime cookbook-Food Conservation in the Home in 1918. The introduction extols patriotism.

Unless the individual American home, the unit of the Nation's strength will pledge itself to strict economy and conservation, there is imminent danger of defeat for the Nation because of famine in the ranks of our Allies.

We will use corn, rye, barley, oats, potatoes and other wheat substitutes while we enjoy the comfort of our homes and save the wheat for the valiant fighters in France. Every pound of white flour saved is equal to a bullet in our Nation's defense³.

Included are recipes for Southern Fried Chicken, Sweet Potato Biscuit, and "Victory" Bread.

Substitute "Victory" potato salad for meat by cutting four medium sized boiled potatoes into cubes, mixing with two boiled beets cut likewise, three gherkins, two olives, one-half cup minced parsley or one-half cup left-over green peas. Mix with highly seasoned mayonnaise dressing.⁴

Conservation is stressed.

. . . when fat becomes old and has absorbed tastes and odors of food that makes it undesirable, it may oftentimes be clarified by cutting up a white potato in it and heating it to a high temperature, the potato will absorb much of the distasteful odor. This fat may then be strained and used for frying or other cooking.⁵

Substitutes for sugar include corn syrup, cane syrup, or honey. The cookbook contains breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus, and also a page on food preservation. Food Conservation in the Home provides insight into the



BLANCHE ARMWOOD'S GRAVE
...in 'A Unione Italiana Cemetary'

meticulous, scientific technique that Blanche emphasized in her domestic arts curriculum.

Publications of the period, including *The Gas Age* and *Tampa Tribune* refer to Blanche as a female Booker T.⁶ Washington. Blanche saw nothing degrading in hard work. This is reflected in her schools' mottos: "Lifting Labor from drudgery to attractiveness" and "She worked willingly with her hands."⁷ Like Washington, Blanche Armwood was a pragmatist. She knew that jobs for black women were restricted to domestic work.

A quote from a 1916 *The Tampa Daily Times* illustrated how, through diplomatic oratory, she was able to

direct white money toward her individual projects:

The housewife in the South trusts her household affairs to her domestic servant. If the servant is well trained and efficient, and does her work conscientiously and well, a relation of confidence grows up between the white employer and her colored servant, which develops into love. This cannot but result in a higher respect for the colored servant and the colored race. This is a feeling that we are all striving to develop.⁸

The *Tampa Tribune* referred to her as "a thoroughly educated colored woman" who could "handle her race."⁹ *The Gas Age* of 1916 stated, "She is gifted with natural oratory, and had no papers

prepared.... Expressions were heard on all sides from the members that if she had been a man there would be no further place to seek someone to take Booker Washington's place."¹⁰

SOUGHT AS MEDIATOR

When a Cook's Union sought to organize in New Orleans in 1918, Blanche was careful not to take sides. She avoided confrontation stating, "I insist the efficient cook will always be in demand and will receive higher wages. The New Orleans School of Domestic Science proposes to produce skilled cooks and just there its mission ends."¹¹ Because of her diplomatic manner, whites increasingly sought out Blanche to be a mediator between the black and white races. Blanche was the only black cooking instructor continually employed by southern gas companies and she accepted the position of Supervisor of Home Economics, working under the extension division of the Louisiana State University and the United States Department of Agriculture.

Like other early twentieth century progressive women, Blanche Armwood was involved in teaching, church work, and club work. From her earliest years, she was an active member of the National Association of Colored Women. Connection with this organization led her to become politically outspoken. She continuously fought for black hospitals, black businesses, for childcare for working mothers, and for homes for juvenile delinquents. She was instrumental in organizing the First Federated Club of Tampa, the Louisiana State Federation of Colored Women, the Southeastern Division of Colored Women's Clubs, and was the state organizer of the N.A.A.C.P. of Louisiana.

An intelligent and literate woman, Blanche Armwood was influenced by the black leaders of her day. Her speeches and writings, and her association with the Republican Party suggest an in-depth knowledge of current events. She was no doubt familiar with Washington's *Up From Slavery* and DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois's September 1918 *Crisis* even contains an article praising Blanche Armwood and the New Orleans School of Domestic Science."¹²

NO WASHINGTON CLONE

Her values most closely parallel those of Booker T. Washington. Like Washington, Blanche was diligent, disciplined, and extolled the dignity of labor. Self-reliance, unselfishness, and a careful attention to detail were important to her. Whereas Washington had Tuskegee Institute, Blanche directed the New Orleans Domestic Science School. Blanche believed that an expanded control of the economy by blacks would lead to greater social equality between the races. Like Washington, Blanche exercised a conservative attitude toward labor unions. Perhaps, because both lived in the South, both realized the pragmatism of sometimes accommodating the white political establishment.¹³

However, Blanche was no Washington clone. Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois also served as role models. Like Wells, Blanche was involved in the crusade against lynching and Jim Crow laws. Blanche joined DuBois's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and fought the unfairness of the disfranchisement laws. A portion of *The Tampa Daily Times*

newspaper article about juvenile courts serves to illustrate:

During the late session of our state legislature, the Negroes of Florida drooped in sadness at the passage of such unjust measures as the "grandfather clause," which will practically deprive thousands of honest, full-fledged, taxpaying, patriotic, liberty-loving citizens of that manhood right, the franchise¹⁴

Throughout the teens, Blanche was also an outspoken activist for the causes of temperance and women's suffrage. Both Wells and Armwood were members of the N.A.C.W. and worked for the Republican Party. In 1920, the Republican Party commissioned Blanche Armwood as a speaker promoting the election of Warren G. Harding.

URBAN LEAGUE EXECUTIVE

Meanwhile Blanche married Dr. John C. Beatty, a dentist, and moved to Alexandria, LA, in February 1919. Dr. Beatty was a graduate of Howard University Dental College, and had practiced dentistry for several years. Although personal letters were not available in the scrapbooks, John appeared to support Blanche's career. He relocated his practice to Tampa in 1922 when Blanche became first Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League.

Aware of Blanche Beatty's reputation as speaker and organizer, Jesse Thomas, southern field director of the National Urban League, encouraged her to become the first Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League. During her tenure as 'Executive Secretary, Blanche worked tirelessly to improve conditions of Tampa's 22,000 black citizens. The Urban League, composed of prominent members from both races including

Tampa's mayor Perry G. Wall, worked to establish a library, hospital, high school, day nursery and kindergarten, public playground, and child health program for sole use by the black community.

One objective on the Urban League agenda was the establishment of an all-black subdivision where blacks could own their own homes. This subdivision would be so designed that eventually all blacks would live within its borders, with none in the other seven sections of Tampa. This area was to have paved streets, electric lights, sewerage, public transportation, and police protection."¹⁵ Blanche's uncle, John Holloman, and A. J. Prince were both real estate developers in the subdivision area. They were both willing to sell lots for reasonable prices so that more families would be able to own property. Blanche endorsed this plan because many blacks suffered squalid living conditions in an area called "The Scrub."¹⁶ Property ownership would help to foster pride and self-confidence in the black community. However, in 1926, her successor, Benjamin Mays, bitterly opposed the all-black subdivision believing it would create even greater segregation. He abandoned this plan stating the subdivision would be "highly undesirable, impractical, unwise and unsafe for Negroes; that the facilities would be too long being provided; that in case of racial conflict Negroes could be located and abused too easily for comfort."¹⁷

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

In addition to holding the position of Executive Secretary of the Urban League, Blanche Beatty was Supervisor

of Negro Schools for Tampa and Hillsborough County between 1922-1930. Blanche Beatty sought to upgrade conditions in black schools. One of her major concerns was the length of the school year. White children attended school nine months of the year, whereas black children only attended six months. By 1926, Blanche had equalized the term for black children to nine months. During her term in office, five new school buildings were built for blacks, teachers' salaries were increased, and Parent-Teacher Associations were organized for every black school in Hillsborough county. Overcrowding was relieved and sanitary condition's improved.

One of the highest achievements was the establishment of Booker T. Washington High School, which in 1930 became the first accredited black school in Hillsborough County and one of the few in the entire state. Both blacks and whites were proud of this achievement. When Blanche resigned in 1930, The Golden Tiger, Booker T. Washington High School's newspaper offered its thanks. ". . . Mrs. Beatty has labored day and night through the sunshine and storm to have Booker Washington reach its present goal. She now feels that she can retire from her labor in the Negro educational work of Tampa with a degree of satisfaction."¹⁸

Of course, service as Executive Secretary and School Supervisor were not enough to keep Blanche busy. She remained an officer in several clubs, must notably the National Association of Colored Women and the National Republican League of Colored Women. In 1927 President Coolidge appointed Blanche to tour New England, to speak

on behalf of the Republican Party. Always involved in education, she supported the renaissance of black achievement in the arts, and as a close friend of Mary McLeod Bethune, used her oratory skill to raise funds for BethuneCookman.

BACK TO BARBARISM?

Blanche had definite opinions on the role of women in society. She fought the opposers of women's suffrage tongue in cheek claiming "Our sympathies go out to the opposer of the woman in politics, however, since we realize the apparent unfairness of the arrangement by which each woman is allowed two votes: her own and that of the man whose action she governs."¹⁹ A woman should be a "lady"-- dependable and reliable, and above all, demand respect. She achieved this by being well groomed and gracious, by keeping a tidy house and preparing nutritious meals; by exercising her intelligence. It was the responsibility of women to uphold society's morals. With this in mind, Blanche was appalled by the moral atrocities committed by the 1920s flappers. She writes,

"Alas too many of our women and girls wear costumes that are positively indecent, inviting insult and improper advances from the masculine sex, then criticizing the weakling that they themselves have created; calling attention to the baser part of our natures as we walk the streets, instead of demanding respect and admiration by the utter seclusion of our animal natures and the presentation of the nobility, the personality, the 'God in us', as did the woman of former ages, who walked head and shoulders erect and chests prominent to show that they were

somebody Are we returning to barbarism?"²⁰

Considering Blanche's straight-laced view of morality, it would be interesting to speculate on what she would say about today's woman of the eighties!

In the late twenties tragedy struck when John Beatty was shot and killed during a struggle with the family chauffeur. Details surrounding the killing were sketchy, but it was finally ruled accidental. This brought a period of devastation and illhealth to Blanche. She became involved in churchwork, where she met Edward T. Washington, a maintenance supervisor, for the Interstate Commerce Commission. The two were married in 1931 and moved to Washington, D.C.

EARNs LAW DEGREE

Throughout the thirties, Blanche continued her push for success. Her positive, extroverted, yet carefully controlled personality kept Blanche in demand for speaking engagements. Even despite bouts of illness, she remained active in the N.A.A.C.P., N.A.C.W., and served as President of the John Wesley Zion Church Choir. As aide to Republican Congressman Oscar De Priest of Illinois, speaking engagements on behalf of the Republican Party continued. Neither did she neglect her ties with Florida or Tampa. Blanche continued her fund raising for Bethune-Cookman, and as the Depression deepened, she organized the Golden Rule Recovery Alliance to provide help for needy Tampa blacks. Her interest in politics and in promoting legislation fair to both races led Blanche to enroll in Howard Law School in 1934.

She obtained her juris doctorate degree in 1938. A letter from Peter O. Knight, a prominent Tampa attorney, indicated Blanche was considering practicing law in Tampa. However, because of numerous speaking engagements her practice was delayed.²¹ During one such speaking tour, Blanche became ill and died in Medford, Massachusetts, on October 16, 1939; presumably from thrombophlebitis.²²

Upon her death Blanche (Armwood) Washington was eulogized by Dr. Benjamin Mays, President of Morehouse College, at the John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church in Washington, D.C.; and again eulogized by Reverend C.S. Long, Presiding Elder of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church of Tampa. She is buried in the Armwood family plot in the "A Unione Italiana Cemetery" in Tampa. On October 4, 1984, Congressman Michael Bilirakis of Tampa, offered a tribute to Blanche before the House of Representatives. In the same year, Blanche Armwood Comprehensive High School opened in Hillsborough county. A \$500 college scholarship to encourage scholastic excellence was established in her name. Armwood High School stands as a monument to the life of Blanche Armwood.

The success of Blanche Armwood was influenced by the variables of sex, race, and the historical and social context of the early twentieth century America in which she lived. Her process for success was drawn from a strong moral commitment to the goals she had selected as a young girl. Family values laid the basis for these goals. An extroverted, self-confident personality made it possible for Blanche to thrive in the leadership positions into which she was placed. Blanche's conservative and diplomatic

policy toward race relations led to acceptance by the white power structure. Finally, Blanche did not deviate from what she believed to be right, and even when failure and personal tragedy occurred, she did not give up the fight.

NOTES

¹ The early family history of the Armwoods and most of the information contained in this paper comes from an interview with Ms. Hazel Orsley during the Summer of 1988, and from the family scrapbooks in her possession.

² In 1895 white residents in Hillsborough County numbered 24,046 and black residents about 7,014; or about 24 whites for every 7 blacks. Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*. Tampa, 1928, p. 92. See also Otis R. Anthony and Marilyn T. Wade, *A Collection of Historical Facts About Black Tampa*. Black History Research Project, 1978. Fact #14, p. 3: In Hillsborough County in 1880, there were 2,917 blacks who comprised one third of the total population. By themselves, black males of voting age numbered 2,500. Fact #35, p. 7: The Negro population in Tampa increased from 4,383 in 1900 to 18,583 in 1925, to 23,323 in March, 1927

³ Blanche Armwood, *Food Conservation in the Home*, pp. 3, 4, & 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, assorted recipes.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *The Gas Age*, April 12, 1916, New York City; also *Tampa Morning Tribune*, Friday, April 7, 1916.

⁷ First motto from Tampa School of Household Arts (1916). Second motto from Tampa School of Household Arts (1917), and New Orleans School of Domestic Science (1918).

⁸ *The Tampa Daily Times*, April 6, 1916. Orsley scrapbook.

⁹ *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, November 21, 1915, p. 8-A Orsley scrapbook.

¹⁰ *The Gas Age*, op.cit., scrapbook

¹¹ *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 21, 1918. Scrapbook

¹² W.E.B. DuBois, *Crisis*. "Men of the Month," Sept. 1918.

¹³ See also John R. Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years 1890-1922," pp. 22-23.

¹⁴ *The Tampa Daily Times*, June 26, 1915. Orsley scrapbook

¹⁵ Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel*. New York, 1971. "The Tampa Story," p. 111.

¹⁶ Leland Hawes, "'Raper Report' focused on Tampa's Race Relations," *Tampa Tribune*, February 25, 1984, Section D pp. I & 2.

¹⁷ Mays, op. cit., p. 112.

¹⁸ *The Golden Tiger*, volume 1, No. 2, Tampa, Thursday, December 11, 1930. Orsley scrapbook

¹⁹ Blanche Armwood, "Woman's Sphere of Helpfulness," scrapbook

²⁰ Blanche Armwood Perkins, "Shall the American Woman Adopt Late Paris Models," scrapbook.

²¹ According to Mrs. Orsley, who lived with the Washingtons during the late thirties, Blanche's oratory was calm, direct, and to the point. Her charisma drew the audience into the topic.

²² Phlebitis coupled with exhaustion was suggested by Mrs. Orsley. In the scrapbook collection a letter dated December 20, 1937 from Dr. Lester Julian Efird, Blanche's Tampa physician suggests phlebitis.

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