

Robert S. Abbott, First Big Colored Newspaper Publisher, Dies While Asleep In Mansion

69-Year-Old Chicago Tycoon Was Ill Several Years; Owner, Founder Of "Chicago Defender"

CHICAGO, March—(ANP) — Robert Sengstacke Abbott, who built the Chicago Defender into the first big newspaper owned by Negroes, is dead.

In ill health for several years, and in recent months confined to his mansion on South Parkway, the noted editor passed away in his sleep at eight o'clock last Thursday morning. He was 69 years old.

Funeral services were held Monday at the Metropolitan Community church with many notables of both races in attendance. Rev. Archibald Carey, assisted by Revs. Evans and Bennett, officiated with burial in the Lincoln cemetery.

It was on Nov. 24, 1870 that Abbott was born at St. Simon's island, near Savannah, Ga. The son of slave parents, he was given schooling at Savannah and in Claflin college and Hampton institute, finishing the printing trade at the latter institution and singing with the glee club.

FIRST VENTURE A DAILY

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, Abbott carried on a bitter fight against southern Negro-phobes and sought to encourage the race as a whole.

Surrounding himself with able men, he saw the Defender grow phenomenally in 10 years. Then came World War I and entry by the United States into the conflict. Abbott fought uncompromisingly for the rights of Negro soldiers and the colored southerner who came north to work in industry. His circulation grew by leaps and bounds.

In 1921, when the Negroes who went to France to fight for democracy had returned and were fighting, with Abbott's help, against discrimination at home, the Defender had grown to such proportions that it became

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necessary to move to its present quarters on Indiana avenue. Its circulation, according to publisher's figures was 205,000.

It is said that at its peak money came in so swiftly from circulation representatives that the clerks tossed money orders into paper boxes, counting them only when the day's last mail deliveries had been made.

Be that as it may, Abbott became a millionaire. At that time he 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.

Twice he had to oust key workers from the newspaper, when he felt they were robbing the business. The first major shakeup was in 1924 and the last was in 1934. Minor shakeups occurred frequently.

In the past 14 years, the rise of other strong papers in key locations cut into the Defender's circulation and revenue. In 1931 he launched the ill-fated Abbott's Monthly which, together with other losses sustained by business generally during the depression, ate into his reserve. During the past few years the Defender has been fighting to regain much of the ground lost in the past decade and a half.

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.

—A Colored Judge—