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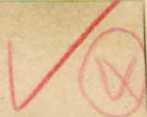
ALLEN

MABEL

BLANCHE

National Library of Jamaica

'Miss May' Allen



THE EDITOR, Sir:— Mrs Mabel Blanche Allen. (Miss May, as she was affectionately known to all) was called away from this world on Saturday, October 6, to reap the reward of the Master: "well done, thou good and faithful servant. . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

She was one who could justly and honestly be called "Child of God," "Mother in Israel," "Saint," and although she was awarded the Badge of Honour of Jamaica, many persons have for years referred to her as "Lady Allen."

Christian people of this area have felt and said that it was under the guidance of God that Miss May and her husband, Teacher Allen, came to Leicesterfield in 1931. This is not, however, an occasion to talk about Teacher Allen. The subject of this letter is Miss May.

One of the greatest things which Miss May has done has been to remain with us from 1931, in a sense up to the time of her death; because whether she lived at Leicesterfield or at Frankfield, she was still with us at Leicesterfield. In coming to Leicesterfield, she had to walk over two miles from Savoy and her personal belongings had to be carried on her head. The Post Office was at Frankfield, five miles away. The school building was the worst that I had ever seen. The cottage was made with undressed lumber, and one section was even wattle and daub and covered with rough and old lumber. There was not a dry spot to be found in the house when it rained and Teacher and Miss May could count the stars by looking through the shingles at night. The toilet was over a chain from the house and extremely difficult to reach at nights or whenever it rained. My family were the nearest neighbours and in about one chain of road which divided our home from the teacher's cottage. 13 donkeys carrying bananas to market got stuck in the mud at one time on the same day and had to be dug out with spades and other tools. The source of water was from "Push-me Gully," a place as dangerous and difficult as the name suggests, because sometimes to get from this gully the person below had to push the one above. Almost any other

young and very able lady teacher, apart from Mrs. Allen, would have stayed at Leicesterfield only long enough to serve three months' notice.

Instead of leaving for more comfortable and progressive areas, Miss May stuck to these conditions and formed the main cornerstone of a school which became in her time the most famous in Jamaica. In fact, it was wrong to call it an elementary school, for it was a comprehensive school. There was nothing lacking in this school which was worthwhile, and children came from various parishes to board at Leicesterfield just to attend this school. We could not be beaten in sports or equalled in academic work; secondary education started in standard 5. When there was a school exhibition of handicraft, Leicesterfield School stood out by itself and had no true competitor. Indeed, we used to have our own shows and exhibitions at Leicesterfield and these were attended by the highest dignitaries in the land. Everyone who came was amazed. The craft work, or most of it, which won such high praise and admiration as well as the exhibits in Home Economics and Dressmaking all taught by Miss May.

It is difficult to say whether Miss May was first a teacher or first a social and church worker, because in all three fields she was very distinguished. Space does not allow me to comment on the mass weddings, the Savings Club, the 4-H Club, the Girls Guildry and, most of all the training of thousands of nurses in the United Kingdom. Although Teacher Allen had started to train student nurses in 1948, it was Miss May who pioneered the training of thousands upon thousands of pupil nurses in 1955, and with Teacher continued it through the years. Because of this, many girls who had given up all hope of qualifying to lead a useful life found a means of doing so.

I can testify to the fact that there is no town in Jamaica, and hardly a village, from which some girl has not been trained directly or indirectly through the instrumentality of Miss May. The fact is that even the scheme, which was started by Teacher

Allen, could never have succeeded without the backing of Miss May, who personally interviewed most of the girls and instructed them how to adjust themselves to living abroad.

The public is not well aware of the fact that Miss May and Teacher were not only interested in training nurses for abroad. They had their own scheme for sending other Jamaicans abroad: domestics, tailors, carpenters, masons, other tradesmen and unskilled workers. What is more, this was voluntary national service, done on their own, at a time when other Jamaicans did not believe that this could be possible.

Iniquitous land tenancy

The thing that kept Miss May and Teacher in Clarendon was not just the school; for they always said other teachers could be found to teach the children; but no one else could be found to set the people of Leicesterfield free from the kind of land tenancy which enslaved them. A hog or a dog could be buried on the property; but a man whose great grandparents and who himself was born there could not be buried there. All the houses on the property were made of cane trash, banana trash, bamboo stick and grass, because anyone who attempted to make a decent house was immediately ejected. A man's thriving banana field could be levied on if the landlord's headman chopped one banana leaf in his field and said, "I take charge of this field." People had to hide their animals from being levied.

Many had to pay an iniquitous charge known as "overland rent." This means if a man rented one acre more or less, the land was not measured and given to him; but 20 years later, the landlord

came and said that he had 5 acres too much. He would then have to pay for 5 acres for 20 years. Poor tenants were taken to court, and often ejected, because they were too poor to fight the landlord. Miss May stayed with Teacher in Leicesterfield bush to overthrow this system by forming a Tenants' Association and by backing the tenants to fight two big lawsuits against the landlord who was represented by the late Norman Manley, K.C. After the property was bought, Miss May remained with Teacher and kept the tenants on the property free of rent for ten years, on the grounds that they did not rent any land from Government and that they wanted land settlement.

The road leading from Nine Turns to Leicesterfield was cut by free labour. True Miss May did not work on the road, as Teacher did, with pick and shovel; but she supported those who worked. She also supported other free labour efforts to cut roads at Windsor, Wesbeach, Morant, Santa Hill, Wakefield and elsewhere in Clarendon.

Miss May was the lady who started adult literacy classes long before Dr. Loebach. These classes were held on her verandah. She gave free music lessons which produced many good organists and pianists. She was the pioneer of basic

schools, the first one starting on her verandah. One reason for the great success of Leicesterfield School is that it was surrounded by basic schools at Nine Turns, Woodside, Big Gate, Mountain and Effort. She also established basic schools in other districts in her capacity as Administrator of the Women's Federation. Among these were Thompson Town, Smithville, Fairburn, Desire, Silent Hill, Wesbeach, Peckham, Tweedside and a host of others.

Miss May had no children of her own; but no one has bothered to count the number of children reared in her home or those who lived at their parents' homes, but were either fully or partially supported by her. Perhaps the first soup kitchen in Jamaica was established at Leicesterfield School by Miss May aided by local effort. During the second World War children were clothed at Leicesterfield by a Revolving Clothing Fund, run by Miss May. When other schools were teaching girls to hem and make buttonholes, Miss May was then teaching them to sew their own dresses and other garments, as well as those of other children. Even up to the time of her death she was assisting many poor children attending school, but only herself and her husband knew the details of these

things, for they did not wish to embarrass anyone.

Miss May literally took charge of the fund-raising side of Leicesterfield Baptist Church although her own church,

Unity Methodist Church, was more than a mile from Leicesterfield. Her generosity and kindness to poor persons can hardly be sufficiently praised. The above is only part of the reason why I say she was one who could justly be called "Child of God," "Mother in Israel," "Saint" and why so many people called her "Lady Allen."

May her soul rest in peace and light eternal shine upon her!

I am, etc.

CANUTE T. MCLEOD J.P.
Leicesterfield P.A.
October 8, 1973.