

Black newspaper celebrates centennial

BALTIMORE (AP) — *The Afro-American* newspaper reminds its readers today of a century of telling the stories others often would not.

The newspaper's anniversary issue features reprints of an account of the 1926 bombing of a black school in Florida and a call for a federal investigation of mob attacks in St. Louis in 1917.

But it also contains everyday accounts of black life: births, deaths, marriages. All are part of the history of a newspaper that was one of the few sources of information about the black community for most of this century, said Frances Murphy Draper, president of the Afro-American.

"If we didn't say anything about it, nobody was going to point that out," she said. "Yes, the paper brought to light inequities, but it also celebrated our life."

The Afro-American once printed 13 editions with a circulation of 225,000 from New Jersey to South Carolina. Along with the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the newspapers informed the black public about events they often could not learn about elsewhere.

"The white press, as you probably know, virtually ignored the

black community except in things that involved crime," said Jim Williams, director of public relations for the NAACP. "But the Afro, like other black newspapers, was powerful in putting out the story of black people."

Because of the lack of coverage, black newspapers wielded great power, a fact not lost on politicians, said Chuck Stone, a journalist who worked for the newspaper's Washington edition from 1960 to 1963.

"I know when I was editor of the *Washington Afro* there were two copies of the Afro that went to the White House and they would give me hell about what I was writing," said Stone, now a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I remember Bobby Kennedy was disturbed about my insistence that his brother move faster against some of the problems of racism in the South," he said. "In those areas, the black press could have some impact, primarily because there was a vacuum. The majority press ignored the black community until all hell broke loose."

The Afro-American relentlessly covered the candidates it backed, supported voter registration drives, exposed disparity in pay, training

and promotion in the military, and was writing about apartheid in South Africa as far back as the 1930s.

The company was founded by John H. Murphy Sr., a former slave, and is still run by his descendants, making the chain the oldest continuously published family-owned black newspaper, Mrs. Draper said.

To honor the anniversary, Baltimore renamed the street in front of the newspaper's office Afro Boulevard. A church service in Baltimore and a tribute at the Kennedy Center in Washington are also planned.

Newspapers such as the Afro-American also provided one of the few outlets for black journalists before the 1960s, Stone said.

"I appointed myself, since I was the editor, as White House correspondent," he said. "I would go to the press conference and there would only be two blacks there." The other worked for *Jet* magazine, he said.

Sam Lacy, who still works at the newspaper three days a week at age 87, broke the color barrier for sportswriters when he was assigned to cover Jackie Robinson's first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. He later became the first black sportswriter in the Baseball

Writer's Association.

Ironically, the success of *The Afro-American* was later diminished by the battles it helped win. Television and the increased hiring of blacks by mainstream media has hurt black newspapers across the country.

The Afro-American now publishes three editions in Baltimore, Washington, and Richmond, Va., with a combined circulation of about 50,000, up from a low of 25,000 in the mid-1980s, said Publisher John J. Oliver.

In 1989, *The Afro-American* was saddled with more than \$900,000 in debt and on the verge of bankruptcy. Deals have been worked out with many of their creditors, and advertising and circulation are up, he said.

Black newspapers are still needed, but they have lost some of their crusading spirit, Stone said.

"They have to compete with the mainstream media. It makes it difficult, but I think there's a role to play in the same way you have Jewish weeklies. They exert tremendous influence," Stone said. "The Spanish speaking press is very viable. There's a role for the black press, but it has to be a little more vigorous."

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Billy Nesmith is 60 years old. Mr. Nesmith was born in South Carolina to Annie R. and Mark Nesmith. He attended High School at Williamsburg County in Nesmith, South Carolina and was never married.

He was employed with Plumblings and Ervin for 10 years in the produce department. He comes from a very large family and is a very loving and caring individual.

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Pictures capture the South

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — The Emmett Till murder trial. The Montgomery bus boycott. Martin Luther King Jr.'s rise to national prominence. It's all there in Ernest Withers' rusting file cabinets.

Stacks of aging photos and negatives put a face on America's search for black civil rights in the 1950s and '60s.

It's all there because Withers was there. And he had his camera with him.

Withers, 69, has photographed black Southern life for more than 40 years, and his files hold thousands upon thousands of pictures and negatives.

There are happy couples at their weddings. Smiling children at parades. A dead teen-ager's brutalized body. Smug white men acquitted of murder.

"I have been the recorder of history and feel good about that," Withers said at the modest studio where he still plies the craft he began learning as a teen-ager with a borrowed camera. "I didn't get a million dollars but I did get a million images."

He chronicled practically every major shift of the civil rights movement and followed the growth of black politics in Memphis from the days of former Mayor E.H. "Boss" Crump to last year's election of W.W. Herenton, the city's first black mayor.

A longtime Beale Street observer, he also turned his camera on musicians such as B.B. King, Otis Redding and Elvis Presley as they went from obscurity to stardom.

His civil rights photos were widely published by minority-

owned newspapers and magazines. Researchers looking into the civil rights era often come by his studio to review his files.

"Ernest is much more than a photographer. He is more like a historian," said Ronald Bailey, director of African-American studies at Northeastern University in Boston. "The impact of his work was very broad in the black community."

Bailey is working with the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston on an exhibit of Withers' photos scheduled to begin in November. He's also helping search for money to catalog and preserve Withers' files.

"In one word, it's a gold mine," Bailey said.

The collection is kept now in a storeroom at Withers' studio. He estimates his trove of negatives at more than a quarter of a million.

Withers was inducted into the Black Press Hall of Fame in 1988 and was awarded an honorary doctorate this year by the Memphis College of Art.

His civil rights coverage began in 1955 with the slaying of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Miss.

The Chicago teen-ager was beaten and shot after whistling at a white woman. Two men charged with killing him were acquitted.

Chatty and soft-spoken, Withers displays little anger over the racial struggles he has seen, or in which he has been himself.

"I relate things as a matter of fact," he said. "I don't relate them to be harsh. History is history."

A Corps of Engineers photographer in World War II, Withers

served in a racially segregated Army in which white soldiers refused to salute black officers. In 1948, he became one of Memphis' first black police officers.

There were nine of them, and they began work each day in a police station garage while their white counterparts met roll call inside. They were not allowed to arrest white people.

Fired three years later on accusations of consorting with a bootlegger, Withers opened a photo studio and soon began working as a free-lance news photographer.

"The beauty of Ernest's photographs is they have a lot to do with the lives of regular people in the civil rights movement," Bailey said. "He has a lot of the unsung heroes."

Withers photographed King from the beginning of his civil rights career and was one of the first photographers at the scene of his murder in Memphis in 1968.

While he has rubbed shoulders with civil rights leaders, sports stars and entertainers, Withers ranks his father, Earl, as the person he most admires.

"The proudness of men lies with my father who loved his family and raised his children," Withers said.

The elder Withers, a postal service employee, was disappointed when his son chose photography as a career and rejected fatherly advice to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C.

"My payoff to my father was I sent two sons to Howard," he said.

Withers and his wife, Dorothy, reared eight children together and have been married 49 years.

State agency to probe police actions

▲ N.C. Human Relations Commission is scheduled to hear community's allegations of police misconduct next week

By TRAVIS MITCHELL
Chronicle Staff Writer

At the request of community leaders the North Carolina Human Relations Commission (NCHRC) will hold a public hearing next week concerning allegations of police misconduct and

brutality directed at members of the African-American community.

Responding to a plea from Citizens United for Justice, Jim Stowe, Executive Director NCHRC, organized a public hearing to be held at the Anderson Center on the campus of Winston-Salem State University

next Tuesday at 7:00 p.m. The commission has no legal authority to conduct investigation or impose penalties in areas under the jurisdiction of local district attorneys, however, representatives will record complaints and forward recommendations to the appropriate city officials.

Newspaper poll finds Bush still behind Clinton

ASBURY PARK, N.J. (AP) — President Bush still lags far behind his Democratic opponent, Bill Clinton, in New Jersey, although the Republican president gained 1 percentage point since July, a recent newspaper poll found.

Of 658 likely voters surveyed this past Friday and Saturday, 47 percent favored Democrat Bill Clinton, while 27 percent said they favored Bush, the Asbury Park Press reported in today's editions. Another 19 percent were undecided. Seven percent either refused to

answer or said they would vote for another candidate. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.8 percent.

A Press poll conducted in late July showed Clinton with 51 percent to Bush's 26 percent, with 15 percent undecided among New Jersey voters.

The bulk of Clinton's 4 percent loss apparently went to the ranks of the undecided.

Clinton continued to benefit from former supporters of Ross Perot. The poll found that 18 per-

cent of those polled would have voted for Perot if he had stayed in the race. Of those, 52 switched to Clinton and 31 to Bush. Another 33 said they were undecided and 18 said they would vote for neither candidate.

Cliff Zukin, a polling expert and political scientist at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, said Bush's 20-point gap is more severe this time around than when Bush was behind Dukakis by the same margin after the 1988 Democratic convention.

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