

Health flashbacks

Cleopatra White (1898-1987)



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Nurse Cleopatra White is one of the founding mothers of Belize.

Born Cleopatra Eugenie White on June 28, 1898 in the colony of British Honduras; she was the eldest daughter of Joseph and Mary White.

Little is known about her childhood and youth. Her mother died when she was very young. She studied at Miss Zeila Braddick's school for girls and the Ebenezer Elementary School. Apparently, she had no family ties, nor children of her own. However, along with Nurse Vivian Seay, 18 years her senior, with whom she shared a house, Cleopatra White helped to rear the brother of the late Belizean educator Signa Yorke, who became a first-class educator himself and Chief Education Officer, Edward P. Yorke. She also reared two girls: Carrie Smith Collins and Olga Arnold.

Together with Vivian Seay, Cleopatra White participated in the founding of the Black Cross Nurses Association in 1920. She began practice as a nurse in 1929. Nurse White was the second matron of the Black Cross Nurses Association, after her friend and mentor Vivian Seay.

Following the 1931 hurricane in Belize City, which caused 2500 deaths and huge economic losses, Cleopatra White and other Black Cross nurses worked diligently at the bar-

racks established in what is now the international airport.

In the early 40's training of public health nurses is organized in Belize. Previously, nurses had been trained at the Belize City Hospital by Matron Lois Roberts, who had received formal training in England. Cleopatra White was included in the first group in 1943. They received theoretical and practical classes and after one year of formal nurse training, they were sent throughout the country to work as nurses in rural health.

After qualifying, Nurse White was initially sent to Double Head Cabbage and then to Gales Point Manatee as the first rural nurse designated in that place. In her ten and a half years of work at Gales Point, Nurse White transformed the village. She not only served as a nurse, but was instrumental in organizing the Red Cross group, women's groups, shows and the first village council in Belize (of which today about 150 still exist), actively participating in the social life of the village.

With her dedication to work, her modest and good-natured character, she quickly became the soul of the village, taking on the role of mother for many a teenager, solving differences among neighbors, healing the sick with medicines or just dancing with any villager or outsider in village parties. Furthermore, she wrote scripts for community enter-

tainment or sat to tell stories. Thanks to her initiative Gales Point had its first Community Center and a clock was erected in her honor.

In 1953, in recognition of her contributions to the development of community life in Belize, Nurse Cleopatra White was awarded the British Empire Medal.

When the city of Corozal and nearby villages were being rebuilt after the ravage of Hurricane Janet in 1955, groups of seven people were elected, with which the government could consult –the origin of today's village council. But as far back as the mid 1940's, Nurse White had been setting up similar groups in Gales Point with whom she would consult about village affairs. In fact, in an unofficial way, Cleopatra White was the inspiration for this idea of village leadership.

In 1956 she was transferred to Roaring Creek, where she founded the First Methodist Church in which she preached and sang in the choir. In the Cayo District, she also served as counselor and sometimes as judge.

In 1958, she visited Great Britain at the invitation of Queen Elizabeth II and with British Council aid toured England, Wales and Scotland to see the Red Cross activities, spending three weeks at the Red Cross headquarters in London.

Again she was present during the aftermath of Hurricane Hattie that struck Belize in 1961 causing 400 deaths and destroying almost half of the city, leaving thousands of homeless people.

At age 64, Nurse White commuted 17 miles from Belize City to Hattieville, which housed many victims of the 1961 hurricane. Then Hattieville consisted of barracks with canvas partitions for doors. Nurse White was the first nurse to work there and she touched the lives of most residents. She

was always humming; even when fixing a dressing. And although she was big with a heavy voice; she was not harsh, never yelled at anyone, not even when she scolded. She was extremely generous.

Playwright and folklorist Cleopatra White also participated in a group and obtained Festival prizes. Along with her pianist Robert Belisle, Cleopatra White helped raise awareness through song.

In 1986 the Office of Women of Belize established the Cleopatra White shield as the prize awarded at the National High School Quiz Contest.

Cleopatra was 88 years old when she passed away on the 13 of January of 1987 at the Old Folks Home in Belize City. In her own words, her only regret was not having had a daughter to take her name and follow in her footsteps.

Nurse White is remembered as a woman with a broad smile that always hummed popular songs and a tireless worker, not only in health care, but also in the development of Creole culture and society.

Today, a health center in Belize City bears the name of this true Belizean patriot.

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