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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

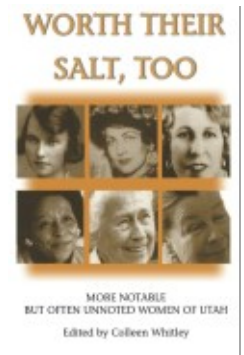
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ALBERTA MAE HILL GOOCH HENRY
 “Feed My Sheep”

Colleen Whitley

A native of Ogden, Utah, Colleen Whitley holds an A.A. from Weber State College, a B.A. from the University of Utah, and an M.A. from Brigham Young University and consequently doesn't care who wins football games. She has taught on every level, from elementary students through graduate students, plus Job Corps, and she helped to open one of the first alternative high schools in the state. She is currently teaching for the English Department and the Honors Program at BYU. A community activist, she works with Girl and Boy Scouts, community councils, PTAs, and lists among her hobbies, “barassing inept public officials.” She wanted to include Henry in this volume because “I think she is one of the most important women in Utah in the twentieth century—and maybe in its entire history.” Finding Henry most generous in helping assemble materials and delightful to work with, she plans to expand this essay into a full-length biography.

Julia Ida Palmer lived in Kansas City, Missouri, until she was in the eighth grade. Then one afternoon, on her way home from school, she was dragged into an alley and raped.¹ When her mother, Susie Wallace Palmer, learned of it, she took her daughter to Shreveport, Louisiana, where her mother lived. There Julia met and married James Hill, a descendent of slaves, born on a reservation near El Reno, Oklahoma.² They worked as sharecroppers in Hosston, Caddo Parish, a little north of Shreveport, where they produced four children: Rosetta, born 1917; Nevada, 1919; David, 1921; and Alberta, born 14 October 1920.

Alberta would eventually move to Utah and become one of the state's most significant community leaders.

Because the Hills were sharecroppers, planting on a White man's land, they were required to shop at the company store during the year and sell their harvest there in the fall. Naturally, the value of all products bought and sold was determined by the store owner. As was frequently the case in such arrangements, the shopkeeper told the Hills that the assessed value of the harvest did not equal their incurred debt in the store. Julia, however, kept careful records, her eighth-grade education serving her well. When she protested, the landowner, Henry Noel, told Julia's husband, "Shut up that gal, boy. Make sure she keep her mouth shut 'cause she gonna get lynched down here."

Neither James nor Julia wanted her to be hanged, and both knew she would not be quiet. Even more important, they wanted their children to be educated above the levels available to them in Louisiana. So in the winter of 1923, the family moved to Topeka, Kansas, where chances of a Black woman both speaking out and staying alive were greatly increased, not that Topeka was entirely open to Blacks, of course. The elementary school the children attended, McKinley, was segregated, although Curtis Junior and Topeka High, which Alberta attended, were integrated.³

Her brother David says Alberta was much like their mother even as a child: aggressive, authoritative, and usually right.⁴ Alberta enjoyed school and met many people, some of whom would remain friends for the rest of their lives. One of them, Georgia West, would sometimes stay at the Hill's house after school until someone could come and take her home. One evening the two girls decided to go to a football game at Kansas Vocational School. On their way to catch a bus, they met some friends who owned a car, a Model T Ford, a rare possession for anyone in 1938 but especially for Blacks. The girls climbed in, and they drove off. Soon after, they were hit broadside by a drunken driver, the glass from the car's window slashing Alberta's face between the eyebrows and across her left eyelid. She still carries a scar from that accident. The drunk, who was White, ran immediately to the police station where his brother worked and reported that his car had been stolen, thus avoiding prosecution.

Alberta was taken to the hospital where doctors discovered that as she had blinked that slashed eyelid, the glass had dislodged and done

more damage. The doctor examining Alberta was White, and when he said she would need stitches, Alberta demanded that she be treated by a Black doctor. They found an intern, Dr. William Scott, the only Black on the staff, to sew up the eyelid. By that time Grandmother Barnes had arrived without having been told that an accident had occurred. Her precipitous arrival did not surprise Alberta. Susie Barnes was part Native American and a spiritualist; her premonitions and insights were known to presage events. She had earlier warned Alberta's mother against letting her ride in cars. Julia, however, was unconcerned, pointing out that they didn't own a car and knew no one who did, so it wasn't likely to be a problem. When Grandma Barnes learned Alberta had demanded a Black doctor, she announced that seeking opportunities for Blacks would become Alberta's life work. At the time, Alberta had no intention of doing anything of the kind; she didn't know exactly what she would do with her life, but civic activism didn't seem to be on the agenda.

Following high school graduation in 1939, Alberta entered the Youth Works Project Administration, attended by girls from all over the state.⁵ They learned to clean, cook, shop, and sew. After two weeks, Alberta received \$18, which she gave to her mother, who returned an allowance back to her. Alberta did not care for sewing, but she took to catering and worked with a catering group for about a year. Then a friend became a cashier at a theater and arranged for Alberta to be hired as a ticket taker. When the friend left for California, Alberta succeeded her as cashier and eventually became assistant manager. Because she was bonded, she often handled the tickets for the big bands that came through Topeka, occasionally hiring her brother as a security guard.⁶ She even became a projectionist during World War II when no men were available for the job.

While she was working in the theater, some friends brought in a cousin who was serving in the army. He was immediately taken with Alberta and announced to his commanding officer that he needed leave to marry her. She married Gooch⁷ in 1941. When she told her mother she was planning to marry, Julia said, "You are old enough, so I am not going to tell you no, but you are playing with God here. If you make your bed hard, you have to lie in it." Initially Alberta and Gooch lived in San Luis Obispo, California, but when Gooch left the service, they returned to Topeka, where they bought a house and a share in a small

restaurant. Alberta's mother, who had divorced her husband by then, lived with them. It was Julia who found Alberta collapsed on the floor in 1948.

She was rushed to a hospital, where surgery revealed that her appendix had burst, spreading infection throughout her abdomen, a condition that was almost invariably fatal at the time. When Alberta was released from the hospital, the general medical consensus was that she was simply going home to die.

Her mother cared for her, and friends from all over the country sent letters and gifts. An old friend, Dorothy Lytle, who later married a member of the Mills Brothers singing group, flew in from Los Angeles—an adventure in itself in those relatively early days of commercial aviation. When Dorothy asked what the doctor was doing for Alberta, the family explained that nothing was being done. The surgeon who had performed the operation was White, because Black doctors were not permitted to perform surgery; however, Black patients were assigned Black doctors for follow-up care, generally limited to dispensing pain pills. Dorothy immediately went to the Santa Fe Hospital⁸ and demanded a White doctor, Fred L. Ford, make a house call to see Alberta. A White doctor coming to a Black home was a social anathema at the time. On his initial examination, Dr. Ford said there was nothing he could do. Dorothy refused to accept that diagnosis, so Ford tried another tactic. He asked, "Can you make her angry?"

The family explained that Alberta was too good-natured to get angry over anything trivial; they said the one thing that might work would be a danger or insult to her mother. Dr. Ford told Julia to go over and touch her daughter, and then shouted at her to stop. Alberta roused enough to open her eyes and think, "What's that White Paddy doing in my house talking to my mother like that? I will never speak to him as long as I live."⁹ Then she went back to sleep. After that, Dr. Ford came to the house three times a day and brought an experimental treatment, sulfa and penicillin. The sulfa required great quantities of liquid, so family and friends worked in shifts around the clock to give her water, juices, soups, and milk shakes.¹⁰ They carried her to the bathroom for three sitz baths a day for six months until she could walk in by herself, though she still needed help getting back to bed. In the process she went from 130 to 66 pounds. Dr. Ford had said initially that even if she lived, she could be in a vegetative state and would

probably spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. When she recovered fully, he said, "I didn't save her. What did?"

Alberta's answer to that question stems from her enormous personal faith. As a young woman she was baptized into her Grandfather J. J. Palmer's Church of the Living God, where she taught Sunday school. She longed to become a missionary to Africa and developed a great and lasting love for the Bible.¹¹ While she was so sick, almost unable to move, she saw a white light come into the room and sit at the end of her bed. Then she heard a voice say, "You will not die. I have work for you to do." It would be several months before she learned what that work was.

When she recovered sufficiently, Alberta returned to work at the cafe, which she discovered was rapidly deteriorating. Cooks or waitresses sometimes did not show up, and Alberta had to cover their jobs. She realized that Gooch's gambling and infidelity had destroyed both their business and their marriage, and she determined to divorce him. Initially, she wanted nothing of their property, despite the fact that it had been her hard work and saving while he was in the service that gave them the initial capital to buy a home and a share in the cafe. The lawyer insisted she should have half, so the judge gave her one of the two cars and the shares in the cafe; Gooch got the house and all the appliances, including two real luxuries for the time: a washer and a dryer.¹²

Alberta continued to work in the cafe but had to stop to rest frequently. Dr. Ford declared the work was simply too hard and told her to go away somewhere so she could rest. She could think of no place to go until one day a Pullman porter came into the cafe and suggested that she go to Salt Lake City. Alberta's only previous experience in Utah had been a short stop on the way back from California with Dorothy in the winter of 1947, the worst on record to that point. The memory was not encouraging. However, the porter reminded her, Blanche Lytle, a friend from McKinley Elementary School, and her husband Raymond were living in Salt Lake City and were doing well. Besides, Raymond respected Alberta since she did not drink, and he would welcome a visit.

In August of 1949 Alberta traveled to Salt Lake, leaving her mother in her apartment down the street from the cafe, expecting to stay in Utah only a few weeks. Although her experience in Utah in the fall of 1949 was far better than in the winter of 1947, she still had not learned to love the place, but she seemed to be unable to leave. Every

time she started to return to her apartment and her cafe, even when she had tickets ready to go, she simply could not leave. Then one day she was standing at the sink washing dishes and looking out the window to the east at the mountains, which she had come to love, wondering what mission the Lord had for her when he promised that she would not die. Suddenly, she realized what it was and drawing on her deep faith immediately replied: "Oh, no Lord. Not Utah."

But Utah it was, and has been for the last fifty years.

Despite her problems with her health, she knew that if she were to stay, she would have to find a job. But Salt Lake City, like virtually every other city outside the deep South, had its own form of de facto segregation. While minorities could ride the busses, most clubs, hotels, restaurants, and other public facilities were closed to them. Alberta still has the realtor's card from the first house she bought which contains the notation, "Can sell to coloreds." The notable exception to this exclusion was Lagoon amusement park in Davis County; Robert E. Freed had dropped color bars in the 1940s.¹³

The impact of the de facto discrimination hit when Alberta started looking for a job. Thinking her experience in theaters would provide good opportunities, Alberta went to the employment office where she was told, "We don't hire coloreds." Learning that the only positions open to colored women were in domestic service, she returned to the Lytles' house and opened the newspaper. When Blanche suggested that such menial jobs were beneath her, Alberta replied, "My mother always said anything that's honest is not beneath you. You do the best job you can as long as it's honest." Eventually she interviewed with Helen Sandack, admitting that she had no references or professional experience as a domestic but that she knew how to keep a clean house. Helen asked if she liked children, and just then "my eight month old baby [Artie] came crawling in and the smile on your face told me everything I needed to know."¹⁴

On election day, 7 November 1949, Alberta went to work for A. Wally and Helen Sandack. She became an integral part of the family; the children, now grown, still call her "Berta." The respect the children held for her was demonstrated when Nancy brought home a young man of whom her parents did not approve, but they decided to say nothing. Alberta quietly took Nancy aside, shook her head, and said, "Uh, uh, he's not one of us." Nancy dropped him immediately thereafter.¹⁵ That

mutual affection and respect still remain. A few months ago Henry attended Artie's son's Bar Mitzvah.

While she worked for the Sandacks, Alberta joined the Pilgrim Baptist Church, feeling then, as she still does, that church membership is important. She appreciates the care and concern congregants offer each other, the sense that they are all part of a family. She represented Pilgrim Baptist at a convention in Ogden in 1960 where they elected her president of the Utah and Idaho Missionary Society. She had fulfilled that childhood dream of becoming a missionary. Although it wasn't exactly Africa, it was among African Americans. She visited throughout the area, anywhere there was a Black community and a Baptist Church. She arranged her visits over weekends and maintained her job with the Sandacks, who supported her completely in her religious endeavors. They even helped her to find a doctor, Irvin Ershler, to monitor her health, still precarious following her ruptured appendix.¹⁶ When Wally Sandack asked her what she planned to do or what she thought the Lord wanted her to do, she replied that she did not know, but she turned, as she always does, to her Bible. She kept encountering Christ's injunction to Peter, "Feed my sheep."¹⁷

While the church was the center of her social life, she had secular outlets as well. In August of 1949 Blanche took her to the Porters' and Waiters' Club in Salt Lake City and introduced her to Harold Lloyd Henry. Alberta played tunk, dominoes, and checkers very well and with great enthusiasm. Harold was impressed. As they visited, Alberta again had a sense of calling to which she again replied with great faith: "I guess the Lord picked him out but I'm not having it." Harold, however, persisted. He visited her at the Lytles' and later at the Sandacks' every time he was in Salt Lake City. In time she came to like his beautiful green eyes and realized "he was a lovely person." They were married on 17 November 1950.

Harold had been married twice before and had two sons, Harold Jr. and Warren. Harold and Alberta adopted two children, Julia, whom they named for Alberta's mother, and Wendell. Despite all of the Henrys' efforts, Wendell, like so many young men, became enamored of drugs and was consequently involved in many problems which contributed to his death in 1988. Harold worked as a waiter on the Union Pacific Railroad until his retirement in 1972.¹⁸ When he became ill in 1994, Julia, her husband Daniel Cosby, and their three children,

Patricia, Denitra, and Daniel Julian, moved in with the Henrys to help Alberta care for him. When Harold died on 10 June 1996, he and Alberta had been married for forty-six years, and she speaks of him still with great affection and respect. The Cosbys still live with her, an arrangement that works well for all of them. She looks forward to her grandchildren's arrival every day after school.

Through all of those years, Alberta's family and her church were the core of her activities. For twenty-two years she served as the clerk for the New Hope Baptist Church, arranging funerals, filing obituaries, and helping people in difficult situations. She also continued to work with the Utah and Idaho Baptist Association. Along the way she learned aspects of law and procedures in dealing with public offices, gained insights into the lives of minorities in the area, and recognized both problems and methods of solving them.

One of the problems that troubled her most was that many young Blacks dropped out of school and few, if any, attended college. On her first visit to the University of Utah in 1949, she asked how many Black students were enrolled and learned that the school usually had a few Black athletes on scholarships but when their eligibility to play expired, most left, never graduating.¹⁹

One solution grew from Alberta's remarkable ability to bring together diverse individuals and groups. In the early 1960s the Utah Baptist Association identified four students from four different churches who needed help to attend college. When Alberta mentioned them to Wally Sandack, he approached several wealthy Jewish families and arranged support for those young people. The next year more students were identified, and it was obvious something more formal would be required. Wally Sandack continued to help and organized a meeting at Virginia Hiatt's home on 4 December 1967. Alberta was elected chairman, Hiatt vice-chair, and Ben Roe as treasurer.²⁰ Roe was a retired businessman with many contacts in the community. He talked to the Chamber of Commerce, the Bamberger Foundation, and other groups with access to capital to provide the seed money. Support also came from many churches. Christ United Methodist Church offered help immediately and continued contributing for the next thirty-two years. Virginia Hiatt, representing the Presbyterians in Church Women United, brought in more financial contributors and interested mentors as well.

When the time came to name the organization that was growing from all this activity, most of the people involved favored calling it the Alberta Henry Education Foundation (AHEF). Alberta objected but was outvoted. Begun in 1965 and incorporated as a nonprofit organization in December 1967, AHEF aids minority and disadvantaged young people. By 1973 the foundation was awarding as many as fifty scholarships per year to schools ranging from public universities to technical schools to private undergraduate schools. By 1991 it was attracting corporate support, but, as Henry is proud to point out, it has never used federal tax dollars.²¹ Among its more than three hundred alumni is a range of professions: Solomon Chacon, a criminal lawyer; Shauna M. Robertson, a lawyer with legal aid; Harvey Boyd, architect; his sister, Marsha Boyd Hodges, probation officer; Toni Harp, state senator for the Tenth District, New Haven, Connecticut; Judee Williams, who worked for a long while with the University of Utah women's programs. Today both Boyds and Karen Wallenberg, another Henry scholar, are working with the Henry Foundation, giving others the same chance they were given.²² Jim Rock, secretary treasurer of the AHEF, coupled donations to the foundation with other scholarships and aids to extend the funds further. The foundation itself has become a catalyst for other civic and educational activities, as has Alberta herself.

Busy as she may have become helping others, Alberta's main emphasis for several years was her own offspring. As her children started kindergarten at Franklin Elementary School, she became involved in PTA. The principal, LeRoy Nelsen, quickly recognized her abilities. "She was vitally interested in the welfare of all the kids—not just her own or just the Black kids. She was intelligent, bright, energetic, but she was working as a domestic and I felt she was capable of more complicated work. I suggested she go to the university and get a degree."²³

In time Alberta followed Nelsen's suggestion, but she did a few other things first. At the same time she was helping at the school, she was also spending many of her days voluntarily chauffeuring Mignon Richmond, who did not drive, to various appointments. In 1921 Richmond had become the first Black to graduate from a college in Utah and was a prominent leader in the Black community, serving on several boards and committees.²⁴ Alberta had met Mignon at church and recognized the value of her services to the community as a whole

and to the Black population in particular, so she offered to drive for her. What started as a simple act of kindness led to a whole new career: as Richmond left several of those boards and committees, Alberta took her place.

Among the organizations with which Richmond worked was the Salt Lake branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Alberta became their youth director and spent four years at the Nettie Gregory Center.²⁵ As a youth director, she supervised games and crafts, but she quickly displayed what would become her trademark in dealing with civic activities: look for lots of options and don't settle for the obvious ones. In 1974 Reverend France Davis, who currently serves as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, was an instructor in the Communications Department at the University of Utah. Alberta asked him to come and explain parliamentary procedure to the young people at the center. It was a new topic for most of them, but many found it fascinating and, eventually, useful.

Alberta also worked with four young Black students from the University of Utah who had been hired by Salt Lake School District to counsel high school students who were performing poorly and appeared to be in danger of dropping out of school. She quickly formed a bond with one, Marsha Boyd. They would learn which students were missing from the high school, then go out and find them. "Marsha always knew where the kids were hanging out."²⁶ The kids got a pep talk (or a chewing out) and a ride back to class.

Recognizing that at least part of the problem stemmed from negative perceptions of Blacks, both by many elements of society and by much of the Black community itself, Alberta and Marsha looked for ways to alter those perceptions. At a regional NAACP conference they saw some drill teams sponsored by local branches; they quickly realized that the young people involved were learning discipline and cooperation, as well as receiving plaudits. Thus Salt Lake City's "Soul Sisters Drill Team" was born. The group performed in various places, but especially in schools, helping children and young adults broaden their horizons. In 1973 they were named "Outstanding Youth Group" at the NAACP West Regional Conference in Pacific Grove, California.²⁷ In the course of joining boards and working with young people, Alberta Henry became widely known as a woman of integrity who recognized problems and worked to solve them.

By 1967 her reputation as an innovative problem solver brought her into another field. Utah community leaders Lucy Beth Rampton and Esther Landa were among those who had lobbied in Washington for a Head Start program. When it became a reality in Salt Lake City, they recommended that Alberta be hired as an aide in the program.²⁸ Alberta agreed because her own children were by then ten and eleven.

Initially, the school met on Twenty-first South, a little east of the present Salt Lake County complex, and later it was moved to Central City, with Lynn Crookston as the director. A group came from the University of Utah to evaluate the program and observed that Alberta, who had never been to college, was as competent as any of the teachers and recommended that she be given a room of her own. A degreed teacher was hired to show her how to deal with the mechanics of teaching, like lesson plans, reports, and discipline. In a few weeks, the teacher said, "She already knows what she's doing. Just leave her on her own and give me the other three-year-old class and we'll work together." They did, very happily, for several years.

At the same time, Alberta maintained her high level of civic involvement. On most days after she finished at the day-care center, she went to NAACP activities or served in the Model Cities program, serving, among other duties, as chairperson of the Education Task Force. Her administrative abilities showed most clearly in the way she handled discussions, sometimes heated, about everything from the expenditure of funds to establishing a peace garden.²⁹ Alberta credits her ability to conduct meetings and organize groups to Esther Landa. She says, "I watched her several times. She could really handle those meetings and be fair."

In 1971 she received a phone call at the day-care center from the parents of some junior high school students who felt that a principal had just suspended their children unfairly. She was preparing to go do battle with the principal when another call came, this one from the regents of the University of Utah asking her to accept an honorary doctorate degree. She replied that she was very busy at the moment, preparing to go burn down a junior high school. The man laughed and said, "That's fine. Just give us your approval to give you an honorary doctorate and then you can go burn the school down." She agreed, although she insists that at the time she was not altogether certain what an honorary doctorate meant. She then went on to the junior high

school where she was able to achieve redress for the students without resorting to arson.

She became an honorary doctor of humane letters in June 1971 in company with Senator Wallace F. Bennett and Nobel Prize winning biologist George Wald.³⁰ She was the first Black to be so honored by the University of Utah. The letters of congratulations she received for that award reflect her impact in the community. They came typed on letterhead from various departments of the university, from public officials, from newspaper editors, from her colleagues in community services programs. And they came handwritten on notecards from friends and neighbors. Their sentiments are reflected by Afton Forsgren of the governor's Committee on Children and Youth: "I know of no one among all of my acquaintances that is as deserving of this honor as are you. So many people who receive honorary degrees have everything and everyone 'going for them.' Not so with you. You did everything you have done against great odds."³¹

By 1980 Dr. M. Donald Thomas, superintendent of Salt Lake City schools, had become Alberta's friend and confidant. He recommended she complete a bachelor's degree so that she could receive both the title and compensation she deserved for the work she was doing.³² So, Alberta returned to the university commencement to receive her bachelor's degree, with honors, in education. Again, she received letters of praise and congratulations. This time they came especially from the young people, many of them now grown, who had benefitted from her foundation. One of them put it very succinctly: "Now you know the glory you've made possible for so many of us."³³

Alberta greatly enjoyed working with the children in the Central Cities Day Care Center. In time, however, the federal government demanded that the parents become involved and recommended Alberta be named parent coordinator. Alberta refused, saying she enjoyed the children far too much to leave them altogether, so they compromised: she would work as an administrator from eight to four, but at four o'clock she would return to the day-care center and stay with the children until their parents picked them up in the evening.

She was an ideal choice for the administrative job, since she had already developed credibility in the community with her previous civic and church work. She meshed the two worlds well, calling on church groups to help provide for the needs of the children—from Christmas

presents to foster grandparenting. She helped parents find jobs, arranged doctor and dentist appointments, and generally fielded the many problems that beset all parents and can overwhelm those without the means to handle them.

In August 1972 she received a letter from Salt Lake School District asking her to become a minority consultant for the Black student population. Once again, she was not looking for a new job and didn't really want to change, but she accepted because she felt strongly that the Lord was moving her along to help others who would need her. She recalls the day she resigned from day care as one of the saddest of her life. She became the first Black administrator in the district and found some of her established White colleagues reluctant to accept her. She was amazed to learn that some principals in schools were intimidated by her; she still thought of herself as a little Black woman who was just trying to help people out and do what the Lord wanted her to do.

She recognized quickly that many Black students had a limited or even negative self-image, which was to some extent fostered by some counselors and teachers who advised careers only in manual trades or menial service areas. To alter that vision, in 1973 she established a Black Honor Society to give young Black students a source of pride and a goal to reach. She was shocked when the society was criticized for being limited to Black students. "It was a great learning experience to see yourself as a racist."³⁴ The group was quickly renamed the Rainbow Honorary Society and opened to all students. The society sponsored a variety of activities for students, including out-of-state trips.

Alberta's reputation for justice and equality was established, soon after being hired, by the way she handled an incident at Riley Elementary School. Two Black boys were fighting during recess and calling each other "nigger." The principal broke up the fight and sent them back to class. A week later another fight broke out, this time between one of those same Black students and a White boy. The White boy called the Black boy a "nigger," and the principal immediately expelled him. The boy's mother protested that the punishment was unfair; her son had heard the word used a week earlier by that same Black student with no real consequences. Alberta was called in to mediate, and as soon as she learned the circumstances, she agreed with the White mother. If the word was sufficiently offensive to require expulsion when it came

from a White mouth, it was equally repulsive coming from a Black mouth. "Fairness must work every kind of way," she says.

Alberta was frequently asked to settle disputes, and her unusual (sometimes outright bizarre) solutions became the stuff of legends. Roger Tucker, former principal of Jordan Junior High,³⁵ recalls a problem with a young Black man, not a student and much older than junior high students, but a frequent visitor at the school. He stole a pair of shoes from the boys' locker room, and when the White owner saw him wearing them, he demanded them back, saying he could prove ownership because he had written his initials inside each shoe. The Black boy insisted they were his and refused to take them off. Their argument quickly escalated into a racial confrontation involving many of the students in the school—the White students maintaining that he should take off the shoes and let someone examine them and the Black students insisting he should not be subjected to any such humiliation. While the students were screaming at each other, Tucker called Alberta. When she arrived, she simply took the suspected culprit into an office and asked him to take off the shoes. Seeing the initials clearly, she returned the shoes to their owner and escorted the young Black man out of the building. Tucker says that a week later he got a call from the U.S. Army asking him about the young man, who was now considering military service, and he wondered if Alberta had simply followed up on the case and found a place for the young man. Such additional service would have been typical of her.³⁶

In another incident, Alberta was called into a junior high when a fight broke out between two girls, one Hispanic and one White. By the time she arrived, the room contained not just the fighters but their entourages as well. Alberta refused to listen to anyone except the actual combatants. The Hispanic girl said someone had told her that the White girl intended to take a group of friends to her home and beat her up. The White girl described how the Hispanic girl's friend had told her she would be a target of abuse. Finding that each girl denied having made such statements about the other, Alberta called for the friends who had delivered the threats. She opened her purse, took out two one-dollar bills, and handed one to each of the friends who had instigated the fight. The fighters, of course, were instantly unified in a demand to know why those people who had encouraged the fight should be so rewarded. Alberta's reply was simple: "Any time anybody can just make a suggestion or tell a lie and get other people to fight, I'm going

to pay them." Her action caused a temporary rise in attempts to start fights, but it ended all the real battles. It also forged a lasting friendship between the two combatants.

Alberta spent a great deal of time in the schools, aside from being called in to solve crises. She thought it important to let the students see her, and, by extension, themselves, in positive situations, so she would often visit, sometimes as many as five schools a day, always smiling broadly and asking students how they were doing.

Alberta's work for Salt Lake School District was not confined to finding solutions to student problems. Sometimes she was asked to solve the administrators' problems as well. The district owned some buildings across the street from West High School; they planned to tear them down and add new facilities for the school. When three families established squatter's rights in those buildings and the district's lawyer was unable to persuade them to move, Alberta went in to talk with them. In a short while she negotiated with the three families to move in to a motel at district expense for two weeks while more appropriate accommodations and employment could be found. The district was able to begin demolition on schedule while the families had a reprieve and a new friend to help them find jobs and homes.

Alberta's reputation for fair, if occasionally unorthodox, handling of difficult situations continued growing in both the school district and the community as she continued to work with the NAACP and other civic groups. Not everything she did was universally popular, however. One case, in particular, drew as many, or even more, protests than it did applause. On 22 April 1974 five people were tortured and three of them murdered during a robbery in Ogden's Hi-Fi Shop. The case drew enormous public outrage because the victims were imprisoned in the store's basement, tied up, forced to drink caustic drain cleaner, and one woman raped before all were shot. Citizens and officials alike called for the death penalty even before the culprits were known. Evidence and witnesses against Dale Pierre Selby and William Andrews, two Black servicemen stationed at Hill Air Force Base near Ogden, surfaced within days.³⁷ The two were eventually convicted of the crime and sentenced to death. Selby was executed soon after, but Andrews's case presented some peculiar problems.

Both Selby and Andrews were identified by one of the surviving victims, and a fellow serviceman testified that they had told him they

committed the crime. After his conviction, Selby admitted that he had committed the rape, but they had both brought the drain cleaner with them, intending to use it to kill any witnesses. He also confessed that he had shot all five victims when the drain cleaner failed to act quickly enough. The shooting occurred, however, after Andrews had left the shop. In point of fact, only Selby had committed murder. Andrews, however culpable he was as an accomplice, however horrible his participation in the tortures, however guilty he may have been in premeditating murder by drain cleaner, had not actually killed anyone.

Alberta, along with James Gillespie of the Ogden branch of the NAACP, issued an objection to Andrews's execution on several grounds.³⁸ To that point in Utah, no accomplice to a murder had ever been executed. Some states have since passed laws that specifically allow for accomplices in murders to be executed, but Utah had no such law at the time of the Hi-Fi Shop murders or at the time of the trial. In addition, Utah, like the rest of the United States, had (and still has) executed a disproportionate number of Blacks relative to Whites in the state's population. A study of executions in the U.S. between 1930 and 1967 showed that while Blacks constitute only 10 to 12 percent of the population, 50 percent of those executed were Black. Although 97 percent of those executions took place in the southern states, other states, including Utah, still showed a higher relative percentage of executions for minorities.³⁹ Many people, both Blacks and members of other races, regard the criminal justice system and especially the death penalty as racist. Response to these objections ranged from complete agreement to reasoned arguments that Andrews's intentions and involvement made him equally culpable to a request "that all you nigger bastards go back to Africa and starve to death."⁴⁰

Andrews was eventually executed, and Alberta moved on to other causes—sometimes trying to improve situations and sometimes simply setting the record straight, as she did on Jackie Noakes's television interview program in 1965. Despite all of her work with Utah's Black community, Alberta had lived in the state nearly twenty years before she learned slavery had been legal in Utah Territory, and she decided to share her new knowledge with the public. She concluded one of her appearances on Noakes's show by mentioning, almost casually, that Utah had been a slave territory. The response was clamorous. Telephones at KSL began ringing immediately. On Alberta's return to

her office at Salt Lake School District, Dr. Thomas greeted her with, "Tell me what you've done this time, Alberta. People are demanding that I fire you." KSL requested she make another appearance on Noakes's program, so she returned with Dr. Ronald Coleman from the University of Utah History Department because she wanted to be sure the story was told accurately and with authority.⁴¹ She was glad to clarify an important point in Utah history and even more delighted with the furor she created.

While Alberta Henry may have delighted in occasional public furors, the bulk of her work was quietly done out of the spotlight. When she retired from Salt Lake School District in 1986, she had served as an advocate for fourteen years for all minorities and disadvantaged students, although by that time she was receiving more calls from Whites than from Blacks. She encouraged teachers to include minority studies and viewpoints in the curriculum, and she was influential in establishing Martin Luther King Day as an annual event in the schools.⁴² While she was still employed by Salt Lake School District, she continued her work with church and community groups, including the NAACP, moving from youth director to vice-president to twelve years as president. During that time she helped arrange visits to Salt Lake by Rosa Parks, leader in the Montgomery bus boycott, and held public meetings about the arrest of Rodney King, widely viewed as a victim of police brutality in Los Angeles. Remembering what she had observed in Esther Landa's chairing of meetings and what she had learned from Reverend France Davis and Daily Oliver, Sr., a lawyer for the Utah-Idaho Baptist Association about parliamentary procedure, she was particularly careful in handling discussions and making decisions. She was scrupulous about clearing all proposals and financial questions with the board of directors and established protocols to give the organization stability and maintain its credibility. In 1974 she ran for the state legislature in District 6 where she was defeated, but two years later she served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in New York.

Alberta Henry may have been unhappy that the Lord wanted her to stay in Utah, but she did stay, and has worked very hard to make it a better place. She has served on hundreds of committees—sometimes on over forty at one time—from the governor's Black Policy Advisory Council to the Travelers Aid Society to the Utah Endowment for the

Humanities to the Brookings Institute, all the while remaining active in the Calvary Baptist Church and helping with its many programs and activities. She has been honored by nearly as many different groups: Elks, Exchange and Altrusa Clubs, Utah Technical College Students, State Human Services Conference, Westminster College Alumni, the NAACP, Utah Opportunities Industrialization Center, and the Campfire Girls. She was the first Black elected to the Utah Women's Hall of Fame. She has fought campaigns for civil rights—winning some, losing others. She has been honored and vilified, praised and condemned. The one thing she has never been is quiet. Her mother would be proud.