

Abbott Came Up the 'Hard Way'

Chicago Editor-Publisher
Knew Rags and Riches, Too

CHICAGO — The death here last Thursday of Robert Sengstacke Abbott, 69, founder and editor-publisher of the *Chicago Defender* since 1905, recalls the story-book life narrative of a fearless crusader for racial equality in the world.

Coming to Chicago in 1895 at the age of 25, he attended the Kent College of law and received his LL.B. After practicing for a few years in Gary, Ind., he abandoned the profession and secured employment as a printer with the ambition of founding a newspaper to fight segregation. His first venture was a daily, but it did not last long.

On May 5, 1905, there appeared the first issue of the *Defender*. For several years, during the struggle to survive, it was published in the living room of an apartment on State Street. From the start, Mr. Abbott carried on a bitter fight against southern Negrophobes and sought to encourage the race as a whole.

He saw the *Defender* grow phenomenally in 10 years. Then came World War and entry by the United States into the conflict. Mr. Abbott fought uncompromisingly for the rights of colored soldiers and the colored southerners who came north to work in industry.

Hit Peak Circulation

In 1921, when the colored people who went to France to fight for democracy had returned and were fighting, with Mr. Abbott's help, against discrimination at home, the *Defender* had grown to such proportions that it became necessary to move to its present quarters on Indiana Avenue. Its circulation, according to publisher's figures, was 205,000.

He became a millionaire, and at that time paid himself a salary of \$2,500 weekly. This was in contrast with stories of the editor's early days of struggle, when he wore patched clothes, went without food, and begged the assistance of friends.

Had 2 Shakeups

Twice he had to oust key workers from the newspaper after he became convinced they were detrimental to the business. The first major shakeup was in 1924 and the last was in 1934. Minor shakeups occurred frequently.

In 1931, he launched the ill-



ROBERT S. ABBOTT

fated *Abbott's Monthly* which, together with other losses sustained by business generally during the depression, ate into his reserve.

Always interested in the advancement of his race, Mr. Abbott was active in fields other than newspaper. He made trips to Europe and South America to bind together Negroes and natives of these foreign lands. Here in the United States, he was awarded honorary degrees by Morris Brown College and Wilberforce University.

When he and his first wife visited Europe in 1929, the publisher reported that they were refused admission by thirty London hotels, compelled to leave one at half an hour's notice and requested to leave another after having engaged rooms for two weeks.

Said he at that time:

"If I had tried to enter a hotel in New Orleans, they would lynch me. At least they would kick me out, and if I resisted they would lynch me. But in England, which has millions of colored people under the flag, I expected different treatment."

A former president of the Hampton Alumni Association, Mr. Abbott, according to intimates, expected to be named to the trustee board of the Virginia Institution and was known to have given more money to the school than any other individual alumnus.

He paid many visits to the school and on one occasion, it is said, pointed out that Hampton's printing department was behind the times in equipment and teaching, pointing out that its

graduates were not prepared to hold jobs on his newspaper immediately following their graduation.

Not long after this, the trustees overlooked Mr. Abbott and named Dr. Morgan E. Morris of Kilmarnock, Va., to the board. It is said that Mr. Abbott was "too outspoken" for Hampton. After that time, he ceased his activity in Hampton's behalf.

Had he desired, he could have received many political posts but he always declined. During World War I he served as a speaker on various Liberty loan drives, was an advisor to the Southside draft board, and served on Gov. Lowden's Race commission after the 1919 race riots. He was also a life member of the Art Institute and Historical society, and received the highest honor of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity for distinguished service to his race.

Mr. Abbott first married Helen Thornton of Athens, Ga., in 1918. They were divorced in 1933. Later he married the widow of Col. Franklin Dennison who survives him. Other survivors are his nephew, John H. Sengstacke, vice president and general manager of the *Defender*; two sisters in Savannah, Miss Rebecca Sengstacke and Mrs. Eliza McKay, and two other nephews and four nieces in Chicago.

When the first Mrs. Abbott won her divorce in 1933, she was awarded a settlement of \$50,000, an automobile and furniture and silver in the Abbott home at 4742 South Parkway. Mr. Abbott was also ordered to pay \$2500 of \$5,000 attorney's fee allowed his wife by the court.

She had previously been awarded \$300 a month temporary alimony, and had offered to settle their domestic rift for \$100,000. Mr. Abbott spurned the offer. At the trial, he was so weak from long illness that he had to be pushed into the court in a wheel chair.