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## Read All Over

From its first issue the paper had a messianic mission—integration, not separation, of the races.

By Edward Kosner  
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

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Long before the Rev. Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, Beyoncé, Toni Morrison and Oprah, Robert Abbott was one of the most accomplished and influential Negroes (as he thought of himself) in America. A small, dapper man, he literally collected change at the turn of the 20th century to publish the Chicago Defender, a crusading African-American newspaper founded on the simple premise that black lives mattered.



A newsboy selling the Chicago Defender in 1942. PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

### THE DEFENDER

By Ethan Michaeli  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 633 pages, \$32

From the Great Migration north that began when William Howard Taft was president through the integration of the armed forces, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the lynching of Emmett Till, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, King's crusades in the South and in Chicago, the passage of the civil-rights and voting-rights bills, and on to the debut of a skinny neighborhood organizer named Obama as an Illinois state legislator with big ambitions, the Defender was in the vanguard both on the editorial page and in the news columns.

From the first issue, the paper, a weekly in its early decades, had a messianic mission—the vision of Robert Abbott. Born dirt-poor four years after the Civil War on St. Simons, one of the Golden Isles off the Georgia coast, he put himself through the Hampton Institute in Virginia. In 1893, he ventured to Chicago with a school musical group, and his life changed: He heard the great black orator Frederick Douglass speak at the World Columbian Exposition and found his calling as a crusader for his people.

Abbott scrambled for years as a lawyer and printer before he was able to publish his first four-page edition of the Defender and then almost had to pawn his overcoat to pay the printing bill. But with headlines like "100 Negroes Murdered Weekly by White Americans," circulation began to build. And the Defender spread across the country when members of the Chicago-based Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first militant black union, began stashing bundles of papers on their runs and distributing them at every stop. By the end of World War I, the paper was selling more than 30,000 copies a week in New York City alone. With the Northern migration promoted relentlessly by the paper, circulation reached a quarter million before the Depression struck.

It's hard today to imagine the conditions that African-Americans lived with in those days, especially in the South. Stores, restaurants, hotels, churches, schools, movies, libraries, pools, even interstate buses and trains were strictly segregated. Voting was all but unheard of, and savage lynchings were so common that it was impossible to keep an accurate count of the atrocities. Those blacks who managed to escape north to cities like Chicago found themselves victimized by slumlords and racist cops, although jobs in the stockyards, mills and factories were plentiful. The Defender prospered, too, and in 1926 Robert Abbott was able to acquire a Rolls-Royce—although he had to buy it through a friend because the dealer didn't want to cheapen the brand by selling one to a dark-skinned driver.

From the beginning Abbott and his paper had only one ideology: the advancement of "the Race." (The term, along with "Black," was always capitalized in the Defender.) And the way to achieve it, he believed, was through the integration, not separation, of blacks and whites. He backed the party of Lincoln against Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936 but later horse-traded for support with the Democrats. Over the years, he tangled with Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican hustler who raised millions from blacks for his back-to-Africa scheme, and the demagogic Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. He even had a falling out with A. Philip Randolph, the porters-union leader. He was cozy with corrupt Chicago officials and occasionally hired Communists as editors, all in the interest of advancing his people and his paper.

Abbott had been grooming his young nephew John Sengstacke, who was of mixed German and African-American heritage, to succeed him, and when the ailing old man died in 1940, Sengstacke stepped in. He ran the enterprise for the next 57 years, starting or acquiring newspapers in other cities and taking the Defender daily in 1956.

Sengstacke sent reporters to cover black troops in World War II and crusaded for full integration of the armed forces, including the officer corps. He set up a Washington bureau that aggressively covered the White House and the Supreme Court's school-desegregation decisions. The Defender was in Little Rock, Ark., for the desegregation of Central High School, in Tuscaloosa when Autherine Lucy integrated the University of Alabama, and with James Meredith at Ole Miss. From the Freedom Rides to the assassination of King and the riots that engulfed Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark and Chicago, every advance and setback was documented in its pages.

The paper always had an agenda and wasn't shy about it. The Defender splashed gruesome pictures of Emmett Till's mangled corpse on page one, horrifying some readers and infuriating others. The formula worked for decades, but the racial progress that the Defender championed was ultimately its undoing. The white press in Chicago and elsewhere drastically expanded its coverage of black news. Mainstream papers and broadcasters drained talent from the Defender and other African-American papers. By the end of the 1970s, the circulation of the daily paper had fallen to less than 20,000, not much more than in Robert Abbott's first decade. In 2008, after 52 years, the paper reverted to weekly publication.

Back in 1928, Abbott had published his nine-point "Platform for America." Among its planks: the opening of labor unions to blacks, the appointment of a black cabinet minister, the integration of police and fire departments and schools, the passage of a federal anti-lynching law, and "the full enfranchisement of all American citizens." He couldn't imagine asking for a black Supreme Court justice or a black president. In time, all of Abbott's dreams and more were realized except the first: "American Race Prejudice Must Be Destroyed."

The author himself is dispirited at the end of his chronicle. "Working at *The Defender*," he writes, "allowed me to see the truth about America, that 'race' is a pernicious lie that permeates our laws and customs, revived in each generation by entrenched interests that threaten to undermine the entire national enterprise, just as it is challenged in each generation by a courageous few who believe that this nation can truly become a bastion of justice and equality."

Mr. Michaeli's pessimism is out of sync with the message of his own book, which documents the remarkable progress the country has made in just a few generations from long years of serfdom for African-Americans enforced by law, tradition and the lynch mob. Indeed, it shouldn't trivialize the enduring struggle to observe that the headlined civil-rights issue of the moment is the lack of black nominees for the Oscars.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of *Newsweek*, *New York*, *Esquire* and the *New York Daily News*.

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