

*“Black-owned paper
Thriving after 50 years”*

*Lincoln Journal story
on Mildred Brown in 1989*

Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society



Mildred Brown runs Omaha Star

Black-owned paper thriving after 50 years

OMAHA (AP) — An Omaha weekly newspaper founded in 1938 is the country's longest-operating, black-owned newspaper run by a woman, the newspaper's founder and publisher said.

A pastor in Sioux City, Iowa, first encouraged Mildred Brown more than 50 years ago to start a newspaper geared toward blacks.

The Rev. D.H. Harris said, "Daughter, God told me to tell you to start a paper for these people and bring to them joy and happiness and respect. I looked at him and laughed until I cried," said Brown, of the Omaha Star.

The Star is Omaha's only black-owned newspaper. It first hit the streets on July 9, 1938, with 6,000 copies costing a dime apiece.

"It really bothered me," Brown said of Harris' advice. "Then I thought, 'I'm a young buck. I have a car. Every place I went they gave me an ad. I can do it.'"

The former English teacher had honed her newspaper and ad-selling skills at a Sioux City paper called the Silent Messenger. Moving to Omaha and launching the Star, she said, was a thumbs-up proposition.

No front seat

By then Brown could run a newspaper, but couldn't take a front seat on the streetcar or eat at any restaurant she chose.

Civil rights issues and a celebration of positive role models for blacks have guided the Star's editorial policy from the start, Brown said.

"I've been up against some stiff obstacles and I have no fear. This paper broke down discrimination in this town," she said. "They called us troublemakers, nothing but troublemakers. I just sold ads like mad."

Through her newspaper, Brown has encouraged boycotts against local and national companies that she said discriminated in hiring.

Brown said the Star has been true to the motto that appears in the paper: "Dedicated to the Service of the People That No Good Cause Shall Lack a Champion, and That Evil Shall Not Thrive Unopposed."

A few black-owned newspapers — among them the Philadelphia Tribune and the Chicago Defender — have served readers longer. But Brown said hers is the longest-operating paper run by a woman.

Now priced at 35 cents an issue, the Star has a circulation of 30,685, Brown said.

Star headlines have reflected news of civil rights, protests and violence through the years. But the paper has been firmly rooted in Brown's brand of community journalism: information, the black perspective on news, a chronicle of everyday accomplishments and her personal specialty — local and national advertisements.

Church news is always lengthy, and ministers' sermons sometimes are run almost in their entirety.

"Mildred does little things for little people to make them proud of what they have done. For the moment, that little person is big in the eyes of the community, and the community smiles upon them," said Steve Davis, executive director of the National Newspaper Publishers Association in Washington, D.C.

The NNPA, which has a membership of about 200 black-owned newspapers, once honored the Star with the Best Church Page Award.

Warren Francke, communications professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said many newspapers geared toward blacks have either become entirely political or neighborhood newspapers. The Star has become a neighborhood newspaper, he said.

Not afraid

"But the Star was not afraid to speak out when they thought a voice should be heard. I honor it for what it did in the days of the civil rights movement. It took guts to do that ... (in Omaha). The Star was a lone voice at that time," Francke said.

Others have contributed to the effort over the years, but the Star and Mildred Brown are synonymous, said Bob Armstrong, executive director of the Omaha Housing Authority.

"The Star has been a voice in this community for a long, long time. Mrs. Brown's kind of a legend, too," Armstrong said.

One fact Brown won't print is her age. How old is she?

"Only God knows and he's not telling," said Armstrong, laughing.

Her fondest wish for the Star is to keep the newspaper financially healthy "so whoever I leave in charge can carry on." The Star now has a staff of 22, she said.

Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society

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Mildred Brown runs Omaha Star
Black-owned paper thriving after 50 years

(Column 1)

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