

The Kids' Reading Room



Women Inventors

Part 2: Madam C.J. Walker

By SUSAN CASEY

Madam C.J. Walker was born as Sarah Breedlove on a Louisiana cotton plantation in 1867, just two years after the end of the Civil War. She went on to start the most successful company in America owned by an African American woman. As a child, she worked as a sharecropper in the cotton fields alongside her parents, who were former slaves. They lived in a shack with no windows and slept on a dirt floor. When she was 7, both her parents died. At age 14 she married. At 18, she gave birth to a daughter and by age 20 she was a widow.

For the next 18 years she supported herself and her daughter working as a cook and washer-woman. Like many African American women of the day, she straightened her hair. When it began falling out, though, she invented a conditioning formula containing both shampoo and pomade, which she applied with a hot comb. She also brushed her hair vigorously. The treatment worked. Her hair became shiny and smooth.

In 1905, after moving to Denver and marrying Charles Joseph Walker, a newspaperman, she started a business selling Madam C.J. Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower and 16 other products. She went door-to-door in the African American community giving beauty treat-

Madam Walker

Sally Fox

Martha Coston

Patsy Sherman

Bette Graham

REUBEN MUÑOZ / Los Angeles Times

Walker Agents, to sell her product as she did. They wore white blouses and black skirts and carried her products in briefcases. By 1919 she had more than 20,000 agents. They worked on commission so everyone shared in the success. She also had a chain of beauty salons and a beauty school, Leila College, named after her daughter who helped her run her various businesses.

Madam Walker contributed generously to the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People, especially to the anti-lynching movement and the YMCA, and gave prizes to agents who did the most charita-

and lived on her estate, Villa Lewaro. She was the first female African American millionaire. She died in 1919.

Wednesday: Bette Graham

Kids, March is Women's History Month. This year's theme is "Women Sustaining the American Spirit." For more information, visit www.nwhp.org/whm/themes/themes.html.

Susan Casey is author of "Women Invent! Two Centuries of Discoveries That Have Shaped Our World," from Chicago Re-