

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND INK

LOUIS MARTIN

LUCIUS squinted his big brown eyes and half smiled as he looked me up and down, taking my measure, slowly, carefully.

"You're one of these college boys," he said for the twentieth time, and his smile broadened as he reared further back in the creaking swivel chair which his vast frame dwarfed.

I laughed a little, but I was not at ease. I wondered what thoughts were running through his fat round head. He had read some of my stuff on the Chicago Defender, and I had misgivings. Before I could think of anything to say, he went on:

"Now, kid, I know you've got a solution to the race problem. I haven't seen one of you college newsboys who didn't. But, you know, if you really want to do some good, you've got to get to the people first; you've got to make this sheet go. And remember, newspapers are sold—you don't give 'em away."

That was seven years ago in June of 1936. Lucius Harper was the executive editor of the Chicago Defender, and he had taken time out, two months to be exact, to start the weekly Michigan Chronicle in Detroit as a subsidiary of the national paper. The "green sheet" was printed on the Defender presses on Wednesday and shipped overnight to Detroit for distribution on Thursday. The system had worked for the Defender paper in Louisville, and Publisher John Sengstacke said it would work for Detroit.

Lucius did not preach. His parting instructions were casual comments made in

his friendly "voice of experience" manner. For more than twenty years he had held one important position after another on the staff of the Chicago Defender and his experiences were rich indeed.

I had learned earlier that the Negro newspaper like the rest of the American press is of necessity a business enterprise, and its existence is contingent upon ends meeting. Lucius' farewell warning that newspapers are sold and not given away is of special significance to the Negro newspaper, which is not generally accepted as a desirable medium by the big advertisers. The largest and most powerful Negro newspaper in America runs hardly any important ad copy, despite elaborate efforts to sell the big advertisers on what is called the two-billion dollar Negro market. It follows, too, that the Negro press is therefore far more influenced by the temper of its readers than the viewpoint of its advertisers.

Lucius gave me the keys to the one-room office and the roll-top desk as he was about to leave. "If you want some help, kid, drop me a line," he said and added, half laughing, "From now on it's your baby." Indeed it was.

The Chronicle was nine weeks old and was selling less than 1,000 copies a week. For the first few days our staff included me and any literate person who happened to be in the neighborhood on Tuesday, which was the deadline. I had learned that while newspapermen are rare, if you scratch a preacher, doctor, or lawyer, you will find a "journalist." Since Mr. Seng-

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stacke had warned me, quite unnecessarily, that the Chronicle was a shoe-string adventure, I began to scratch around me from the first day.

After a few weeks of rewriting the notes I found on the blotter at police headquarters, covering civic affairs, and rounding up "journalists" to write reams of wind, I began a methodical study of reader appeal. With a few carefully selected newsstands for my laboratory, I sought somewhat scientifically to determine the relative sales value of various news headlines.

The Chronicle was usually sandwiched in with several other weeklies on the stands, and the customers invariably looked them all over before making the decision that was so crucial to our little enterprise. I soon discovered that a bold-face headline of a murder was worth twenty headlines on such affairs as the opening of the membership drive of the local YMCA. I found, too, that all the world loves a pretty girl three columns wide. It seems that Mr. Hearst discovered this a little earlier, however, because the Detroit Times, which outsold the other dailies two to one in these districts, carried a fresh scandal in banner headlines every morning, accompanied with pictures of rare intimacy.

While we could not keep pace with the Detroit Times, we found it a very profitable experiment to devote at least one of our three or four headlines to life in the raw or death in the afternoon. Murders were running three a month that summer, and we could always wind up our stories with the moral, implied if not expressed, that crime doesn't pay.

In order to win also those friends and influence those people who insist that news must be good, although they read the murders too, we balanced the rain with sunshine. We carried at least one headline on some story of Negro advancement—the first Negro to get some coveted

municipal post, or the first Negro to sit on a jury in some benighted county. While we could depend on our own community for the rain, often we had to range the country over for our sunshine. These experiments enabled us after a few months to boost our circulation and build up the Chronicle reading habit among at least 4,000 citizens.

By September 1937 we were incorporated under the statutes of Michigan, and while the Chronicle was still printed on the Defender presses, we became legally independent of the Chicago paper.

II

The newcomer to Detroit soon begins to recognize that the auto industry dominates the life and spirit of the city, and there is no escaping the influence of those who pull its strings by day or night. When the plants close down for their annual conversions to new models, a pall covers the town, and after a week or two the clerks in the department stores begin to read those long novels which always have a happy ending.

I found early that, while the city at large was affected by the ebb and flow of the shining autos, the Negro worker, never secure at best, suffered the worst fears over the length of his vacation. He knew his future was filed away in a steel cabinet in the personnel office of his company, and he wondered if he would be lucky enough to be called when production started anew.

There were always thousands of unlucky ones, but even for those who got their telegrams to report to work there was another question. How many days a week would they work? Often for the worker, the answer to this question determined whether he would lose his home to the bank or whether he would be able to send the boy to school. Everybody knows,

the joke goes, that even the Detroit River frequently shifts its schedule and sometimes runs only three days a week.

There was a lot of talk of a union back in 1936—a new kind of union which welcomed Negroes along with whites and which promised higher wages, seniority, and better working conditions. I heard this talk, too, and, like the boys in the shop, I began to speculate on the possibilities of a new deal for the thousands of Negro workers who swept the floors and fed the furnaces of the great auto industry.

With our Chronicle circulation growing, and with new-found confidence in our own ability to make the sheet go, this union talk began to take shape as a Chronicle pattern. I had seen at first hand the subordination of men to machines. I saw workers literally crushed by a system over which they had no control, their lives dependent upon the whims of a straw boss. I saw the patronage system at work where a letter from the right man landed you a soft job and the word of another would throw you in the street. I saw how Negroes were subtly pitted against whites, and native Americans against the foreign-born.

Many Negro leaders who had "friends" in industry were opposed to this union talk, but the workers told me the leaders were always opposed to changes which inevitably brought an unpredictable future. The workers were not afraid of the word reform, and they welcomed support. I talked with the leaders of this new union movement and debated the issues out. Thereupon we began the long campaign to win over the masses of the Negro people to the union way of life.

The daily press blasted the United Automobile Workers of America as a threat to free enterprise and branded the leaders as Reds from Moscow hell-bent for revolution in America. These phony stories, however, could not stem the tide of un-

rest among the thousands of workers in Detroit. They knew their grievances were legitimate; they organized and prepared their strikes. Following the great General Motors sitdown strikes, new heroes were born among the workers, black and white. The tide was turning and the motor magnates began to see that this new union was coming to stay as an integral force in Detroit and Michigan's industrial life.

The pro-labor platform of the Michigan Chronicle won thousands of new readers among the workers, many of whom had never regularly read a Negro newspaper. By 1940 we were safely above the 15,000 mark with some little prestige and influence, and we began to enlarge our staff and move to larger quarters.

III

It was about this time that I hired our first genius. Bob "Shakespeare" Hayden had worked on the Federal Writer's Project in Detroit and he had won a Hopwood Award for verse out at the University of Michigan in the summer of 1938. Born near the corner of St. Antoine and Beacon in the heart of the celebrated ghetto that we call Paradise Valley, Bob appeared to be something of a cultural accident. His thick glasses early made him a pedant, and while the Valley kids hung on the tailboard of the brewery wagons, our Bob sat alone with his books and grew wise.

I had some misgivings when Bob took over the rewrite desk in our city room. He would come to work in the morning with a thin volume of T. S. Eliot in one hand and something of John Donne in the other, and there was always a broad smile on his banana-yellow face. Despite the apprehensions of some of the boys on the staff, it did not take Bob long to prove that he was a regular guy.

Affable and business-like, Bob attacked

his rewrite job and translated those illegible news items in the morning mail like a veteran. He had very positive ideas about the future of industrial workers, and he believed that culture was the right of the masses. He wanted to bring beauty into the slum, and he wanted to distill some of this beauty into dactyls and pentameters on the front page of the Chronicle. Week by week this passion grew, and I knew at last that a crisis was impending.

On the advice of Omar Leatherman, a summertime printer, I had bought a job press and stuck it in the basement of the house which had become our office building. Omar had heard of a printer who was going back to tropical Georgia, and he urged me to buy his outfit, for, as he said, "It was dirt cheap." It was, and I made the deal.

With Omar idle and Bob rhyming half the news, it occurred to me that we might publish a book of Hayden's best work. The notion struck us all as a step of great promise which might pay wonderful dividends in cash and certainly in the community's culture. With a poet and printer at hand, the book required only a modest investment in special ink and paper stock. Thus it was that in 1940 we published the first book of poetry by a Detroit Negro in the memory of all those we asked about it. Bound in yellow cloth, our slender volume bore in Roman type the title, *Heart-Shape in the Dust* by Robert E. Hayden.

It won kind reviews in the local dailies and got encouraging notice from the New York autocrats. Bob's longest poem, "These Are My People," was chanted around the countryside by various choral groups.

Today Bob is lecturing at the University out at Ann Arbor and is writing a new book of poetry which Doubleday Doran has contracted to publish.

IV

Shortly after Pearl Harbor we became engaged in the first major housing controversy in which our newspaper was to play a significant role. For months on end we had protested the frightful housing conditions of the city of Detroit and campaigned against the powerful realty interests who were opposed to Federal-built housing. With the country now at war and thousands of war workers living in rat-ridden slum dwellings, the Federal Housing authorities at last decided to brush aside the opposition and proceed with projects long planned.

A site was chosen in sparsely settled North Detroit for a 200-unit housing development which became the famous Sojourner Truth Homes that precipitated what the daily papers called a riot in February of 1942. White residents in the neighborhood were led to organize in opposition, when it was announced that according to Washington's and Detroit's Jim-Crow plans Negro war workers would occupy the homes. The white realty interests contended that permitting Negroes to live in this area would be a violation of the racial restrictions of the neighborhood. They were able to influence Congressman Rudolph Tenerowicz, in whose district the project fell. Even the parish priest wrote Washington of the moral threat Negroes would bring to the North End community.

We on the Chronicle pointed out that the site was only four blocks removed from a long-established Negro settlement; that racial restriction on land was an abridgement of our Constitutional rights besides. We exposed the deal by which Congressman Tenerowicz, in agreement with poll-tax Congressmen, had forced the government temporarily to deny occupancy to Negro war workers, many of whom had already signed leases. On the basis of his part in these machinations, we were able

to wage a successful campaign to retire Congressman Tenerowicz to private life in the subsequent elections.

The Sojourner Truth victory, which was won despite Tenerowicz and the efforts of a mob organized by men who are now under Federal indictment for sedition, brought us thousands of new friends among Negro and liberal white citizens of Detroit. It was only half a victory, however, for although the restrictions in the neighborhood were waived, the project remained Jim Crow. We contend that Federal money obtained from taxes levied upon all citizens without discrimination should not be used to build great projects designated exclusively for the benefit of one race or another. Let those in need who come first be the first served.

V

In the wake of the great war effort many new problems have come to Detroit and the old ones have been aggravated. Over 400,000 new people have found their way here, and their cousins are following after. The Chronicle has grown with the populace and today we boast a circulation of 25,000. The struggle of our newspaper for a better deal for Negroes in industry, in the armed services, and in civil life has continued with increasing difficulty. Hate strikes have been called against the up-grading of Negro workers which has been made necessary by the shortage of skilled manpower, and there is popular resentment over every incident which seems to indicate that Negroes are "getting out of their place." There is widespread fear, which is exploited by powerful fifth columnists, that the Negro may emerge from this war both free and equal.

I have discovered that it is a cardinal sin to some Americans for the Negro newspaper to compare democratic practice with democratic theory. We have

been denounced for laying bare injustices and accused of "rocking the boat" by calling attention to the Four Freedoms and the Atlantic charter. One white reader wrote us, "You ought to know that the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence was meant only for white folks." Nevertheless, we have won many white friends who have dared to believe that democracy is something more than a catch word for foreign ears alone. White writers are frequently represented in our columns, and our readers enjoy them.

Like most weeklies, our working week is telescoped into three furious days before the deadline and, like a standard daily, we attempt to cover the waterfront. To carry on this crusade we have gathered about us over the years a staff of some little distinction.

Russ Cowans, our city editor, who as Joe Louis' first secretary sought to introduce the Bomber to the literary life, does double duty on the sport page, where he reminisces over the exploits of the dusky heroes of sport he knew years ago when Satchel Paige was a baby. He was recently appointed to the State Boxing Commission by Governor Kelly. Larry Chism, our crime reporter, who gave up writing "true" stories which the magazine editors would not believe, has found time to launch a War Widow's club among the wives of servicemen, who help in the war bond drives. John Wood, who covers civic affairs in the town, wages war against juvenile delinquency. He has organized youth groups in various sections of the city and reports that he will tackle the parents next.

One of our columnists, William Sherrill, was an emissary of the late Marcus Garvey to a conference in Geneva following the first World War, when the dark Generalissimo sought to have certain African territories turned over to his Universal Negro Improvement Association. Another

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of our columnists, Horace White, is a Congregational Minister who has been State Representative and is now the only Negro member of a municipal commission in the city. The Chronicle's Phi Beta Kappa book reviewer, who sometimes gets into controversies with the authors, wields the most important influence over our editorial policies. And she insists she should because, among other things, she is the editor's wife.

Like the majority of Negro newspapers we on the Chronicle have dared to take the American ideals off the shelf, dust them off, and put them on display. We have dared to ask for more than lip service

to these ideals and to uncover those incidents in our national life which do not square with them. Like moral gadflies we have been stinging away at the American conscience, and the fact that the Peglers are squirming may be a tribute to our effectiveness. And this, in the last analysis, is our only excuse for existence as a Negro newspaper.

Louis Martin analyzed the causes of last summer's race riots in Detroit in "Prelude to Disaster," in our Autumn issue. The Chronicle is published at 268 East Eliot Street, Detroit 1.

WHITE FOLKS DO THE FUNNIEST THINGS

LANGSTON HUGHES

ALTHOUGH Negroes laugh at many of the same things white Americans do, they also laugh for *different* reasons at different things.

Some incidents of Jim Crowism which I personally have experienced have amused me more than they have angered me—due, as nearly as I can analyze them, to their very absurdity. For instance, once I was driving south from New York to Richmond. An hour or so below Washington those of us in the car became thirsty and someone suggested stopping at a roadside refreshment hut we saw ahead. We knew we could not eat or drink inside—since there is “legal” Jim Crow in Virginia—but it was my intention to purchase a few bottles of soda and bring them out to the car.

When I went to the door and put my hand on the knob, it did not open, al-

though I saw a man just inside. I pulled on the door again and discovered, to my amazement, that the man was holding it. He shouted through the screen, “What do you want?”

I said, “I’d like some sodas.”

He said, “You get ’em through the hole.”

I said, “What hole?”

He said, “We got a hole cut for niggers on the side.” And he continued frantically to hold the door as though I were a dangerous savage intent on murder. I went around the side of the little frame building—and there, sure enough, was a square hole cut in the wall through which colored people were served! I did not buy, but I had to laugh! Who could help it? Almost within the shadow of the Capitol of American democracy, a little two-by-four roadside shack had cut a hole in its