

Black Press: yesterday and today

"The Black Press, U.S.A.," By Roland E. Wolsley. Iowa State University Press, \$10.50

"The Black Press (1827-1890)" Edited by Martin E. Dann, G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$7.95.

By Edward Peeks

The black press stands at a crossroads, as it has repeatedly in the struggle for Negro Americans for their Constitutional rights. But this time the crossroads denote more uncertain directions than ever. One road which beckons is the broad route to social and economic justice for black and white together; the other, the side route to racial separatism and the isolation of black nationalism.

There was a time, however, after the days of chattel slavery, when no doubt existed about the course of "justice" for a black American charged with murdering a white. All too often, the lynch mob took over before the ink had dried on the police blotter. In this atmosphere the black press had no doubts about either its role or the goal of its readers. They shared a sacred mission to remove once and for all the certainty of mob rule and brutal disregard for the Constitutional rights of black Americans. Together, the volumes compiled by Martin E. Dann and Roland E. Wolsley reveal much about this often neglected past role of black newspapers, as well as offering insight into present problems plaguing print and broadcast media owned by black Americans.

From "Freedom's Journal," started in 1827 by John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish, to the Cleveland "Gazette" published by H.C. Smith after the Civil War, black voices made the Negro press what it traditionally was considered - a protest press. About 525 black publications appeared between 1827 and 1890, but few of them survive today. Yet what these publications stood for lives on in the Dann volume, which anthologizes the personal journalism of black men and women under such subjects as the role of the black press, the black view of history, politics, labor, migration, and emigration.

The Dann anthology, as does the Wolsley study, defines the black press as an institution owned and operated by black Americans for black Americans. In his selections, Dann adheres faithfully to this definition, making it an anthology of Negro voices expressed through means launched and controlled by them. For this reason, some classic writings are omitted. Others are excluded because they are familiar selections in general anthologies on black America, in biographies, or in social

commentaries. This discriminating selection gives the volume an extra measure of force and diversity as black men and women speak up for their rights.

Before the Civil War, the black press attracted white readers who were mainly abolitionists. Literacy was low among free persons of color. Some who could read were too poor to buy a newspaper. Others refused to identify with the cause of freedom advocated by black publications. Frederick Douglass hardly ever had more than 3,000 circulation at any time between 1847 and 1863, the year that hard times and the Civil War forced him to suspend publication.

Wolsley makes clear the distinctions between black newspapers and magazines. While differences exist in format and production, however, there are similarities in the historical growth and development of the newspaper and magazine for black readers. W. E. B. Du Bois' monthly "Crisis" magazine and Robert S. Abbott's weekly Chicago "Defender," for example, gained mass circulation about the same time during World War I. Both advocated black migration from the plantation South to the industrial areas of the North; both championed civil rights and sharpened the cutting edge of the protest press; both had the help of black Pullman porters who assured delivery to Negro communities, North and South. When the Great Depression struck, both "Crisis" and "Defender" circulations plummeted.

Circulation burgeoned in the 1940's - defense industries not only brought new prosperity to black America, but the war intensified the protest role of the Negro press. It attacked job discrimination in defense industries and the mistreatment of blacks in uniform. The war against Nazism fired up the age-old belief in self-help, better known today as "black power". (Now, as then, the belief by any name embraces racial solidarity, loyalty, economic progress for the group - a means to full citizenship rights, not an end in itself for separatism or white supremacy in technicolor.) At the same time, news about Negroes increased in the general press.

In 1942, John G. Johnson began his phenomenal rise as a black publisher of magazines, beginning with "Negro Digest", now called "Black World." "Ebony", the circulation leader of Johnson Publications, once came under fire for skimming the "cream" of Negro life with success and society stories while ignoring the plight of the black masses. It is a different story now. "Ebony" and the weekly "Jet" are mining the

current fad of "blackness." "Ebony" has an audited circulation of more than a million; "Jet", 415,000.

Veteran black newsman Ted Poston of the New York "Post" once pointed at "Jet" and remarked, "That's what killed the Negro Press." The black press, however, is still very much alive. It includes the Johnson Publications, some 225 newspapers with more than 2 million readers, plus magazines such as "Sesame," "New Lady," "Essence," and "Tuesday." The latter, with a circulation approaching 2 million, is a supplement stuffed in metropolitan dailies once a week and distributed in Negro communities. There are three black dailies: the Chicago "Daily Defender," Atlanta "Daily World," and the Columbus, Ga., "Times."

Wolsley notes that the black press faces increasing competition by radio and TV for news and advertising. Of some 110 radio stations beamed at black communities, only a handful are owned by blacks - in contrast to the hundreds of newspapers and magazines they publish. Such competition is a major challenge.

The Negro weekly also is challenged to go daily in large cities where the black population continues to increase. Prospects appear to be just as good in Washington, Cleveland, and a score of other cities as they were nearly forty years ago when W.A. Scott started the Atlanta "Daily World." Perhaps better. The embattled cities of the nation, teeming with black and white lower classes, need a press steeped in hope and committed to work for social and economic revival, one eschewing the common emphasis on editorial handwringing by metropolitan dailies over loss of the traditional tax base to the suburbs.

Many businessmen, labor leaders, and public officials know that the exodus cannot continue indefinitely without ultimately dooming suburbia itself; that the city must be revitalized through commerce, industry, housing, health facilities, schools, and other means that improve the quality of life for urban and suburban residents alike. The black daily has a base on which to stand as an advocate for urban rebirth. Not the least pillar of that base is the growing Negro middle class, including those who exercise their right and opportunity, where it exists, to move to suburbs. The black daily would help determine goals aimed at mutual benefits for black and white urbanites; it would seek to root itself in the lives of working class people, reporting their births, marriages, and deaths; it would offer consum-

er news and services, along with national and international news. The black press now gets more advertising than ever - another base on which to build - and, though newspaper production costs are high, there are cost-cutting and labor-saving devices such as offset printing and computers.

Wolsley, who teaches journalism at Syracuse University, suggests the possibility of this kind of urban daily, but in fact believes that the future favors black magazines. The magazine fits the trend toward the "specialized periodicals," as opposed to mass consumer magazines. "As the white newspapers cover the black society more and more," he says, "the black magazine will supply readers with depth writing, fiction, and other materials for the ethnic group which will not in sufficient quantity, be available through white periodicals and which cannot reasonably be expected to appear there." This point is so deserving of further study it might well become a project of the black National Newspaper Publishers Association.

Wolsley's "The Black Press, U.S.A." brings the history of Negro journalism up to date, taking up where Armistead S. Pride left off in "A Register and History of Negro Newspapers in the United States: 1827-1950," an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation at Northwestern University. Edwin K. Weisch, in "The Negro in the United States," observed that the black press "has not received the scholarly research attention it deserves." Wolsley gives it the picture of the black press as an institution and a business enterprise as well. In doing so he offers a broader view than does Vishnu V. Oak in "The Negro Newspaper" (1948), which concentrates on the black newspaper as a civil rights champion and a case history of small business.

Wolsley also examines public relations and broadcast journalism as they relate to the contemporary black press and its future. (Black public relations firms are becoming increasingly important as consultants in big business and government, thus influencing information channels expected to yield news of particular significance to Negroes about employment, housing, and health matters.) Wolsley's research sometimes gets in the way of his writing, and he tends to crowd dates, periods, and personalities. This leads to some minor errors of fact. But on the whole he has produced a many-sided study which few books on the subject can rival.

Watch for revenue act impact on 1971 returns

A number of changes in the basic tax rules designed to reduce the tax burden of all individual taxpayers are embodied in the Revenue Act of 1971, notes Commerce Clearing House, national reporting authority on tax and business law.

Some of the new provisions go into effect immediately and will have impact on 1971 calendar-year individual tax returns.

First off, the value of a personal or dependency exemption on 1971 returns increase from \$650 to \$750. Next year it jumps to \$750. Further the low-income allowance for 1971 is a flat \$1,050 (\$525 in the case of a married individual filing a separate return without any income phase-out).

Next year, the allowance is worth \$1,300 (\$650 in the case of a married individual filing a separate return).

These new tax benefits, coupled with the existing 13 percent standard deduction (up to a maximum of \$1,500) are reflected in a new series of Optional Tax Tables released by the Internal Revenue Service for 1971.

Many individuals get an estimated tax break under the Revenue Act. The penalty for underpayment of 1971 estimated tax will be waived for single persons (or married persons not entitled to file a joint return) whose gross income does not exceed \$10,000, married individuals entitled to file a joint return if their combined gross income is less than \$20,000, and heads of households and surviving spouses if gross income does not exceed \$20,000.

The new Revenue Act also has its impact on the business front for 1971. Paramount among the changes in the business area is the restoration of the 7 percent investment tax credit effective, generally, for property acquired after August 15, 1971.

More timely Income Tax information will appear in next week's issue of the Observer.

Further, the Act gives legislative sanction to the Treasury Department's Asset Depreciation Range System (now known as the "Class Life System" of depreciation), which,

in effect, allows a taxpayer to select a depreciation period for assets within a range which goes from 20 per cent below to 20 per cent above the class life for each class of assets. This

new system eliminates the complicated reserve ratio test and is designed to simplify the administration of depreciation methods.



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NNPA notes Black Press Week

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - The National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) will mark the 145th anniversary of the Black Press with workshops for high school students in five regional areas, Garth C. Reeves, president of the association and publisher of the Miami Times, announced this week.

The workshops, part of Black Press Week observance, March 12-19, will serve to better acquaint young people with the 192 black newspapers published in America and further their interest in journalism, said Mr. Reeves.

The regional areas where the workshops are to be held are: Atlanta under the leadership of John B. Smith of the Atlanta Inquirer and C.A. Scott of the Atlanta Daily World; Baltimore under the direction of Howard E. Murphy of the Afro-American; Miami with Mr. Reeves in charge. Also St. Louis under the leadership of Nathaniel A. Sweets of the St. Louis American; Dr. Eugene Mitchell of the Argus; and Howard B. Woods of the Sentinel; and Sacramento, Calif., with William H. Lee of the Sacramento Observer in charge.

In all five workshops, with an expected total attendance of more than 1,000, the history of the black press will be reviewed, going back to John B. Russwurm and the Rev. Samuel E. Cornish, founders of Freedom Journal in New York City on March 16, 1827.

Since that time, nearly 3,000 black newspapers have come and gone, leaving today 192 in 37 states with a combined circulation of more than 3,500,000. Four of these are dailies: The Atlanta Daily World, the Chicago Daily Defender, the Columbus Times, and the Daily News of the Virgin Islands.

Five commercial black papers have continued since the 19th century. They are: The Philadelphia Tribune, founded in 1884; the Baltimore Afro-American, 1892; The Houston Informer and Texas Freeman, 1892; the Iowa Bystander, 1894; and the Indianapolis Recorder, 1895.

Blacks charge news media

A black who works in the news media criticized his own profession Tuesday as being racist in hiring and news practices.

"For the most part, coverage of the black community is sketchy except that it is violent or sensational," Lou Palmer, a reporter-columist with the Chicago Daily News said.

"There is no commitment to put the black man in perspective," Palmer and Rep. Shirley Chisholm (D-N.Y.), who had her statement placed in the hearing's record, said the number of blacks in the news media are so few that they have no impact on policy.

"There are 11 black reporters on the four white-owned newspapers" in Chicago, Palmer said. "This is in a city which the Census

Bureau says is 33 per cent black."

Rep. Chisholm said: "Despite all the pledges to the contrary we have heard over the past few years from the press it still has not made concentrated efforts to hire and promote minorities. The Washington Star, for example, told us that in a city that is 71 per cent black with a staff of 185 reporters and editors, it has but nine reporters and editors who are black."

"The New York Times, in a city which is 21 per cent black, has 557 reporters and editors, but only 20 minority reporters and editors."

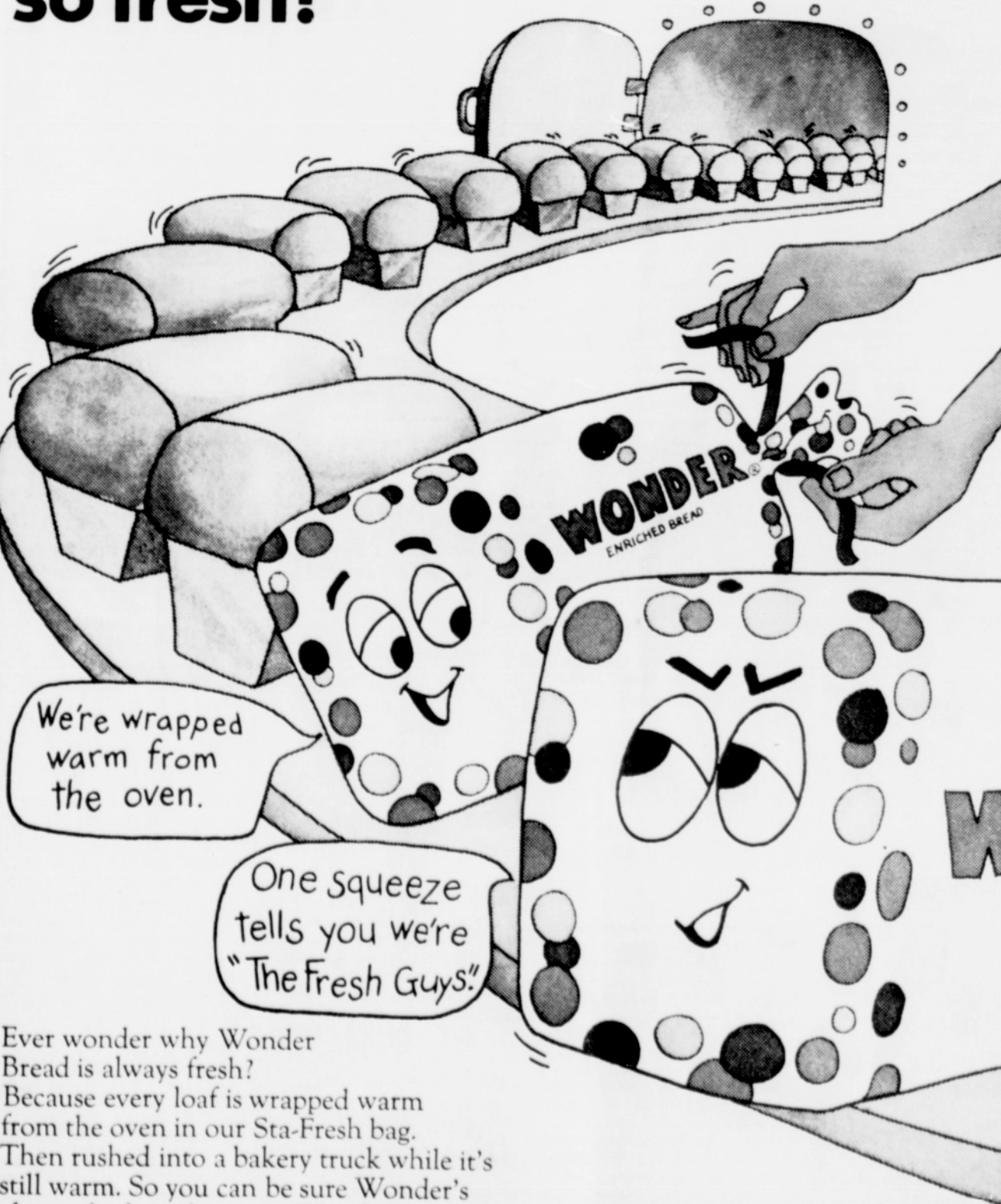
"The San Francisco Chronicle, printed in a city that has a 28.5 per cent minority population, has only 12 minority group members out of an editorial staff of 223."

Mrs. Chisholm said some newspapers ignored her request for information on minority staff members.

"It is the ultimate hypocrisy that the papers that preach the loudest about freedom of information, civil rights and civil liberties, reverse themselves and refuse to provide information to the public about their own policies."

The PORTLAND TRAFFIC SAFETY COMMISSION urges all drivers to dim their lights well in advance, because the glare of bright lights blinds an oncoming driver for five to seven seconds. That five to seven seconds could really get you.

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