

Annie Malone off the cuff

Good morning everybody – I see the confusion on your young faces; they said you were going to meet a millionaire.

‘So, where is he?’ I hear you saying. ‘Who’s that old black biddy up there?’ Well – this old black biddy is Annie Malone and I am the millionaire. I’m with you today because this St Louis Orphans’ Home you live in is being renamed after me tomorrow and I thought you should get a look at me first.

I see you smiling. Hard to believe isn’t it? It is for me too. I was an orphan just like you. My parents were brought here as slaves from Africa and they died young. They left eleven of us kids to look out for each other best we could. I never finished school but by the time I was 54 years old no African American in the country paid more income tax than I did!

Now - how did she get all this money? and where is it now? I hear you askin’! I got 5 minutes so I will be brief - Hair. Advice was we black women would be better off in the job market if we had straight hair like white women instead of the cornbraiding we grew up with.

Problem was the straightening methods were dangerous and they stank! - goose fat, butter and bacon grease or lye mixed with potatoes. It burned your scalp and broke your follicles. I just turned 20 and I decided to take action. My aunt knew chemistry and she helped me to mix a chemical solution to straighten my hair without all that fuss, fume and fire! I called it *‘The Great Wonderful Hair Grower’*.

I came here to St Louis in 1902 because there were so many of us African Americans here. I got copyright, hired some assistants, and sold my ‘PORO’ beauty products door-to-door. Word spread like wild fire and my ‘Poro Method’ was everywhere. I was gonna have to expand. *‘Learn Trades or Starve,’* they said; ‘we blacks could gain greater economic independence if we were given the opportunity to get useful skills.’ And what could be more useful than barbershops, and beauty parlors! AND they were recession-proof.

1918; I built the first college in the United States dedicated to black cosmetology right here in St Louis. And I wanted Poro College to offer other things that were denied to African Americans, like live entertainments, hospital care and guest rooms. By 1926 Poro College employed 175 people and was valued at more than one million dollars!

‘Well done, Annie Malone!’ they said in the newspapers -

but ...

... the problem with money - is money itself. Managing it I mean, and who’s responsible for where it goes.

I got so caught up with supporting civic trusts and social welfare programmes that I took my eye off what my Manager husband was doing with my finances. He claimed he was responsible for all my PORO success and he fought me in the divorce courts for half my business. I cared about my independence so I held out to keep control of my business and he took a wad of money as a settlement.

A year or two on I moved to Chicago and built another Poro college but - I was soon back in court, this time fighting a former employee who was trying to claim the credit for my success. I had become a target – a victim. And that was not how I wanted to live. Then when the Great Depression hit I took my share of the blows. I lost the St Louiss Property and paid thousands in back taxes and levies that I hadn't even known existed. By the time they all finished I wasn't so sure I wanted to be a millionaire!

But I tell you for all I had a million dollars and the way it made me proud, nothing matches up to the day I received my honorary Masters degree from Howard University.

Now - I got no children to inherit what I own, but I got a big family - and I got you. There are two black students at Howard right now, sponsored by me. Now that could be you. I urge you to keep up with your education, be independent. If you make money ask what that money can do and never give up on your dreams.

Who knows - maybe they'll name a building after you one day!

**Annie Malone**

**Alexandra Mathie**