Elizabeth May (Mai) DeKonza

1870-1959

A TRIBUTE

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Clay Center, Kansas

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In this paper we honor the memory of one of St. Paul’s past members whose story has almost been totally forgotten. As a small, lame, poor, Black woman, Mai DeKonza experienced racial bigotry and mistreatment from the very church that confirmed her. The story of this strong, talented, faithful, and very different parishioner is worth knowing, and it challenges us to live our Christian faith in the twenty-first century with more empathy and love for each of God’s children.

 The year 2015 marks the 150th anniversary of the ending of the Civil War, a tragic and hard-fought war to preserve the Union and to rid the nation of its original sin, slavery. People of all persuasions wish that the war would have settled the race issue for our country and that we would now be closer to a post-racial society. But the events of June 2015 in the Emanuel African Methodist Church of Charleston, South Carolina, point to a far more depressing conclusion: America still harbors violent, racist problems that continue to threaten the nation we all love and cherish.

 People of faith everywhere ask themselves numerous, troubling questions. How can we address the issue of lingering American racism with the message of the Gospel? Are we personally involved in this problem and if so, what can we do about it? Is my parish, my diocese, or my national church involved? What can we do?

 St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Clay Center, Kansas, is a small congregation that has hovered on the border between a mission and a parish during her 134-year history. The parish is located in a proud free state where slavery was never legal. The parish in her early years included several veterans of the Civil War who fought for the Union. Surely this little parish on the prairie has escaped the scourge of racism. Or has it?

 The centennial commemorative history of St. Paul’s includes the following passage that is remarkable for its honesty and for its implications.

*There is only one blot on the glorious history of St. Paul’s and that flaw, a trend of the time in which it occurred, is a regrettable truth which must be faced if the story is to be honestly dealt with. In 1900 a black woman was confirmed in St. Paul’s. The Reverend Joseph Sheerin was the priest and Bishop Millspaugh confirmed her in a class of four confirmands. Idealistically, in the church where only God is Master, where color should cause no stigma, and where service brings no servility, the black woman should have found the equality denied elsewhere. In 1900, however, to expect an all-white church to tolerate a black was asking a great deal. To many, accepting a black person as an equal, even in the house of God, was difficult if not impossible. For years she was tolerated but not accepted.*

 *Mai DeKonza (her pen name; real name unknown) died in 1959 at the age of ninety years, St. Paul’s only black communicant. Father Walker conducted her burial service at a local funeral home. The chalice, which for fifty-nine years was so self-righteously reserved for this person of another color who had the audacity to push her way in, still stands as a grim reminder of the inequalities that existed only a short while ago.*

 So the truth has been documented: Our parish has been involved in racism in spite of our best current efforts to exemplify our parish goal: to be a place where all are welcome. To understand more of the implications of our own history, we need to explore the roots of racism in the Episcopal tradition and how it has affected local parish practice.

 David Hein and Gardiner Shattuck have given us a good review of that history (*The Episcopalians*, 2004). In the 19th Century ante-bellum period, the Episcopal Church in America did not split into two segments over the issue of slavery as did the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. This unity, however, came at a price because the church kept its distance “from the political and military crisis that tore their nation apart in 1861” (p. 77). The Episcopal Church in America included members and officials who represented the wide range of views toward slavery that reflected the variety of views in the nation as a whole. Two of the largest slaveholders in the United States were Episcopal bishops. Some Episcopal churches in both the north and south began to construct a religious defense of slavery; others espoused alternate views.

 At the beginning of the Civil War, churches and dioceses in seceding states formed the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America (1861). Episcopalians in the north were reluctant to speak harshly about their separated brothers and sisters in this new church. After the war the two churches gradually reconnected with each other while trying hard not to say or do anything that would threaten their very fragile reconciliation. Hein and Shattuck write that after the Civil War ended, “Few white leaders in the church considered African Americans to be their equals, and they feared the consequences of not closely controlling the religious affairs of black people” (p. 101).

 In the period 1865-1870, “Thousands of African Americans in the South left the Episcopal church and other white-controlled denominations to which they had been compelled to belong while enslaved. . . .Most black Episcopalians simply wished to escape from the racial paternalism and coercion that were adjuncts of the gospel once preached to them by slaveholders” (p. 80).

In the years that followed, the church began to consider various options. Perhaps the Episcopal Church should establish a new black Episcopal church; perhaps the Episcopal Church should create special missionary organizations into which blacks could be placed thus not having to admit black parishes into their dioceses or black persons into their churches. Both proposals were rejected; instead, an informal and unofficial segregation began to take hold in many Episcopal circles. A compromise solution to the problem of what to do with black people prevailed in 1910 when the Episcopal Church allowed for the election of a suffragan bishop in dioceses. One of the acceptable reasons for appointing a suffragan bishop could be to work among black members of the diocese. In 1918 two such suffragan bishops were appointed, one in Arkansas and one in North Carolina. The first of these two new bishops was The Right Reverend Edward Thomas Demby (1869-1957), a black clergyman with whom Mai DeKonza, the subject of our tribute, corresponded often about racial matters.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Episcopal Church has in the last half of the 20th Century changed dramatically into an institution that works toward the ending of racism in American society. In 1958 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted a resolution stating belief “in the natural dignity and value of every man, of whatever color or race, as created in the image of God” (pp. 133-134). The church’s elevation of its first African-American Presiding Bishop at the 2015 General Convention in Salt Lake City is symbolic of the substantial changes, for the good, that the church has made. However, in 1900 when Mai DeKonza moved through the confirmation process at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Clay Center, Kansas, she encountered an equivocating and less-than-enthusiastic reception. St. Paul’s reaction to Mai seems to reflect accurately the attitudes of the Episcopal Church at large, even though this mirroring of attitudes in no way justifies the less than welcoming acceptance that Mai received in her new home parish.

Just who was Mai DeKonza? Elizabeth May Lawton was raised by George W. and Elizabeth Lawton. She was born in Junction City, Geary County, Kansas, on November 27, 1870, although various sources give different dates for her birth. Later in her life, Mai[[2]](#footnote-2) herself seemed unsure about her birthdate when county officials were attempting to enroll her in the new Social Security system. Mai quipped, when complaining about her failing eyesight, “But I guess I have pretty good vision for a person my age, whatever that may be.” The best evidence points to the 1870 birthdate.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The only father Mai ever knew was George W. Lawton, a white man born in 1832 in Devon, England. He served in the Civil War with a light artillery company in the Union Forces from Illinois. He entered the service in 1861 as a private and was discharged in 1865 as a sergeant. He reenlisted in the Army in 1866 and served an additional 10 years. His time in the service took him to Texas and to Fts. Riley and Hays in Kansas. George W. Lawton died of dropsy in 1882 in Solomon, Kansas. At the end of his life he was a farmer in the Solomon area.

Mai’s mother, Elizabeth Williams, was an ex-slave who was removed in 1862 as contraband from Missouri to Lawrence, Kansas, by Chaplain Hugh D. Fisher and James Lane, then a Union brigadier general and a sitting U. S. Senator. Elizabeth hid in a barn to survive Quantrill’s 1863 Raid in Lawrence. Elizabeth (1850-1910) was just a teenager at the time of her escape from slavery and her terrifying experience in Lawrence. Elizabeth was shot in the arm during the raid, and the injury plagued her, especially at the end of her life, making any employment difficult. Mai had a half-brother Richard Lawton (1863-1933) who also lived with the family. Mai’s family moved from Junction City to Solomon, Dickinson County, in 1873 when she was just three years old.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Mai grew up in Solomon, attending school there through the eighth grade. She lived in Solomon when she made a major decision just before she turned 21 years of age: She changed her name legally to Elizabeth May DeKonza. In those years all legal name changes were enacted by the Kansas Legislature, and legislation changing her name was approved on March 6, 1891. Information does not survive that would help us understand why she changed her name or why she adopted her middle name as her given name and later changed its spelling to “Mai.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Her obituary indicates that Mai coined the DeKonza name because of her love of Kansas history. Mai was truly a daughter of the prairie.

Mai soon began to compose music, write poetry, and develop dramas of various sorts. She worked as a music teacher, seamstress, stenographer, and did light housework for people. To date, we have located only some of her writing and musical compositions (see list at end of paper). Seven World War I sheet music songs are deposited in the Performing Arts Encyclopedia at the Library of Congress. Her poetry appeared in many Kansas newspapers. In 1928 Mai received a copyright for a drama in three acts entitled “The Greatest Mystery of All.” Two of her poems, “A Lover’s Song at Midnight” and “The Lion and the Lamb,” appeared in *Poets and Poetry of Kansas* (1894, Herringshaw, ed.). She wrote a biographical sketch entitled “Recollections of A. Wimsett.” Wimsett was a noted evangelist in the United Brethren Church. Her unpublished manuscripts, however, have not survived. Like most writers, she often got discouraged with rejection replies from publishers. “Sometimes I think myself foolish to try to make efforts to escape poverty and overcome my handicaps no matter what my mental ability and product.”

For the first half of her adult life, Mai maintained a mobile life. The following list of places where she lived may or may not be complete:

* 1895-1897 – Solomon, Kansas
* 1898 – Clay Center
* 1900 – Abilene and Clay Center, Kansas
* 1902 – Topeka, Kansas
* 1903, 1906 – Clay Center, Kansas
* 1906-1910 – Abilene, Dickinson County, Kansas
* 1915, 1916, 1918 – Kansas City, Missouri
* 1923 – Kansas City[[6]](#footnote-6)
* 1926-1927 – Clay Center, Kansas
* 1928 – Topeka, Kansas

Thereafter, Clay Center seems to become her more permanent home. It is likely that she first came to Clay Center between 1895 and 1900 to be near her half-brother, Dick Lawton, who had settled here to marry Annie Holms and to raise their family that eventually consisted of 14 children.

 Mai loved to learn. She started a commercial course at the Topeka Industrial Institute in 1902 and completed a Commercial course in 1903 at the Clay County High School. She visited public libraries and kept up on national and international news. In 1915-1916 Mai attended the Kansas City School of Social Service. She admired Franklin Roosevelt as a great politician, but she did not like his attitude toward alcohol. She proudly displayed a “Keep Kansas Dry” sticker in the front window of her house. She completed correspondence courses in harmony, writing styles, and music composition. Professor H. W. Steininger who taught at the Clay County High School helped tutor and guide her in her musical activities. Her active mind also wrestled with racial issues, and she developed strong opinions about the subject.

 Mai was quite musical and participated as a performer in concerts (for example, 1899, Clay Center); she provided instrumental solos at school concerts (Topeka, 1902); conducted an emancipation celebration concert in Abilene (1907) and a successful Children’s Day program at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Abilene (1909); and played for weddings (Abilene, 1908, 1909). She gave speeches on racial and political topics in Abilene; she was active in politicking connected with the 1908 presidential election. In Junction City Mai offered the public a musical concert featuring some of her own compositions and lecturing on “Mistakes Taught about the Black Race” (1911). One of her Abilene speeches attracted press notice in Topeka. “Miss DeKonza, a colored young woman of this town, made a logical and convincing speech on the court house steps showing the Negro’s necessity for being a Republican.” She wrote a letter to the editor in Topeka arguing that Democrats were introducing Jim Crow policies into Kansas (segregated rail cars, for example) in a way that was harmful to black people. In Topeka Mai lectured in Lane Chapel on “Is Our Airship Ready to Fly?” (1911).

 Malignant typhoid fever struck Mai when she was a child leaving her with some disabilities. “When, in my teens, an invalid for years, I amused myself by writing music, verses, stories, plays.” A news item in the Abilene *Daily Reflector* (1905) reported that “Miss May DeKonza who has been lame for some years was able yesterday to walk 10 blocks without a crutch. She has much to be thankful for.” During these years, however, she was able to work and support herself. But all that changed.

 Mai was run over by a car in Clay Center on December 22, 1926, an accident that led to a four-month hospitalization. From 1927 onwards, she was permanently disabled and unable to work. Soon she went on the county welfare rolls and suffered the indignity of seeing her name in the paper monthly as a “pensioner” receiving support from the County Poor Fund. Mai described herself as a “helpless pauper ‘on the county’.” Soon she was unable to walk the 22-block roundtrip to attend services at St. Paul’s, and she became virtually homebound, able to get around her “shack” only with the use of crutches.

 Mai DeKonza was confirmed at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Clay Center on November 5, 1900, by the Rt. Rev. F. R. Millspaugh. She was in a class of four confirmands that included George A. Root, Solomon Comerer, and Mrs. Jessie Hayes. The priest who presented this class to the bishop was Rev. Joseph Sheerin, a native of Ireland, who came to St. Paul’s on June 1, 1899, from the diocese of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He baptized ten people (including his own son Frederick) and confirmed six persons during his tenure. He reported to the bishop that “the church raised more money and paid the rector more than to any preceding minister.” He resigned from the church on December 15, 1900, to assume duties at Grace Episcopal Church in Hutchinson, Kansas. His resignation came five weeks after the confirmation of St. Paul’s first black member although there is no evidence that the two events are connected.

 We have not yet located the place of Mai’s baptism. Nor do we know why and how she became a convinced Episcopalian. Perhaps her lifelong interest in the church stems from the fact that her father was born in England where he may have been a practicing Anglican.

 We learn about Mai’s relationship with St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Clay Center from a set of letters she wrote in the 1930s to Bishop James Wise in Topeka. Although she felt alienated from the local parish, she developed a strong attachment to the bishop. The 20 letters in this set date from April 23, 1927, to March 4, 1946. They are mostly single-spaced and stretch from an occasional half-sheet to six-page letters. Her opening greeting to the bishop read “My Dear Bishop” or “Our dear Bishop and Father.” She always closed her letters as from “The least one of your diocesan children.”

 The collection also includes some replies from Bishop Wise to Mai. He truly lived up to his name as he mostly wrote brief and warm letters to Mai: “My Dear Child” or “My Dear Friend.” In one letter to St. Paul’s rector urging the local church to remember Mai at Christmas, the bishop described Mai as “that dear and unusual person.” Whereas the local parish was unable to maintain a warm and trusting relationship with Mai, the bishop certainly did. Mai keenly tracked the bishop’s scheduled visitations to the Clay Center parish. She would attend church on those occasions if she were able. On at least two of these visits, the bishop made a call at her home. She was deeply honored by these visits and noted that the Bishop has “no prejudice against races or class or factions among men.” The bishop served as a spiritual lifeline for Mai. At times she would promise him that she would never leave the Episcopal Church; at other times she felt like she had already left the church.

 Mai’s writing was mostly clear in these letters, although hints of grandiosity and paranoid thinking sometimes peeked through. She used sophisticated reasoning abilities and was clearly a person of high intelligence. Her prose reflected 19th century conventions with long sentences exploring spiritual, political, and racial themes. At times her insights were keen, and she told the bishop that she felt called to work for the good of the black race.

 She confided in the bishop that her black mother had told her repeatedly that she (Mai) had been born to make a great stir in the world. “But when you look at this misshapen little body, belonging to a despised race, you may well wonder how in the name of all miracles, can I this late in life, make a ‘great stir’.” She was 63 years of age when she made these comments.

 Someone composed an account of the state of affairs in the parish from the standpoint of its white members during the very same time period covered by this correspondence between Mai and Bishop Wise. “Quietly, but effectively, the work of St. Paul’s Church, Clay Center, both in a spiritual and in a material way, has gone forward, particularly during the last three years. . . .” “A deep and healthy interest is also being shown by the young people in the church school. There are now 36 pupils enrolled, with a superintendent and 6 teachers.” The advancements of the church during these years included a new parish hall, new nave lanterns, new memorial windows, a beautiful new pipe organ, and a new brass missal stand. “All these gifts add greatly to the beauty and dignity of the service and show an enlightened and growing interest in the church and its work.”

 The church experience of the only non-white member of the congregation, Mai DeKonza, was very different. The church used a separate chalice for her when she was able to attend services or when communion was brought to her home. Mai never mentioned the reserved chalice in her letters to the bishop, but she surely knew about it. She did report to the Bishop that after the 1917 St. Louis race riots, “I would not take communion from a white man’s hand for 16 years.”

 One time she composed the music and lyrics for a song that was performed at the local Methodist Church (1932), but Mai did not ask her own parish church to utilize the song in a church service because Mai understood that only music with disocesan approval could be so used. Mai’s half-brother died in 1933. “Not one Episcopalian came to see me or expressed any sympathy, not even on a postal card.”

 Mai heard of an Episcopal Church proposal to shift all blacks who could not be transferred to one of the black Episcopal churches in Wichita or Kansas City to the care of the black Bishop Demby of Arkansas. “I wonder how that is,” she wrote. She loved Bishop Demby, but she told her beloved Bishop Wise, “Please let me stress this fact, dear Bishop, that all the Bishops in the Episcopal church, of the entire American continent, backed by all the Bishops of the Church of England, could not have the power to change me from Bishop Wise to Bishop Demby.” She knew that some people felt it inevitable that colored people would eventually have to leave the Episcopal Church. “No. I do not admit that anything in this world is inevitable except death.”

On Easter 1934 Mai walked 11 blocks to church only to find that the time of the service had been moved from 8 a.m. to 6 a.m. Parishioners were just finishing up their Easter breakfast when she arrived. When Mai realized she was not going to be offered any of the breakfast, she turned to walk back home. A female member of Mai’s original confirmation class sent her husband to give Mai a ride home. This woman did show kindness to Mai over the years, probably because she knew her well from their days together in confirmation classes. This woman’s efforts to be kind, were the exception rather than the rule.

 When I was in the Hospital four months, after being run over by that car, seven years ago, all the pots and bouquets of flowers and cards came from Presbyterians and First Methodists; yet Rev. Boyce did sometimes come in to see me. And I thought, as I saw them enjoying themselves so merrily, Easter morning, if the church had requested them to make up an Easter box for African heathens, how gladly they would have given to it, but nobody in St. Paul’s thought of me, of the African race, right at hand, with an Easter egg, or card, or message of cheer, nor of suggesting that a bite of their fine Easter breakfast be sent to me. They simply forgot me.

 Mai wondered in her letters if it would be better to belong to a lodge, “For lodge members do visit the sick and send to members flowers and try to look after those who are alone in the world.” “I have no Christian fellowship nor real personal friends in St. Paul’s.” She continued in her 1934 letter to Bishop Wise:

 I do not feel resentful toward St. Paul’s, nor even toward the mere act of church Jim-Crowism, because I consider that St. Paul’s, as a white church, built and supported by whites, has a right to run its own affairs, as a church, and remain white, without any dark spot. And I consider that all colored Christians who remain in white church organizations should expect to be ordered around by white church authority, as inferiors, which they, by submitting themselves to be, whether as Episcopalians, or Catholics or Methodists or Baptist or Holy Rollers, or whatever else they be. I now realize that there is no ‘holy catholic church’ in the United States, but it is instead the holy racial church, nine-tenths white, with a big black blotch cowering (away from) the rest of its surface. . . .Now you have it; and my conscience is relieved, as I have again been honest with you, as I promised I would ever be.

 St. Paul’s continued to view Mai as eccentric, which she no doubt was. Church leaders were not pleased when they discovered that Mai was carrying on a correspondence with the Bishop, “daring to interest him in me, when I ought to be content to have food, shelter and clothes, as old and disabled as I am.” Yet “I am remaining in the invisible church, loving Christ as my Savior.”

 Mai’s wounding experiences with St. Paul’s were punctuated by encounters that were much more edifying. Rector Boyce would sometimes bring food to Mai after a church picnic or parish dinner “as he knew that such things as chicken, pie, cake and salad were rare food to me.” One Episcopalian woman in the church mailed her a box of nice summer clothes. Another woman gave her dishes and clothes with a cherry pie hidden in the middle. “These people do kindnesses to the poor only from one motive – that they are needed,” she wrote. People from other churches would take her to musical events or to see the Christmas lights on the north side of town. In January 1937 she wrote:

 I had a good Christmas, was given more than at any time, since living in this old house. The rector mailed to me a church calendar, his gift to each; and Rev. Hansen, the Presbyterian minister, brought his wife for her to make to me her yearly Christmas gift. I even got a basket from the Good Fellows; and so many cards, and a regular shower of fruit from different friends, besides a turkey dinner from a lady of the First Baptist Church. Mr. Andy Hansen and his daughter brought me a turkey dinner Thanksgiving, sent by Mrs. Hansen. She still remembers that I was in the same confirmation class with her.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Mai longed for the day when American society was not racially divided. “If I were a supernatural being, I would actually like to turn coal-black some of the Southern lily-whites who are ever seeking a way to Jim-Crow Kansas colored people: for I believe if they could live as blacks only for thirty days and have to face all the obstacles which Southern race-prejudice provides, they would become converted whites, when going back to white.” She never lived to see that day.

Toward the end of her correspondence with Bishop Wise, Mai’s letters began to give evidence of mental deterioration. The slide into incompetency from about 1938 onwards was as steady as it was sad. Her paranoia began to strengthen its grip on her mind as she had conflicts with the Post Office, with the clerks at the Rock Island Railroad Depot, with her family, and finally with the “crooks” in the county courthouse. Yet as late as 1946 her relationship with Bishop Wise continued to nourish and nurture her. “O how he lived the spirit of Christ! And who could resist the Christian love of James Wise?” she wrote.

The final conflict with the county came when she refused to sign a document giving her age so that the county could place her on Old Age Assistance. The controversy over her age began as early as 1936 when the county wanted to move elderly people off the county poor fund onto the provisions of the new Social Security Act (1935). Judge Elmer Anderson presided over the competency hearing. Mai attended the 1942 proceedings and even gave testimony from the stand. Neither her words nor the words of her court-appointed attorney, William Beall, could stem the tide.[[8]](#footnote-8) County Attorney Wayne Ryan asked the court to appoint a guardian “by reason of the fact that the professed leaders of society of the community of Clay Center, Kansas, have conveniently overlooked the deplorable condition of said alleged incompetent (Mai) . . . . and that by virtue of her contrary views she has become dispossessed of her place to live and is now weak physically and unless she has a guardian appointed for her to provide the necessaries of life, she will continue to be exposed to the elements of oncoming winter and probably die.” The jury of six men declared her incompetent and the judge appointed a guardian for Mai on November 3, 1942.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Four successive guardians (Emma Hilts, Vivian Hundley, Minnie Warner, and Delphia Alquist) watched over Mai for the rest of her life. They administered her welfare income, paid her bills, and looked out for her wellbeing even though toward the end of her life Mai would only talk to them through her screen door. Mai remained defiant and independent-minded the rest of her days, filing an official 80-page complaint with federal officials about her incompetency status and writing pleas for help to President Roosevelt. Untreated eye conditions brought with them the threat of blindness; other injuries such as a broken wrist and a wrenched shoulder occurred as the result of falls. Shortly before Christmas 1958, Mai sustained a cerebral hemorrhage and was in the hospital for over two weeks before being transferred to a nursing home in Clifton. There she died after three days on January 6, 1959. Father Walker conducted a service for her at the local funeral home.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Thus ended the earthly life of Mai DeKonza. Episcopalian to the core, this little lady stood firm against the gates of Hell. She did not live long enough to see her beloved church change to deal better with racial issues; she did not live to see the enactment of the Civil Rights Act and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Her ideas about racial matters were ahead of her time. Although she is now silent, her voice still speaks to us. Her message, in her own words, is “Hate begets hate just as truly love begets love.” Her mortal remains now rest in an unmarked grave in the Potter’s Field of Greenwood Cemetery in Clay Center. May light perpetual shine upon her.

Contributions of E. M. DeKonza

Poetry

 “A Lover’s Song at Midnight,” before 1894

 “The Lion and the Lamb,” before 1894

Music (lyrics and music)

 “Lord, Give Me Grace,” before 1932

 “You Will Come Back to Me: A Song,” 1918, for voice and piano

 “Patriotic Pickininnies on Parade: Marche Humoresque a la Ethiopique,” 1918

 “When Doing the Yank Doodle-Do: A Song,” 1918, for voice and piano

 “Battle-Cry of World-Liberty: two-step and song,” 1918, for voice and piano

 “Hail to the Heroes: two step and song,” 1918, for voice and piano

 “This Is a Mighty Day,” 1918, for voice and piano

 “Victory Won?: two step and march,” 1918, for voice and piano

 “O Race! O Land!” a two-step with trio

 “Belle of Monrovia,” a waltz with words

 “Flow on, O Nile,” duet

 “A Beautiful Night,” vocal solo

Plays

 “The Love-Stone,” a 1-act play, 1918

 “The Greatest Mystery of All,” a drama in 3 acts, 1928

 “The Porch of Happiness,” a duodrama (no date)

Biography

 “Recollections of A. Wimsett”

**Sources**

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State of Kansas Censuses for 1885 and 1895.

*The First 100 Years: St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Clay Center, Kansas.* 1981. Compiled by M. Naomi Richwine.

*The State of Kansas Session Laws, 1891.*

United States Federal Censuses for 1880, 1900, 1910, 1940.

Newspaper items in the Clay Center *Times,* the Junction City *Daily Union,* the Abilene *Daily Reflector,* the Topeka *Daily Capital*, the Salina *Evening Journal*, and the Abilene *Daily Chronicle.*

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1. To date, searches in the archives containing Demby papers have failed to locate this correspondence. It may not have survived. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mai preferred to be called Miss DeKonza by all except her close friends. She felt that the use of a first name only for a black person indicated disparagement and was fitting only for a maid or servant. We are choosing to be her close friends in this paper, hence the name Mai. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The 1870 date is supported by *Herringshaw’s Encyclopedia of American Biography,* the 1880 and 1900 federal censuses, certain parish records, the Civil War pension file of George W. Lawton, and the 1885 and 1895 Kansas state censuses. A date in 1875, less probable, is suggested by the 1959 Clay Center Burial Permit for Mai, 1942 Clay County court documents, and by the 1940 federal census. Least likely is an 1885 date as indicated in the 1910 federal census. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kansas did not have an anti-miscegenation law during its years as a state (1861 onwards). The Territory of Kansas did have such a law, but it was short-lived (1851-1855). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Less than a month after the confirmation of Mai DeKonza at St. Paul’s, a nine-year old girl, Elva Mai Tolls, was baptized at St. Paul’s. No parents are listed in the parish register entry for this event. Perhaps Mai DeKonza and this young girl were friends, and Elva’s middle name had an influence on Mai. Miss DeKonza started using the Mai spelling of her last name sometime after 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mai stated that she lived in Kansas City for 12 years, but we do not know the exact year when her residence there began or ended. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mai appears to be confused about last names here. The woman in her confirmation class was Mrs. Jessie Hayes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William Beall served for about 35 years as Senior Warden for St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Clay Center. He was also a member of the Standing Committee and Chancellor of the Diocese of Kansas from 1943 until his death in September 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The jury consisted of G. W. Bale, M. D.; Frank U. Stewart; Nate Simmons; P. A. Engert; Jim Mack; and Ray Engler. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. County funds paid for the majority of her funeral expenses although a sizable portion of those costs was paid by R. Alquist, perhaps from the estate of Raymond Alquist who was the late husband of Mai’s last county-appointed guardian, Delphia Alquist. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)