

# NEWSPAPERS

## THE CALIFORNIA EAGLE



### Publisher- Charlotta Bass

When The California Eagle shut down its presses in 1964, it was one of the oldest black-owned and operated papers in the United States. John James Neimore had established it in Los Angeles as The California Owl in 1879, to ease black settlers' transition to the West. The paper provided them with housing and job information, and other information essential to surviving in a new environment. The paper evolved into one of the leading papers of the day while under the control of Charlotta A. Bass (nee Spears) and her husband, John Bass. Charlotta Bass assumed control of The Owl following the death of Neimore in 1912, and renamed it The California Eagle.

With the support of her husband--a veteran journalist from Kansas, founder of The Topeka Plaindealer, and newly appointed managing editor of The Eagle--Bass launched a more militant campaign against discrimination and segregation. The newspaper was directed towards political and social issues affecting black people locally and nationally, and at every opportunity it challenged America to uphold the inalienable rights espoused in the Constitution.



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Two of The Eagle's biggest (and earliest) crusades were against racism in the motion picture industry and the War Department. In 1914 articles and editorials were published in opposition to the making of D. W. Griffith's film "Birth of A Nation" with its derogatory portrayals of African Americans and celebratory depiction of Klu Klux Klan violence. This campaign was joined by other African American newspapers across the nation, and led to

the banning of "Birth of A Nation" in some communities. The paper spoke out against injustice in the military during World War I, and again in World War II.

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After World War I, The California Eagle fought racial discrimination and segregation in Los Angeles and the State of California such as "restrictive covenant" practices. Restrictive covenants were policies or legal guidelines usually embedded (and often hidden) in zoning and real estate regulations which were used to keep new housing tracts and developments racially segregated. The covenants designated restrictions to the use of land or housing, and were used to keep African Americans and other minorities from living or purchasing property in certain neighborhoods.

The Eagle also denounced police brutality, and waged successful battles against discriminatory hiring practices at the Southern Telephone Company, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Boulder Dam Company, the Los Angeles General Hospital, and the Los Angeles Rapid Transit Company. In the 1930's, The Eagle joined forces with such papers as The Chicago Defender, The Pittsburgh Courier, The Afro-American, and The Norfolk Journal and Guide, to support nine black teenagers from Scottsboro, Alabama who were charged with raping two white women aboard a freight car. The case became known as the Scottsboro Case. The Basses also collaborated with Leon Washington of The Los Angeles Sentinel and co-sponsored the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign on the West Coast, which dissuaded African Americans from patronizing businesses that had discriminatory hiring practices. This campaign was championed by black papers on the East Coast as well.

In 1951, Charlotta Bass sold the paper to Loren Miller, an attorney and former Eagle reporter, and in an issue dated April 26, announced her resignation in her personal column, "On The Sidewalk."



"After more than 40 years in which I have tried to serve my people and my country, as a good neighbor, as an editor, and as a fighter for Negro liberation, I feel that I must now take time to regain my health, to learn more about what is happening in the world...and to decide how I can be most useful in the years ahead."

Bass devoted her remaining years to politics. In 1952 she became the first black woman to run for national office as the Progressive Party's Vice Presidential candidate.

In the ensuing years under Loren Miller's stewardship, The Eagle continued to press for the complete integration of African Americans in every sector of society, and to protest all forms of Jim Crow. Among Miller's primary civil rights concerns were housing discrimination, police brutality, and discriminatory hiring practices in the police and fire departments.



In 1964, Miller sold the paper to 14 local investors in order to accept a judgeship, and under the new ownership the paper deteriorated rapidly. The Eagle presses were forced to shut down on July 7, 1964.

Four years later on April 12, 1969, Charlotta Bass died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 95, but not before, as she remarked in her biography *Forty Years: Memoirs From the Pages of A Newspaper*, "noting the triumphant emergence of the Negro as a top contender for honors in all fields."

## FURTHER READINGS

Bass, Charlotta. *Forty Years: Memoirs from the Pages of A Newspaper: 1960.* (Self-published Manuscript Available at Southern California Research Library and through interlibrary loan.)

Gill, Gerald R. "Win or Lose-We Win: "The 1952 Vice Presidential Campaign of Charlotta A. Bass." in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*. Hartley, Sharon and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1997, 1978.

Hardy, Gayle J. *American Women Civil Rights Activists: Biobibliographies of 68 Leaders, 1825-1992.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993.

Jeter, James Phillip, Ph.D. *Rough Flying: The California Eagle -*

## (1879-1965) (AJHA Convention Paper)

Streitmatter, Rodger. *Raising Her Voice: African American Women Journalists Who Changed History*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994.

### Collections

Charlotta A. Bass Papers and Manuscript Collection located at Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, CA. Comprised of six boxes of Bass' personal correspondence, campaign literature, book manuscript, and speeches.

40 newspaper and magazine articles located in "Charlotta Bass" clipping file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

Seven articles in "Charlotta Bass" vertical file held at Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

Microfilm available at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.