

John H. Johnson, 87, Founder of Ebony, Dies

By Douglas Martin

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John H. Johnson, who used his mother's furniture as security for a \$500 loan to start the business empire that eventually included Ebony and Jet magazines and that made him one of the nation's richest and most powerful black businessmen, died yesterday in Chicago. He was 87.

A company spokeswoman, Latrina Blair, confirmed the death.

Mr. Johnson had major holdings in book and magazine publishing, cosmetics, television and radio and in 1982 was the first African-American on Forbes magazine's list of the 400 wealthiest Americans.

He sometimes said he was in the business of inspiring people, heralding achievements like the first black woman to become a Rhodes scholar or the black man who sent three daughters through medical school. But his publications could also bristle with indignation over the sting of racial discrimination, as reflected by a 1965 cover: "The White Problem in America."

As the magazines that Ebony used as models, Life and Look, slipped away, Ebony maintained a large presence in black households and last year had a circulation of 1.6 million. Mr. Johnson also published other magazines, including EM (Ebony Man) and Ebony Jr. His company's Fashion Fair Cosmetics brand is among the leading makeup and skin-care companies for women with darker skin.

John Harold Johnson, the grandson of slaves, was born in Arkansas City, Ark., on Jan. 19, 1918. He was a boy when his father, Leroy, a sawmill worker, was killed in a mill accident. His mother, the former Gertrude Jenkins, married another mill worker.

He attended a segregated school, but the town lacked a high school for blacks. He repeated eighth grade rather than dropping out. In 1933, he and his mother visited the World's Fair in Chicago and decided to stay. His stepfather later joined them.

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The family lived on welfare, and then on what his stepfather earned in a New Deal public works program. Mr. Johnson got part-time work in the National Youth Administration, another New Deal initiative. He also starred academically at an all-black high school and was president of his class and editor of the school paper.

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When he graduated in 1936, he spoke at a dinner held by the Urban League. Harry Pace, president of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, was so impressed that he offered him a job and a scholarship to attend the University of Chicago.

Mr. Johnson dropped his studies at that university, though he later took course at Northwestern University's School of Commerce. He became editor of Mr. Pace's internal company magazine. Since the insurance company catered to blacks, Mr. Johnson spent much time culling and digesting articles on blacks from other publications.

He married Eunice Walker in 1941. She and their daughter, Linda Johnson Rice, president of Johnson Publishing, survive him, along with a granddaughter. His son, John Harold Johnson Jr., who had sickle cell anemia, died at the age of 25 in 1981.

In 1942 while Mr. Johnson was still an employee at Supreme Life, he persuaded his mother to help him borrow \$500. He asked 20,000 of the company's policyholders for \$2 to subscribe to what was still a nonexistent magazine. About 3,000 people did so. That June, he published Negro Digest, modeled on Reader's Digest.

To get the magazine on newsstands, he got 20 friends to ask for it. The newsstands then called distributors and requested it. After his friends bought the magazines, Mr. Johnson resold them.

The same strategy was applied in other cities, and within a year, Negro Digest had a circulation of 50,000.

Inspired by his success, Mr. Johnson began planning a magazine with flashy covers like those of Life. He said that his goal was to "show not only the Negroes but also white people that Negroes got married, had beauty contests, gave parties, ran successful businesses, and did all the other normal things of life."

His wife came up with the name Ebony. The first 25,000 copies immediately sold out.

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Its advertising was distinctive among black publications at the time because it promoted general merchandise, as well as products like hair straighteners aimed at blacks. Ebony strove to glamorize consumption, at first with cover girls, and some suggested the effect was to play down serious issues at a time blacks were still excluded from many areas of American life. But many readers were glad for the uplift.

Mr. Johnson started Jet in 1951 to highlight news of African-Americans in the social limelight, politics, entertainment, business and sports.

In 1973, Mr. Johnson started the Fashion Fair Cosmetics line after models in the Fashion Fair touring fashion show, his wife's project, had trouble finding dark makeup.

In 1990, Mr. Johnson told The New York Times that he was not altogether happy that 12 percent of the readers of Ebony and Jet were white.

"This is more than I would like to have," he said. "I want to be king of the black hill, not the mixed hill."

He also advised young blacks against joining a white-owned corporation unless they were satisfied with being vice president.

"But if, like me, you're temperamentally unsuited to that and want to reach the top, do something else," he said.

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