

Ben Burns

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BEN BURNS, 86, WHITE EDITOR WHO MADE MARK IN BLACK JOURNALISM - Chicago Tribune

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By **James Janega, Tribune Staff Writer**
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At the height of segregation after World War II, it would have been difficult at best for an African-American journalist to get a job in white America.

But Ben Burns crossed that barrier, but in the other direction.

Mr. Burns, who was white and Jewish, made a 30-year career in black journalism, helping found Ebony magazine and editing both the Chicago Defender and Sepia magazine.

He died at 86 on Saturday, Jan. 29, in Atlantis, Fla., having suffered from heart disease in his final years, his family said.

In the 1940s and 1950s, at a time when color was everything, Mr. Burns joined black journalism because he had been branded a Red for having joined the Communist Party in college during the Great Depression.

"I think I must be the only journalist who ever worked not just on the Daily Worker, but all three of the country's communist newspapers," Mr. Burns told the Tribune in a 1997 interview.

He later remarked that in those days, the relationship to communism carried as much of a stigma as having African heritage. "With credentials like that, I knew it wouldn't do much good to apply at The Wall Street Journal," he said.

With his wife pregnant and the left-wing publication he was working for in San Francisco folding, Mr. Burns returned to his native Chicago and accepted a house painting job from his father. But he soon received additional work doing public relations for a local black politician, which in turn got him referred to the Defender.

"Once he got into it, he learned everything," said his daughter, Barbara Radin. "He was a very voracious reader. He studied everything."

And he saved much of it, said Michael Flug, archivist for the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library on the South Side. From the early 1980s until just a few months ago, Mr. Burns donated carloads of research materials to the collection.

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ug. The boxes contained newspaper clippings, rare
e had collected for the magazines and publications

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for which he worked."

"It's one of the best sources of the history of black journalism that we own. To historians, it was a gold mine," Flug said.

Mr. Burns served as national editor of the Defender from 1942 to 1946 and returned in 1962 as editor in chief. He brought out the first issue of Negro Digest and helped launch Ebony in 1945.

The concept for Ebony arose, Mr. Burns recalled, in the midst of his moonlighting as a press aide. He had met John H. Johnson, a young political assistant with an idea for a black equivalent of Life magazine. While Johnson raised the money to fund the publication, it fell on Mr. Burns to put the fledgling magazine together.

"I laid out the first issue on (my) kitchen table in our apartment on Jackson Boulevard," Mr. Burns said.

But in 1954, Mr. Burns was fired. In his letter of dismissal, Johnson said Mr. Burns had allowed too many sensational stories to get into the magazine. Mr. Burns denied the claim.

He finished his career as the editor of a rival publication, Sepia magazine, where he stayed until 1977.

In his later years, Mr. Burns returned to public relations and wrote an autobiography in 1996 called "Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism." In 1997, the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, his alma mater, named him among 75 alumni to the school's Hall of Achievement.

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Burns is survived by his wife, Esther; two sons, Richard and Stephen; and four grandchildren.

A memorial service has not yet been planned.

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