

Robert Lee Vann

The second half of the 20th century has seen a notable array of North Carolina journalists who made their careers and their mark on national journalism outside the state.

They include such contemporary personalities as Gene Roberts, retired editor of both the Philadelphia Inquirer and New York Times, and Penny Muse Abernathy, former president of the New York Times News Service.

But in the first half of the 20th century, perhaps North Carolina's most influential contribution to national journalism was born in the Hertford County village of Ahoskie. He never knew his father and his mother was a cook in the household of a prominent family in the nearby farming community of Harrellsville.

Robert Lee Vann (1879-1940) rose from the cotton field to become founder-editor-publisher of the Pittsburgh Courier, which by the early 1930s counted 250,000 readers across the country, the largest circulation of any black-owned newspaper in history, and one of the few newspapers of any kind to have a national circulation.

Vann managed to acquire a first-rate education at Virginia Union University and Western University in Pennsylvania, and was licensed as a lawyer in that state in 1909.

From then on, he was a leader in politics, national and local, as spokesman and advocate for black causes. He moved in high Republican Party circles, debated with W.E.B. DuBois over the administration of the National Association of Colored People, and even criticized A. Philip Randolph as an obstacle to organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

A powerful voice for the Republican Party in the first decade of the century, he became increasingly disillusioned in the 1920s. In 1932, he made a historic break and led his newspaper into the Democratic Party, urging black voters to support Franklin D. Roosevelt for president. His defining editorial called on his readers to "turn the picture of Lincoln to the wall."

By 1940, however, Vann was disappointed with FDR's failure to do more economically for black citizen. Shortly before he died, he announced his support for Republican Wendell Wilkie.

Vann's fame made him a role model for black businessmen and politicians, and he was honored when public schools in Ahoskie and Pittsburgh were named for him, scholarships were established in his honor at Virginia Union and Western, and a World War II Liberty Ship was named for him in 1943.

By Roy Parker Jr.
January 1998

To learn more about journalists in North Carolina, consult the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography.