

### **A CHAT WITH CHAR #3**

#### **“Using 20th Century African American Photos and African American Newspapers in Urban Cities to Obtain Genealogical Information on your Relatives”**

By Char McCargo Bah

This chat will focus on the experience I gained in researching urban cities by using archival photographs and newspaper articles to obtain genealogical information on my relatives in the 20th century.

Prior to 1935, social security did not exist in the United States. When family members migrated to urban areas before 1935, they worked without social security numbers. To obtain information on your ancestors for that period, city directories are used to locate their address. But other sources like black photo studios and black newspapers are available.

Most urban cities were segregated in the early 20th century. Many African Americans who lived in the cities, lived in African American communities or lived where they worked like maids and butlers. Most of those people patronized black businesses. Many African Americans that migrated from rural areas, had never seen a black-owned business before.

Some African Americans wanted their families to know that they were doing well financially. African American photographers had studios in black communities and provided services to that community and freelancing for African American newspapers and African American nightclubs. When someone wanted to inform family members of their financial success, they would send post card pictures or portrait pictures taken at a studio and send it home. Those pictures said more than words could ever convey. A person would be dressed in expensive looking clothes and have their picture taken at a studio. This picture would be sent to their family back home and showed to relatives and friends. This is how success was displayed to rural families which made many of them migrate north.

Here are some suggestions on how to search for the photographer's studio or photographer who took your ancestors' picture(s).

1. You must know your ancestors' address for that period.
2. Search the city directory for black photographers and their studios.
3. Locate the studio near your ancestors' address.
4. Check museums, historical societies, libraries, universities and archives to see whether the photographers' pictures were deposited there.
5. Also, locate the family of that photographer to see whether his pictures stayed in the family, or whether the pictures were sent to a depository.
6. Also ask whether those pictures were cataloged.

Another resource that might have information on your ancestors is the black newspapers. The absence of positive news on African Americans in the north gave birth to the early 20th century African American newspapers. Check with your libraries to see what black newspapers were in the area you are researching. You might find some of your relatives in those newspapers that covered their graduation, weddings and anniversaries,

recreation activities, pre-civil rights movements, church activities, black neighborhood coverage and alternative stories concerning black crime.

Some Black Historical Northern Newspapers:

Los Angeles Sentinel – (1946-1991) The oldest and largest Black newspaper known in the western United States.

New York Amsterdam News – (1922-1993) – The leading Black newspaper of the 20th century, that served one of the largest black communities in the United States and featured in depth coverage of the Harlem Renaissance.

Pittsburgh Courier – (1911-2002) – Is one of the most nationally circulated Black newspapers. It Courier reached its peak in the 1930s. A conservative voice in the African-American community, the Courier challenged the misrepresentation of African-Americans in the national media and advocated social reforms to advance the cause of civil rights.

The Chicago Defender – (1910-1975) – A leading African-American newspaper and a proponent of the “Great Migration”, the move of over 1.5 million African-Americans from the segregated South to the industrial North.

A list of some well known black photographers:

Robert H. McNeil – He took pictures in Washington, DC in the 1930s and 1940s for political, social, religious, community events in Washington’s black community and pictures for the newspaper.

James VanDerZee – He was known for his portraits of black New Yorkers. James received national recognition. His collection of 75,000 photographs spanned a period of six decades. He once owned Guarantee Photography and GGG Studio which was located on Lenox Avenue and 129th Street in Harlem.

Allen E. Cole – He was a professional photographer in Cleveland, OH. He generated over 27,000 negatives during his life time. He was a photographer from 1920s – 1960. He had his own studio and was a photographer for the Cleveland Call & Post newspaper. His photography collection is at Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, OH.

James Latimer Allen – Took pictures in Harlem, New York in the 1920s and 1930s. After serving in WW II, he took a Federal job in Washington, DC.

Gordon Parks – He was gifted in many areas. Gordon first started taking pictures of everyday black population during the 1930s with WPA Farm Services Administration. Some of those pictures were taken in Washington, DC.

Charles (Teenie) Harris – Took pictures from 1931 – 1975 in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. He also was a photographer for the Pittsburgh Courier newspaper.

Morgan and Marvin Smith – The Smiths were twins and they took pictures during the 1920s and the 1960s in Harlem, New York. They had their own studio. Marvin is still living in NY.

On Wednesday, December 12, 2007 at 9 p.m., "A Chat with Char" will discuss "20th Century Black Photos and Black Newspapers in Urban Cities."

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