

# History Of Defender Related In New Book

*The intriguing story of how Robert S. Abbott established The Chicago Defender and built it into the most outstanding Negro newspaper in America is told in an exciting new book, "They Seek A City" by Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy. The following excerpts from the book are reprinted with the permission of the publisher, Doubleday, Doran & Co.*

By ARNA BONTEMPS  
 and JACK CONROY

An out-of-town visitor who observed Colored American Day at the World's Fair in 1893 was Robert Sengstacke Abbott, almost twenty-three. As tenor of the Hampton Quartet, he had frequently toured the country. The young man listened to Frederick Douglass' speech and heard Ida B. Wells tell of the destruction of her Memphis newspaper by a mob. Abbott also was interested in journalism, and had been learning the printer's trade at Hampton Institute, Virginia.

Abbott enjoyed his World's Fair visit, and in 1897 returned to Chicago with the intention of staying. He was a fully qualified printer, but found that printing firms were reluctant to hire a Negro. He picked up odd jobs at his trade and took up the study of law in night classes at Kent College of Law, where his closest friend and counselor was Harry Dean, subsequently a sea captain and adventurer. Dean has recounted his somewhat astounding experiences in a book, "The Pedro Gorino," written in collaboration with Sterling North.

John R. Marshall (later Colonel Marshall of the Eighth Illinois Infantry), a Hampton graduate, was a Chicago brickmason, and to him Abbott brought a letter of recommendation from General Samuel C. Armstrong, founder of Hampton and at that time its principal. Marshall's circle of acquaintances was large and included many persons of prominence and authority. The young printer-lawyer benefited from his association with the popular brickmason.

## 'Little Too Dark'

Edward H. Morris, possibly Chicago's most successful Negro attorney of the period, told Abbott bluntly that he was "a little too dark to make any impressions on the court in Chicago," and advised a debut in a smaller town. The beginner displayed his hopeful shingle in near-by Gary, Ind., but it was almost totally ignored by the citizens of that steelmaking community.

Giving up his attempt to practice law, Abbott fell back upon his intermittent printing jobs. But he had another idea. The evening of May 6, 1905, found him peddling on the street and from door to door copies of a four-page paper, the Chicago Defender, bearing an arrogant subtitle, "The World's Greatest Weekly." The publisher was also editor, business manager, and entire staff. The editorial desk doubled as a kitchen table in the apartment of Mrs. Henrietta P. Lee on South State street. Mrs. Lee also proffered the use of her telephone, and the Western Newspaper Union, a printing company specializing in small country weeklies, was persuaded to extend as much as twenty-five dollars credit.

Abbott seldom was able to pay the full amount of the bill at once, but was forced to take out a portion of the edition, sell it, and then return with proceeds to bail out the remaining copies held in escrow by the printer. Abbott's friend Marshall had introduced him to a foreman in the Chicago Tribune engraving plant who arranged a month's credit for engravings. A night-club proprietor championed the venture, often depositing ten dollars in his cash register subject to the demand of the hard-pressed publisher and editor. When Abbott expressed worry over the obliga-



ROBERT S. ABBOTT

tion thus incurred, the slate was wiped clean by insertion of an advertisement.

## Gets Volunteers

Though Abbott continued for some time as sole regular staff member, he enlisted a number of volunteers. Julius N. Avendorph, sports promoter and social figure, wrote about both fields of interest. Tony Langston, a bartender at the Keystone Club, took advantage of his position to gather news about frequenters of the establishment and other tidbits accessible to members of his profession. Alfred Anderson, manager of old Provident hospital, helped out with editorials, and Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams edited a health column. Recognizing the role of the barbershop as social center and forum, Abbott called on as many as he could reach to leave papers for sale and to col-

lect items of news, comment, and criticism deposited by customers.

James A. Scott, subsequently appointed assistant states attorney, had suggested "Defender" as a suitable name for Abbott's new paper, since Negroes of Illinois and the nation were in critical need of a vigorous defender of their rights. A great many of the preceding and contemporary Negro papers had attached themselves to one or the other of the dominant political parties (usually Republican), and too often had subordinated the battle for justice and equality to political expediency. Abbott resolved to remain rigorously independent and to fight incessantly for Negro rights. His resolute adherence to this policy at length brought him more readers than any other "race" publisher.

One of Abbott's earliest competitors, the "Broad Ax" moved to Chicago from Salt Lake City in 1899. Julius C. Taylor, its editor and publisher, decorated each issue with numerous likenesses of politicians, who, it has been said, often enough lent the paper financial aid to escape the uncomplimentary comments of Taylor, who excelled in personal accusations and preach-baiting. His motto was: "Hew to the line, let the chips fall where they may." The editor was inclined to condemn ministers of the gospel who mixed politics with religion, and on one occasion said:

"The Negro race is the only race in the world to have their churches turned into political halls for faking preachers and the small-headed base white Republican politicians who contend that they can buy any 'darky' preacher and a whole church full of niggers for ten dollars."

## Hearst Makeup

As a matter of policy, the "Broad Ax" favored the Democratic party, but expressed its willingness to print contributions from "Republicans, infidels, or anyone else . . . so long as their language is proper and the responsibility fixed." Aside from its pungent editorial style, the paper was notable as the first in Chicago to attack the tradition demanding of Negroes full and unquestioning loyalty to the Republican party. The "Broad Ax" ended its hectic career in 1927.

When the "Defender" outgrew the facilities of the Western Newspaper Union, Abbott made a printing arrangement with the Chicago "Daily Drovers' Journal." A composing-room foreman who had worked for the Hearst press persuaded him that his make-up should be more sensational and eye-arresting. Abbott agreed, and before long was being called "the Williams Randolph Hearst of Negro journalism." It was rumored widely that the paper actually belonged to Hearst.

The Defender cartoonist had designed a masthead so similar to that of the Chicago "Evening American" that hurried newsstand purchasers often mistook one paper for the other to the disadvantage of the dealer, since the Defender sold for five cents and the "Evening American" for two. The Hearst paper filed suit for infringement of copyright, but Abbott forestalled the action by changing the masthead.

## Bible of Negro South

The Defender achieved national prominence with its vigorous advocacy of the Negro exodus from the South beginning with World War I. Circulation leaped, and Abbott added pages and various improvements. He cultivated a homely, direct style of expression, never "talking down" to his readers, and demanded that his writers follow this policy. The paper became the "bible" and inspiration of black Southerners yearning toward the New Canaan, and the "defender" indeed of those already in the North.

Beneath the slogan, "American Race Prejudice Must Be Destroyed," every edition of the Defender emphasized these points:

"The opening up of all trades and trade unions to blacks as well as whites. Representation in the President's cabinet. Engineers, firemen, and conductors of all American railroads and government-controlled industries.

"Representation in all departments of the police forces over the entire United States.

"Government schools open to all American citizens.

"Motormen and conductors on surface, elevated, and motor bus lines throughout America."

During the race riots of 1919 the "Daily Drovers' Journal," fearing mob violence, refused to print the Defender, and Abbott was forced to bargain with the Gary Tribune, whose small presses required two days to turn out an edition of 150,000. Impressed with the desirability of owning his own plant, Abbott moved a year later into his own building on Indiana avenue where printing equipment valued at more than \$500,000 now turns out the paper.

## Biggest Circulation

Before Abbott died in 1940, after an illness lasting eight years, he had the satisfaction of seeing his "World's Greatest Weekly" attain a circulation larger than that of any other Negro paper. During the great migration, a record of 500,000 is said to have been reached, and a consistently high figure has been maintained.

Since the founder's death, the Defender has been managed by a board of directors, including John H. Sengstacke, Abbott's nephew; Dr. Metz T. P. Lechard, editor-in-chief; and James P. Cashin, an attorney. The militance fostered by Robert Sengstacke Abbott is little diminished, and readers were being exhorted for some time after the United States entered World War II to "Remember Pearl Harbor, and Sikeston too," the latter reference being to a particularly brutal lynching in Missouri.

The Defender, however, has broadened its outlook and now vigorously attacks all form of racial intolerance, including anti-Semitism. Its avowed policy, of course, always dictated such a course, but for a long time the emphasis was solely upon anti-Negro manifestations. An example of the Defender's catholicity is provided by a glance at the roster of columnists appearing in the paper. There are: W. E. B. Du Bois, elder statesman among Negro leaders; Langston Hughes, Negro poet with Indian blood; S. I. Hayakawa, author of "Language in Action," a Japanese-American; Earl Conrad, a white New Yorker; Walter White, veteran foe of lynching, whose investigation often has been facilitated by the fact that he can easily be mistaken for a white man; Ben Burns, white Northerner; and Lucius Harper, one of the last remaining links with the Defender of the early days.