

Jessie Etnie / Martha Edna Rainwater name and date issues

by Susan Chance-Rainwater

On 5 Nov 1936, John Emmett Rainwater supplied the family information for Mrs. Martha Edna Rainwater. The death certificate is a confabulation of outright lies and genteel pretense, intended, one assumes, to protect Edna's reputation in death.

WHAT THE RECORDS SAY

1870 = Edna, b 1869

1880 = Edney, b 1869

1900 = Etnie, b Aug 1873

1910 = Jessie E, b 1880

1920 = Edna, b 1881

1930 = M E, b 1877

death index = Martha E, no date

death cert = Mrs Martha Edna, b 1875

tombstone = Edna, b 1875

ARE THESE THE SAME PERSON?

In Sept 1869, Wilkes Berrywine Rainwater and his wife, Martha Ann Collins, welcomed a daughter into the world. When the 1870 census was taken, this daughter was recorded as Edna. The name has been written over, and Ancestry has mistakenly transcribed the name as Ema. Ten years later, in 1880, she was again recorded as having been born in 1869, this time as Edney. Because of the similarity of the names and dates, I feel confident that Edna/Ema and Edney are the same person.

According to family legend, Edna went to work in the 1890s on the plantation of Judge Thomas Street in Marshall County, Alabama. She became pregnant by Street's son, Oliver, and the resulting child was John Emmett Rainwater. They did not marry. [243]

In 1900, the Etowah County, Alabama household of John and Missouri Mathis contains an Etnie Rainwater, born Aug 1873, and John E. Rainwater, born Apr 1892. Etnie is recorded as a sister-in-law and John as a nephew. Is Etnie actually Edna, despite the difference in name and dates?

What defines the relationship between Edna and Missouri is Martha Ann Collins. She was the mother of both girls. Missouri Lowe Mathis was Martha's daughter by her second husband, and Edna was her daughter by her third husband. So yes, Etnie is Edna and John is her son.

By 1910, Edna had moved to Polk County, Georgia. This appears to be a “restart your life” sort of move. From this point on, Edna represents herself as a widow, and claims birth years ranging from 1875 to 1881. 1875 seems to have been the winner.

So why move? Why the life restart?

In 1903, Edna gave birth to a second son, Clarence Dewey Rainwater. He, too, was born out of wedlock. My supposition is that either she or her family arranged the move to spare both Edna and her living family from the shame. It’s worth noting that her half-brother John Daniel Rainwater had lived in Polk County in the 1880s, and this may have informed her choice of destination.

What’s odd is that she can’t decide what her name is. In 1910, she’s Jessie E, then back to Edna in 1920, then M E in 1930, which translates to Martha Edna on her death certificate. Edna is what ended up on the tombstone.

When John Emmett Rainwater provided the information for his mother’s death certificate, he invented parents for her – Wilkes Foster and M. E. Low. This cleans up his own illegitimacy, by making his mother not a Rainwater, and claiming that she was a widow, not a single woman. I am amused that he retained his grandfather’s first name, Wilkes, and his grandmother's second married name, Lowe. It is, I suppose, entirely possible that this is what his mother told him and that he is innocent of the confabulation.

CONCLUSION

Despite the change in birth year and the many name changes, it appears to me that the Edna born in 1869 is the Edna who died in 1936.

SOURCES

1870-1930 Federal Censuses

243: Robert Schimmel (Rainwater family), Rainwater Rootsweb mailing list owner

1352: Georgia Death Records, 1919-1998

1626: In the Corners of Forever (Polk County, Georgia cemeteries), Vol. 1, Ralph and Jane Ayers, Cedartown, GA, 1986

2312: Find a Grave, <https://findagrave.com>

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