

First Lady of the Black Press: She both reported on and experienced black history as it was being made. She suffered verbal and physical abuse from segregationists. She recalled of an angry mob that confronted her in Selma in the early civil rights movement, how she could just feel the hatred and would never forget the contorted faces of people screaming racial slurs in her face.

The granddaughter of slaves, Ethel L. Payne was born in Chicago in 1911, the fifth of six children. Her mother was a high school Latin teacher and her father, a Pullman porter. Little has been written about her early years but it is known she attended Lindblom High School and Crane Jr. College. She wanted to be a civil rights lawyer, was not accepted into law school and searched for a profession as she worked as a clerk at the Chicago Public Library.

In 1948 Payne left Chicago to take a position with the Red Cross as director of an special forces army club in Japan. It was there her writing talents were discovered quite by chance. Payne kept a journal detailing her experiences and observations, many of which focused on the black soldiers and their experiences in the primarily white armed forces.

At a press club in downtown Tokyo, Payne met with other correspondents, some who came through during the Korean Conflict. She shared her journal notes with one, Alex Wilson, a reporter for the *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper founded specifically to publish issues in the black community that were not covered in white newspapers. Wilson like what he read and asked if he could publish her writings. Payne agreed and saw her career in journalism begin.

The *Defender* ran her stories of black troops stationed in Japan on its front page, publicity perhaps not welcomed by the US military, and offered Payne a job doing feature articles. She accepted the offer, returned to the United States in 1951, and bylined with accomplished writers such as, William Motley, Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes who also wrote for the *Defender*. After joining the paper, Payne earned a degree from Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

Her first piece won first prize at the Illinois Press Association. Payne's articles on civil rights were piercing and straightforward, as was Payne who was living the civil rights issues about which she was reporting. Payne was moved to investigative reporting and was requested by the editor to accept a position as the *Defender's* correspondent in its Washington, DC bureau. She was one of three black journalists in the White House Press Corps in the 1950s when racial discrimination was just beginning to be reported on a national level: But not so fast.

President Dwight David Eisenhower held weekly press conferences. At one conference in 1954 the president called on Payne and their encounter resulted in the national spotlight on Payne and civil rights. Her question to Eisenhower concerned the recent decision of the Interstate Commerce Commission to end segregation practices on interstate highways. She asked of his plans to initiate the commission's decision. Eisenhower was noticeably uncomfortable by her question and sternly informed her that he would be fair but would not cater to special interests. But to Payne, desegregation of black American citizens did not qualify as a special interest.

Following reports that Payne was disruptive, the *Washington Post* reported, "...she was

not 'trying to make waves' but rather to find out when and how the powers might act to end racial discrimination in housing, interstate travel and other areas in which government might act." Eisenhower did not recognize Payne at future press conferences.

But Payne also covered stories overseas and was the first African-American woman journalist to focus on international news reporting heavily promoted in the *Defender*. Her journalism took her to the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia and Ghana's independence movement. In 1966 she was assigned to cover the African-American troops fighting in the Vietnam War. For three months she reported from Vietnam where she went into the field, observed where soldiers learned guerrilla warfare, investigated American military supplies being sold on the black market and witnessed the death of a Vietnamese woman, whereby she experienced the first hand effects of agent orange. After the Vietnam War she traveled to the Nigerian civil war, to the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City and to Africa on separate occasions with Secretaries of State William P. Rogers and Henry Kissinger.

She became the first African-American woman to be employed by a national network as a radio and television commentator when offered a job with CBS's "Spectrum." After six years she moved to the WBBM program "Matters of Opinion" where she stayed until 1982. Her commentary always discussed topics important to the African-American community, in essence to the entire American community.

In 1972 she became an associate editor at the *Defender*. Six years later, after twenty-eight years with the newspaper, she left to return to Washington to pursue her interest in international news and began a syndicated column that ran in six black newspapers nationwide.

Because she was a woman, evidenced perhaps even in the circle of the black male-dominated media, she and journalist Alfreda L. Madison, were unable to secure tickets to a 1987 Black Caucus dinner representing the black media. Later, Caucus leaders cited outrage for this gender disparate treatment against two women who had opened doors for many African American women (and men, but especially women) in journalism.

Upon her passing in 1991 at the age of eighty, the Washington Post wrote, "Had Ethel Payne not been black, she certainly would have been one of the most recognized journalists in American society." That said and written, Ethel L. Payne, who did not start out to be a journalist, is recognized as the "first lady of the black press."

Sources: *Black Women in America Business and Professions*, Ed. Darlene Clark Hine; <http://www.newarkmetro.rutgers.edu/essays/display.php?id=236>, *Ethel L. Payne, early journalist*, essay by Genise Clark; <http://www.answers.com/topic/ethel-l-payne>; http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ethel-paynefirst-lady-of-the-black-pressasked-questions-no-one-else-would/2011/08/02/gIQAJloFBJ_story.html