

NEWSPAPERS

THE PITTSBURGH COURIER



Publisher Robert Lee Vann

The Pittsburgh Courier was once the country's most widely circulated black newspaper with a national circulation of almost 200,000. Established in 1907 by Edwin Harleston, a security guard and aspiring writer, the newspaper gained national prominence after attorney Robert Lee Vann took over as the newspaper's editor-publisher, treasurer, and legal counsel in 1910. By the 1930's it was one of the top selling black newspapers in the country--as widely read as The Chicago Defender and The Afro-American.

From the beginning, The Courier called for improvements in housing, health and education, and protested the slum conditions in which black people were forced to live in Pittsburgh and elsewhere throughout the nation. In one campaign it pressed for an increase of black physicians in the Pittsburgh area and the opening of an African American hospital to serve the community's health needs as white facilities were unwilling to treat African Americans.

The Courier sought to empower African Americans economically and politically. In one instance, it featured a front-page column entitled "The Camera," which counseled African Americans on financial matters. The Courier encouraged the black community to support black organizations such as The National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In an editorial entitled "The Penalty of Unconcern," The Courier stressed the importance of African Americans taking an active role in their political destinies.

The Courier protested misrepresentations of African Americans in the mainstream media. In the early 1930's, the paper began a nationwide protest against the Amos n'Andy daily radio serial.

RACE UNITES FOR DRIVE TO SECURE REAL DEMOCRACY

In continuing the policy of The Courier to fight for the rights of the Negro race, the paper recently started the "Double V" drive for victory at home against prejudice and discrimination as well as victory abroad against the enemies of democracy. Since this "Double V" emblem has been

In 1932, Vann helped influence black voters to shift their political allegiance away from the Republican Party, which was often still thought of as the party of Lincoln, and to support the Democratic candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Pittsburgh Courier was one of the first

black newspapers to publish both national and local editions. At its height there was as many as 14 editions circulated in states including Texas, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York. Many of the 20th century's most well known and influential black journalists and intellectuals contributed articles, columns, and editorials to The Pittsburgh Courier. George Schuyler joined the staff in 1925 and had a weekly column entitled "Views and Reviews." Self taught historian Joel A. Rogers' column "Your History" was a constant source of information concerning the buried or forgotten historical black past. Marcus Garvey, W.E.B DuBois and James Weldon Johnson contributed columns at various times. In later years, Elijah Muhammed wrote a column for The Courier. Zora Neale Hurston was hired to cover the sensational murder trial of Ruby J. McCollum.

The Courier protested misrepresentations of African Americans in the mainstream media.

In the early 1930's, the paper began a nationwide protest against the Amos n' Andy daily radio serial. It petitioned to remove the program from the air and published scathing editorials denouncing the program's negative portrayals of black people.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE "DOUBLE V?"

The Courier is interested in knowing what you think of the "Double V" drive for democracy at home and abroad. We will publish any letter of 50 words or less explaining your ideas on this nationwide campaign to secure a "practical democracy" for the Negro tenth of America's population.

THE EDITOR.

Following Robert L. Vann's death on October 24, 1940, Ira Lewis, who had worked at the paper since 1914 as a sports writer and eventually managing editor, and whom Vann had hand-picked as his successor, became editor. Under his leadership The Courier reached its highest circulation, and gained even greater popularity and scope.



This was due in part to the successful "Double V" campaign spearheaded by The Courier. Beginning in the paper's February 7, 1942 edition and continuing weekly until 1943, the Double V campaign demanded that African Americans who were risking their lives abroad receive full citizenship rights at home. The newspaper printed articles, editorials, letters, Double V photographs, and drawings, and even designed a recognizable Double V sign to promote the campaign. Many other black

newspapers endorsed the campaign as well, making it a nationwide effort. Another major battle fought by The Courier was against segregation in professional sports. Wendell Smith, who became the paper's sportswriter in 1938, used his column to denounce segregation in the major leagues. His efforts contributed to Jackie Robinson's signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. In the early years of Robinson's baseball career, Smith traveled and roomed with Robinson on several Dodger trips, and arranged his travel and housing itinerary, because in some cities Robinson could not stay with the rest of the team in segregated hotels. The Courier was one of the few black newspapers to provide coverage of news in Africa as the continent moved towards independence.

In 1948 Ira Lewis died. The Courier's circulation began to decline during the 1950s and '60s, and in 1965, it was sold to John Sengstacke, the owner and publisher of The Chicago Defender. Today The Pittsburgh Courier is published under the name "The New Pittsburgh Courier."

FURTHER READING

Books

Buni, Andrew. Robert L. Vann of The Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974.

Washburn, Patrick S. A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government's Investigation of the Black Press During World War II. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Articles

Brewer, James H. "Robert Lee Vann, Democrat or Republican: An

Exponent of Loose Leaf Politics." Negro History Bulletin 1958 21 (5): 100-103.

Eagles, Charles W. "Two Double V's: Jonathan Daniels, FDR, and Race Relations During World War II." North Carolina Historical Review 1982 59 (3): 252-270.

Washburn, Patrick S. "The Pittsburgh Courier's Double V Campaign in 1942." American Journalism Vol. III (1986), no. 2. : 73-86.

Dissertations

Bernheim, Stanford Burt. The Pittsburgh Courier and the Quest for full African-American participation in World War II. History Seminar Paper. University of Texas at El Paso, 1992.

La Brie, Henry G. Robert Lee Vann and the editorial page of The Pittsburgh Courier. (n.p.) West Virginia University, 1970.

Williams, Linda Darnette. An Analysis of American Sportswomen in two Negro Newspapers: The Pittsburgh Courier, 1924-1948 and the Chicago Defender, 1932-1948. Ohio State University, 1987.

Power of the Press:

Washburn, Patrick S. The Black Press: Homefront Clout Hits A Peak in World War II. American Journalism 1995 12 (3): 359-366.

African Americans Depicted in the Media:

Buchanan, Singer Alfred. A Study of the Attitudes of the Writers of the Negro Press toward the depiction of the Negro in Plays and Films: 1930-1965. Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Michigan, 1968. Publisher: University Microfilms.

Schuyler, George Samuel. Fifty Years of Progress in Negro Journalism. Pittsburgh Courier: 1950. 7 p.

Our Press A Flaming Sword in Fight for Race Progress: Its Unifying Role Brought Negroes Closer Together. Pittsburgh Courier. Pittsburgh Courier: 1950. 7 p.

Wiggins, David Kenneth. Wendell Smith: The Pittsburgh Courier-Journal and the Campaign to include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933-1945. Journal of Sport History, vol. 10, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 5-29.