



Vietta Garr



Courtesy of Bill Curtis

Vietta Garr worked for the Truman family as cook, companion and friend for more than 35 years. Her involvement at church and her leadership in a fraternal organization called the Knights of Tabor, as well as her position at the Truman home, made her a highly respected member of the African American community in Independence, Missouri. Vietta's life is an example of one of the overlooked stories of our nation's history: the African American domestic.

The Garr Family

Vietta's father Benjamin, born in 1858, was the eldest child of George and Martha Garr. The Garrs and their children were slaves on a farm near Independence until Missouri's emancipation in 1865. By 1870, the family was farming in Independence. They were devout Baptists, an affiliation that continued to be strong in subsequent generations.

Benjamin Garr married Emma Jamison around 1895. They lived in Independence and rented a house on Farmer Street. It is said that Ben worked for Bess Truman's grandfather, George Porterfield Gates, as a houseman. He also worked as a hostler -- someone who takes care of horses or mules -- and as a laborer at a local rock quarry. Emma Garr worked as a laundress.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans had limited job options. Men worked as laborers in various businesses and in private homes as house servants or gardeners. Women held positions as cooks, maids and laundresses. Benjamin and Emma had one daughter,

Ione Vietta, in March of 1896. Vietta grew up watching her female relatives work as cooks and laundresses and learned the skills she would need to work in a private home. She attended Young School, the African American school in Independence, located on the corner of Farmer and Noland streets and completed her high school education there. By 1920, she was working in an Independence home as a servant.

Benjamin Garr died between 1934-1938. Emma Garr died July 21, 1940. Both of Vietta's parents are buried at Woodlawn Cemetery in Independence.



Headstones of Benjamin and Emma Garr, Woodlawn Cemetery.

Photos by Bill Curtis.

Vietta and the Trumans



Courtesy of Bill Curtis

Vietta in her work uniform, circa 1950.

Vietta Garr began working in the Wallace-Truman home in 1928. Bess Truman's mother, Madge Gates Wallace, was accustomed to having servants in the home. Her parents, George and Elizabeth Gates, employed live-in servants during the late 19th century. Domestic workers in this part of the Midwest were typically African Americans. After the turn of the 20th century, the Gates-Wallace family continued to employ black domestics, although they no longer lived with the family.

Vietta worked for the family until 1943. With Senator Truman and his family living in Washington D.C., Vietta was no longer needed at the Independence house on a regular basis. She soon found a position as manager of the Crown Drug Store lunch counter at 12th and Paseo in Kansas City, Missouri.

In 1945, Bess asked Vietta to work for the family again when Harry Truman became president. She accompanied the family to the White House to be a companion to the

aging Madge Wallace. Although Vietta was never the official White House chef, the Trumans favored her meals. Vietta knew what foods each of the Trumans enjoyed. During their stays in Independence, she fixed steam-fried chicken or baked Virginia ham, her own special recipe for sweet potatoes and the President's favorite, angel food cake.

Vietta helped raise the Truman's daughter Margaret, from the time she was a small child. Margaret was not able to say "Vietta" as a young child, calling her "Pete" instead. They developed a strong bond that lasted into Margaret's adulthood. Vietta accompanied Margaret on numerous concert appearances providing trusted companionship.

During her time in Washington, Vietta met many famous and influential people. She collected cards, autographs and other keepsakes, which she compiled into scrapbooks chronicling her travels.

Community Involvement

Vietta was well known throughout the African American community, not only for her position at the Truman household, but also for her involvement in Second Baptist Church and the Knights and Daughters of Tabor. Her opinion was

respected by both blacks and whites. She often referred people from her church and community for domestic positions. Several people who worked on a part time basis for the Truman family were referred by Vietta.

Second Baptist Church

Vietta was a longtime member of Second Baptist Church located on White Oak Street in Independence. Church was an important part of her daily life and Vietta was involved with many committees and special groups within the church. She played the piano and sang soprano in the church choir. She was known for her wonderful cooking and often prepared food for church gatherings.

Second Baptist Church, Independence, Missouri, circa 1960.

Photo by Bill Curtis



The Knights and Daughters of Tabor



Vietta Garr's International Order of Twelve endowment certificate, dated February 7, 1921.

Courtesy of Norman & Roxanne Robinson.

In August 1872, Rev. Moses Dickson founded a benevolent society for African Americans in Independence called the International Order of Twelve of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor. The society's objectives were to spread Christianity and education, acquire real estate and avoid intemperance. The Knights of Tabor spread quickly across the country and by 1900 claimed 200,000 members.

Vietta Garr was an active member of the women's Independence chapter. The Salem Tabernacle No. 1 provided a social outlet, but more importantly it allowed African Americans to purchase burial insurance during a time when white companies would not insure black citizens.

Vietta became a member on February 7, 1921. She listed her mother, Emma Garr, as beneficiary of her insurance policy. During the late 1920s, Vietta took on an active role in the society, serving as High Priestess, the leader of the Tabernacle. She served in this position for several years. The Salem Tabernacle No. 1 operated into the early 1930s when the Depression made paying dues too difficult and the chapter disbanded.

Retirement

In 1957, the Trumans set up a trust fund for Vietta with \$5200 from their estate. The trust paid twenty dollars per week until Vietta's death or for five years, the time it would take to deplete the fund. She received the support from 1957 until 1962. Vietta continued to work for the Trumans during those years, finally retiring in the mid 1960s. She never married.

Vietta was severely injured in late 1973 when her dress caught fire from a burner on her kitchen stove. She died on December 31, 1973. Her funeral was held January 6, 1974 at Second Baptist Church. In her eulogy the pastor commented that Vietta was associated with diplomats and statesmen from many countries yet she never lost her love of church and community.

Vietta Garr is buried with her parents at Woodlawn Cemetery.



Vietta, circa 1965.



Vietta's home at 131 E. Farmer in Independence, circa 1970.

Photo by Bill Curtis

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