

THE PILLAR OF FIRE CHURCH, DENVER, COLORADO

Special Investigation by
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Bishop Alma White is the founder of the Pillar of Fire Church and the institutions connected with it, such as Alma College, Alma Preparatory School, and the Zarephath (N.J) Bible Institute.

Mollie Alma Bridwell was born in Lewis County, Kentucky on June 16, 1862. She received her early education in that state. In 1880 her family moved to Millersburg, Bourbon County, Ky. Mollie Alma attended the Millersburg Female College, from which institution she later received the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In December 1887, on the 21st, she married Kent White, a ministerial student. At the time they were both attending the University of Denver.

It should be mentioned here that Mrs. White was converted at the age of 16, when she felt called to the work of the Lord. As the Methodist Episcopal Church did not license women to preach, she thought she could better accomplish the work to which she was called by teaching than in any other way.

Mrs. White took a course in English Literature under Dr. A. B. Hyde, and also a literary and elocutionary course in the Scott-Saxton College of Elocution. At the close of the school year, as a pastor's wife, she began to do what she could to raise the spiritual standards among the people whom her husband served. It was not long before she took up evangelistic work.

Mr. and Mrs. White had two sons: Arthur Kent White and Ray

Bridwell White - now both active in the Church founded by their mother. In a personal interview with Arthur K. White he told me the following regarding the origin of the movement: while Mrs. White was helping her husband in his church, as stated above, one of their boys, she did not say which one, fell very ill and was at the point of death. It was this moment of despair and anguish that the mother vowed in her prayer that if the Lord would spare her son she would do something special for the Lord. The son lived and she was obedient to her promise. She began her evangelistic work and in her revival meetings hundreds of souls were converted, many of whom were called to the Lord's vineyard.

Historical Sketch of the Movement.

The society now known as "The Pillar of Fire" was first organized under the name of "The Pentecostal Union" in Denver, Colorado, in 1901, "for the purpose of engaging in works of education, benevolence, charity, and missions." However, previous to 1902 Mrs. White had for several years maintained in Denver and other western towns and mining camps, a number of missions. Her work was carried on among the poorer classes, working men, especially in Denver. Her work extended as far as Butte, Montana and Omaha, Nebraska.

At first these operations, though undertaken on Mrs. White's own responsibility and developed by her own work and initiative, were carried on under the shadow of the Methodist Episcopal Church. She did not originally contemplate the founding of a new society. In my interview with Arthur White, he emphasised the fact a great deal, that his mother did not have in mind the establishment of

a separate church - and that the break came because the Methodist Church refused to give her a license to preach. She felt she must obey the Lord rather than the church.

Her work grew to such an extent that some type of organization became necessary. That this was inevitable was impressed upon her when a man tried repeatedly to give her a building in the Victor mining camp. She protested that as a private individual it would not be right for her to accept in her own name a deed to real estate to be so used. This gentleman finally persuaded her to form a board of trustees and incorporate her mission work so that property could be held and affairs connected with it properly administered. Since her missions were known at the time as "Pentecostal Missions", the name "The Pentecostal Union" was adopted. In 1905 this name was changed to "The Pillar of Fire." Mrs. White thought the latter appropriate for a church or mission publication, as it implies symbolically the radiation of spiritual light or truth. She took this from Ex. 13:21. "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar^a of cloud, to lead them in the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night." Any good church paper certainly should give its readers enlightenment on matters pertaining to their moral, educational and social interests. The Pillar of Fire publication, in the course of time, came to be widely distributed. So much so that the whole movement became associated in the minds of the people with "Pillar of Fire," rather than with "Pentecostal Union." Later the word "Pentecostal" was appropriated by another organization known as "The Tongues", so different in spirit from their own that they

decided to drop it. When the society was incorporated in 1914 under the laws of New Jersey, the name "Pillar of Fire" was chosen as the corporate name of the Church organization as well as for the official publications.

In the early stages of the movement they had their headquarters at 2348 Champa Street, Denver, and called the place "Silver Mansion." Here a grammar school and Bible training School were conducted. As the number of students increased more room was required. Lots were purchased and a four story building 50x150 feet in size was erected at 1845 Champa Street, the present Denver headquarters. In 1908 the National Headquarters were moved to Zarephath, New Jersey, thirty miles from New York City.

Educational Program.

From all evidences, the Church has stressed education from its beginning, and made it an integral part of its evangelistic and missionary work. They have provided education or training regardless of age or sex. They write: "For years we have been looking after the training and education of young people, and in our educational department we have followed approved methods and courses of instruction adopted by the state board of education. We have cared for and instructed many worthy young people in poor circumstances, some of whom are orphans or half-orphans... We believe that whatever theoretical knowledge students may gain from books, every boy and girl should have practical training in some trade." Or again, "Our object is to inculcate in the hearts and minds of young people, along with their educational

and manual training, a profound respect for law and order as embodied in the administration of our government, a deep regard for the sanctity of the home, which is the foundation-stone of our American civilization, and a heartfelt reverence for the Bible and the religion of Jesus Christ."

Among their education institutions of higher learning they list the following: Alma College, Alma Academy, Zarephath Bible Institute, all at Zarephath, N. J. Belleview College (formerly Westminster College), Denver, Colorado, and the Galilean Training School, Los Angeles, California. Of course schools for children are conducted wherever missions or churches are operated.

They stand for co-education. The reason for this is evident. Let me repeat a few statements from the Alma College Catalogue. "It is now plainly recognized and fully admitted that, by every consideration of wisdom and justice, women are entitled to equal recognition with men in opportunities to fit them for life's duties." "Alma College is one of the few coeducational collegiate institutions of the eastern section of the United States. It aims to send forth young men and women who love truth, who possess symmetrical Christian characters; who have a high appreciation of sound scholarship, true manliness, and womanliness, and who have a broad conception of the needs of humanity and a deep desire to relieve these needs." "In too many colleges and universities there has been a shameful neglect of those things which contribute to spiritual growth. On the other hand, undue attention paid to higher criticism, intensive study of Darwinian evolution, and an over-emphasis placed upon the theory of 'economic determinism' have destroyed for thousands

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their faith in God and their respect for the Bible." Ray B. White, writing in regard to the object of Westminster College (now Bellevue College) says: "Our object...is to train young men and young women on the lines of true Christian learning. We purpose to have at Westminster a college where students will not be tainted with higher criticism and so-called 'liberalism.' We are opposed to the 'modernistic' doctrine of evolution and hold to the Bible as the inspired Word of God, maintaining that one may obtain in this day a sound and cultural education without of necessity forfeiting faith in God, and a belief in Christian fundamentals." This no doubt is a reliable summary of their educational philosophy.

Doctrinal Position.

So far as I can learn from their literature and from personal interviews, they have no definite system of doctrines. Arthur K. White stated that they follow in a general way the Methodist Episcopal discipline. As the following statement will bear out: "While the religious influence surrounding our schools may, from a denominational standpoint, be described as more Methodist Episcopal in character than anything else, owing to the similarity between Pillar of Fire and primitive Methodist creeds, no test of any particular religious faith is applied as a condition of admission." They stress holiness very much, but with no thought of speaking with tongues. This was stressed by Arthur White in an interview. (On the whole, they stress the orthodox evangelical doctrines, and might well be classed as fundamentalists, so-called. Let me give a few statements from the writings of their leaders: In the Rocky Mountain Pillar of Fire, June 1,

1929, Alma White says: "The Pillar of Fire People have gone back to primitive methods and are proving them to be as effective now as in the days of the Apostles and those early Methodists." (p.4) Again, Pillar of Fire, July 3, 1929, p.4. "There are hundreds of thousands of false prophets, as shepherds today who are guarding their flocks to crush out any signs of spiritual life that may be manifested, and the poor deluded people who are fleeced and left to shiver in the cold are ignorant of the real character of their so-called shepherds." "It is this same old fight between sin and righteousness and will be kept up until anti-Christ is dethroned and the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ."

Mrs. White seems to be a prolific writer, and so are her sons. The following books are credited to her: Looking Back from Beulah; Gems of Life; Golden Sunbeams; The Chosen People; My Trip to the Orient; The New Testament Church; Truth Stronger than Fiction; Why I do not Eat Meat; Restoration of Israel; The Hope of the World. (1917); The Story of My Life (four volumes); With God in the Yellowstone; My Heart and My Husband; Poem; The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy; Klansmen, Guardians of Liberty, (1926); The Voice of Nature (verse); Musings of the Past, (verse); Heroes of the Fiery Cross, and nearly 150 hymns.

The following periodicals are claimed by this movement: The Good Citizen; The Pillar of Fire; The Rocky Mountain Pillar of Fire; The London Pillar of Fire; The British Sentinel; the Occidental Pillar of Fire; Pillar of Fire, Jr.; Woman's Chains. All of these are edited by Alma White.

Their annual conferences meet yearly at the following places: The Eastern Division meets at Zarephath, New Jersey. The Western Division meets at 1845 Champa Street, Denver, Colorado. The Officers are: Bishop Alma White, president, Reverend A. K. White, vice-president; The Reverend A. L. Wolfram, Treasurer.

The Bishop is at home in Zarephath, New Jersey, and Denver, Colorado. She, as well as her sons, bear the degrees A. M. and D. D.

Closing Comments.

The Pillar of Fire Church centers around a personality. No one can question that after studying the movement. That personality is Bishop Alma White. Next to her in rank of importance are her two sons, Arthur K. and Ray B. White. Their official letterhead reads as follows: Bishop Alma White, A. M., Founder and President; Reverend Arthur K. White, A. M., First Assistant Superintendent; Reverend Ray B. White, A. M., Second Assistant Superintendent. Besides an M. A. degree, each has the distinction of writing a D.D. after his or her name. Mrs. White claims to be the only woman Bishop in the world. In looking through school catalogue, magazines papers, etc., one is impressed by the prominence of the White family. The many and varied articles and editorials that come from their pens are usually accompanied with a photograph of the writer. Everywhere Mrs. White's books are advertised conspicuously. There is an Alma College, Alma Temple, Alma clubs, etc. She edits all their papers and magazines, and as mentioned above, she is president of the whole movement, and rules and runs it in her own way without much question.

On the other hand, they are certainly honest and sincere in their works, and manifest a spirit of genuine interest and

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friendliness. One would hardly classify them as religious fanatics, or state that they are inimical to American democracy or Christianity. They feel they have a mission to fulfill, laid upon them by the Lord. Whether or not they have a contribution to make to the world only history can and will reveal. Their strength, and their hope, lies in the fact that they seem to stress education, even though it be of a particular kind.

Dr. Bernhardt
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