

Myrtle Mary Deane

A Noted Humanitarian;

Former Stuart, Florida resident;

Advocate for the Poor

(1897-1998)

written by Grace Heising

Myrtle Deane was born in Key West, Florida, on August 11, 1897. She was the ninth child of William Henry Deane and Jessie Ann Elizabeth Mackey Dunbar Deane. Myrtle's paternal grandfather was an American Indian from Virginia. He had a boat in which he took escaping slaves from Virginia to the Bahamas. He was found out and he too took refuge in the Bahamas. He died young but of natural causes.

His son, William Henry Deane, at age sixteen, was taken on a freighter captained by a friend of his father's. He was taught to cook for the staff. Eventually, William Henry left the ship and worked for the largest wholesale grocery in Key West, "Montsalvatge and Reed." He worked with that company for forty-four years and became Manager of Operations in charge of the warehouse on the dock in downtown Key West. Myrtle Deane's maternal grandfather was a Scottish physician who served on a ship. Her maternal grandmother was a Bahamian Negress. This couple, wed in the Bahamas, moved to Key West. They had seven girls, one of whom was Jessie Anne.

Jessie Anne met and married William Henry Deane in Key West. They had six girls and six boys. Jessie Anne was a devoted mother who worked to develop the talents of her children. Marion played the piano; Alice, Victor, and Marcus the violin, and Elbridge played the flute. Together they were their

own entertainment. Myrtle sang and worked at rhetoric. Every morning Jessie Anne would lead the group down to the ocean for an early swim.

Myrtle was baptized as an infant at St. Paul's Anglican Church in Key West.

Although the congregation was largely white, the Deane family were accepted communicants. At age six she began school at the Fredrick Douglas public school. There were ten grades. All the students and teachers were people of color. When Myrtle finished all the grades, she took the teacher's examination and passed (fourteen took the test, including three classmates - only Myrtle passed). In a year she began teaching at the Douglas School. She began with grade three (one year), then moved on to grade six. Eventually she taught eighth grade arithmetic, ninth and tenth grade algebra (five years).

Myrtle was recruited to join the faculty of the Stuart Training School in Stuart, Florida. In Stuart she lived with the principal and his family. There were twelve grades at Stuart and Myrtle taught Math and English at the middle school level and algebra to the ninth and tenth grades.

Myrtle won a scholarship to the Bishop Tuttle School of Social Work in Raleigh, North Carolina. She spent two years there. She was chosen to represent the School at a general convention in Cincinnati and stayed at the Convent of the Transfiguration in Glendale, Ohio. Myrtle liked these Anglican Sisters and became the first woman of color to be admitted to and eventually elected to the community. This was not without its difficulties. The sisters who supported

Myrtle's full admission, needed to invoke the support of Bishop Denby of Cleveland to override the resistance of some who did not think it appropriate that the community be racially integrated. Myrtle remained with the Sisters for twenty-seven years. She cared for small children at St. John's Orphanage in Painesville, Ohio. (Two women from this orphanage have kept in loving contact with Myrtle). Myrtle also taught at the St. Simon School in Woodland Heights, Ohio. In 1991, her students from St. Simon's brought her back to Woodland Heights for a reunion.

Myrtle spent two years back in Key West caring for her mother. She returned to the Sisters after her mother died in 1960. In 1965 Myrtle requested permission to leave the convent. It was then that she became a Roman Catholic. The Sisters of Charity of Mount St. Joseph extended hospitality to Myrtle during her period of transition. Later, at a conference, she met Sister Michael Waters of the Medical Missions Sisters. Sister Michael invited Myrtle to join the staff of the St. Vincent Home for unmarried mothers on Woodland Avenue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This talented Myrtle had a certificate in tailoring. At St. Vincent's she taught the women to sew. After her retirement from St Vincent's she became active as an organizer, working with residents of the Paschall Homes and with Senior Citizen Organizations. It was during this period that she received tributes from three succeeding mayors of Philadelphia, Frank L. Rizzo, William J. Green, and W. Wilson Goode; an honorary citation from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives; a merit of award from the Pennsylvania Governor's Regional Council on Aging; a

certificate of appreciation from the National Council of Senior Citizens, Inc., and other certificates of recognition.

One of Myrtle's fondest memories was seeing the Pope when he visited in New York. Sister Michael had two tickets she had received from her brother, Bishop Waters of North Carolina and chose Myrtle as her companion. Another important memory was her visit to the White House with a Pennsylvania delegation on Aging.

Myrtle died peacefully of arteriosclerotic heart disease on August 31, 1998. She is survived by her sister, Salome Deane (child number twelve) and her great nephew, Victor, grandson of her brother Victor (child number six); nieces Lorraine Bethel and Frankerline Welters; nephews Arthur, Michael, Robert, and Thomas Wernham and Alphonso, Elbridge, and Marvin Deane. She is fondly remembered by the many (former) children, especially Mary Kay Cole Ward of Richmond, Virginia and Carol Cole Lesker of Alpharetta, Georgia, and adults (those of us who call her friend) whose lives were enriched by her enthusiasm for life, devotion to her God, and dedication to her fellow man. We will miss you, Myrtle. We already miss your delicious rum cake. We will not forget how you sang and reverently gestured to the hymn, "JERUSALEM".

(This is her story, as she told it to her friend, Grace Heising, a volunteer at St Vincent's, who met Myrtle Deane there.)
Thanks to Mary K. Ward for sending this information.