

THE BLACK PRESS: WE WISH TO PLEAD OUR OWN CAUSE

By Connie Bennett Cameron

Ever since the first Black newspaper was published in 1827, Blacks have always felt a sense of pride, protection and an inner sense of strength through the Black Press, that comes with knowing that true freedom exists only when we take it upon ourselves to do for ourselves.

The motto of the Black Press, "We wish to plead our own cause, too long have others done it for us," stands out boldly and speaks courageously for itself. It rests on the laurels of a conscientious group of people who know what it's like to be lynched, fire-hosed, spat upon, and other turn-the-other-cheek maneuvers we one helplessly and painfully had to endure.

We thank God those days are behind us now. However, had it not been for the Black Press, the history of such injustices may never have come to pass. And the likes of Dr. King and others may never have taken their rightful places in history. It has been the experience of the Black Press to speak out against slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, intimidation, incrimination, apartheid, and other injustices.

With the fact firmly established that the role of the Black Press is to provide economic, political, social and religious freedom, let us take a look at some of the historical facts surrounding the National and Northwest Black Press.

After President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 many Black editors thought their mission was accomplished. By 1870, there were only 10 Black newspapers, a far cry from what was really needed to fight the pressing issues of the day.

By 1877, a rebirth of the Black Press emerged and by 1880, 31 Black papers had joined the scene to fight mob violence, Ku Klux Klan activities and lynching.

By 1890, a record 154 Black newspapers were fighting new forms of slavery --- segregation and sharecropping.

* At the turn of the century in 1905, a rural Georgian who put himself through college, founded the Chicago Defender, one of the most widely read newspapers in the country. Robert Sengstacke Abbott's efforts made him a millionaire, and soon therefore many other newspapers came on the scene, inspired by his ambition and success.

Abbott had no children of his own, but he raised and educated one of his brother's children, John H. Sengstacke, who took over the Defender in 1940 after Abbott's death.

* In 1940, John H. Sengstacke, sensing a need to pool the resources of the Black Press to strengthen its work as an advocate for racial equality, founded the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association.

Today, NNPA has over 200 member publications, reaching millions of homes. It is one of the strongest and most respected voices in America.

* Major Black magazines that have come and remained through the years include publishing tycoon John H. Johnson's Ebony and JET magazines, and Essence and Black Enterprise.

The Black Press of the Pacific Northwest: Significant facts:

* The first newspaper for Blacks in the Northwest was founded in 1892. The Seattle Standard was founded by Britain Exendine.

* In 1894, the Seattle Republican was founded by Horace R. Cayton. Although operated by a Black man, for almost two decades, the paper directed its readership toward both Black and White audiences throughout Washington.

* In 1902, The Searchlight was founded. It was specifically directed to Seattle's Black community. It eventually failed, as did the Spokane Citizen and the Tacoma Forum.

* The Facts Newspaper, founded in 1961 by Fitzgerald Beaver, is the longest running Black newspaper in the Northwest.

* The Seattle Medium Newspaper, founded in 1970 by Chris Bennett, is an offshoot of several other newspapers and two radio stations, including the Tacoma True Citizen (1974), Seattle Metro Homemaker Shopper's Guide (1974), Soul Town Review Magazine (1987), KRIZ Radio 1420 AM and soon-to-be KAAR 1460 AM in Portland.

* In 1983, Virginia Taylor began publishing Tacoma's Northwest Dispatch.

* The history of the Black Press expands over 160 years, and is still going strong. In fact, its leaders are more determined now than ever to fight the good fight of faith. So much has changed through the years for Black America. Hands that once picked cotton are now picking presidents. And it is up to the Black Press to ensure that the voice of Black America be heard loud and clear.