

Editing a Paper in Hell: Davis Lee and the Exigencies of Smalltime Black Journalism

By Thomas Aiello

Davis Lee founded several newspapers, evolving from a crusader for civil rights to the rare black defender of southern segregation. His journalistic endeavors existed on the margins, hubristic and controversial by necessity in order to keep a fledgling business enterprise afloat. His case was extreme, but despite his radical stances and controversial life, Lee's case demonstrates the difficulties that existed for black journalists between the 1930s and the 1960s. Most created weekly newspapers with circulations in the hundreds, staffed by few employees, relying on syndication services to fill the spaces between local news and editorials. Lee's case is an outsized, hubristic representation of the plight of black journalists in small markets in the middle of the twentieth century.

On the evening of May 30, 1927, twenty-three-year-old Davis Lee brought a woman named Audrey Dixon to a party at Willow Grove Park in his hometown of Bel Air, Maryland. There he got into an argument with Wesley Buchanan and several of his friends, presumably over Dixon. In her telling, Buchanan and his friends had trapped Lee and pulled a gun. So Dixon hit Buchanan's arm while Lee stabbed his assailant in the chest. Lee and Dixon then left the party, fleeing the scene thirty miles south to Baltimore, where they drove to her house. The police were waiting for them.¹ "I stabbed him in the chest with my pocket knife," said Lee after his arrest. "He died immediately." Lee was tried for second-degree murder, convicted in November, and sentenced to eighteen years in prison.² It was, perhaps, the most inauspicious start ever to a career in journalism.

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¹"Negro Fatally Stabbed Monday," *Aegis* (Bel Air, MD), June 3, 1927, 1.

²Lee was tried for second-degree murder, but he was not tried in Bel Air. In a move surprising everyone, his attorneys successfully petitioned for the case to be moved to nearby Towson, twenty miles south toward Baltimore. The team also elected to try the case before a judge rather than a jury. It came as no surprise that Lee was convicted. "Davis Lee Guilty," *Aegis*, November 4, 1927, 1; and "Ex-Convict Editor Lashed by Wilkins," *Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), December 27, 1958, 9.

That career would span the next half-century and would be as outsized as his entry into the business. He would begin writing in prison. After being paroled, he would found several newspapers over several decades, evolving from a crusader for civil rights to the rare black defender of southern segregation. He was almost unimaginably litigious, evolving from libel lawsuits in his early career to later seven-figured suits against the NAACP, stemming from imagined conspiracies by black activists against the honesty and virtuosity of his stances against forced integration. Lee's journalistic endeavors existed on the margins, hubristic and controversial by necessity in order to keep a fledgling business enterprise, or several fledgling business enterprises, afloat.

His case was extreme, but despite his radical stances and controversial life, the case of Davis Lee demonstrates the difficulties that existed for black journalists between the 1930s and the 1960s. Most created weekly papers with circulations in the hundreds, staffed by fewer than five employees, relying on syndication services to fill the spaces between local news, editorial comment, and the advertising that kept them solvent. It would understandably leave them shifting with the winds of those elements, and though Lee shifted more than most, his case is demonstrative of the plight of black journalists in small markets in the middle of the twentieth century. Survival dictated that those journalists create a customer and advertising base for themselves by either crusading for black rights or moderating their stances to play to local white interests, and the strange career of Davis Lee is exemplary of both of those efforts.

The Depression

Lee was born and raised in Bel Air, where he attended the Hartford School of Journalism and Law, one of the region's public secondary schools.³ It was a promising start, but the murder of Wesley Buchanan and the eighteen-year sentence that followed was a significant hindrance to his progress. In prison, Lee was a machine operator in a textile factory. While in prison, he helped his fellow inmates learn to read and write, but he also wrote himself, submitting stories and editorials to various papers and making a journalistic name while behind bars. "I work in the pants factory during the day, and do all of my writing (two syndicated weekly columns, short stories and essays) at

³Lee was raised by his grandparents Isaac and Caroline Curtis, along with their adopted son Earnest and another grandchild, Edna Clark. Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 Population, Harford County, Maryland, Sheet no. 11A (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 1910); Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 Population, Harford County, Maryland, Sheet no. 4B (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 1910); and "Davis Lee," US Social Security Death Index, 1935–2014, SS# 218-14-8235 (Washington, DC: Social Security Administration, 1987); and "Davis Lee, 82, Lawyer, Journalist," *State* (Columbia, SC), February 20, 1987, 4C.

night, from six until ten," he explained. "Every spare moment between times is utilized in reading. I read 12 daily papers, 50 or 60 colored weeklies when they come in, two new novels each week, besides a number of magazines." That work helped Lee achieve parole after serving six years, whereupon he convinced Carl Murphy, president of the Baltimore *Afro-American*, to supply him with a job to help him convince the parole board of his stability. The *Afro*, founded in 1892, was one of the largest and most significant black weekly newspapers in the country. "I am positive, Mr. Murphy, that my future mode of living and achievement will fully justify you in coming to my assistance. I am determined to make good, all that I ask is a chance."⁴ It was a request that would bind Lee to Murphy for the next decade.

That decade was the core of Depression era, a time that was vital for black life within the confines of Jim Crow and the black press that reported on it. After World War I, a new radicalism, led by Marcus Garvey, emerged in response to poor wartime treatment. Most of the black press was against Garvey, however, and the *Chicago Defender* aided in bringing about his arrest and eventual deportation. The interwar press was the black newspaper at its most radical, and that militancy grew its audience and made it nationally relevant, a "much greater intermediary link and integrative force for the black population" than it had been before, in the words of historian Charlotte O'Kelly. "It is almost as if all the rancor, all the resentment and brooding, all the inhibited impulses to retaliate for discrimination and injustice," argued sociologist Guy Johnson, "were brought together and let loose every week in the two hundred or more Negro newspapers" of the 1930s. The black press was, in the words of Gunnar Myrdal, "a fighting press."⁵

Thus the black press, as Charlotte O'Kelly has demonstrated, "served to solidify in the black person's mind concepts of race and racial struggle." According to a 1932 study of "Negro Nationalism," the black press reflected the full range of opinions that a group might have, from radicalism to accommodation. "As a whole, however, it is a decidedly potent influence in wielding

⁴Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930 Population, Baltimore City, Maryland, Maryland Penitentiary, Sheet No. 7A (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 1930); Vincent Tubbs, "Tunnel Joe Martyr for Prison Reforms," *Afro-American*, April 21, 1951, 1, December 27, 1958, 9; and Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, November 28, 1933, Marshall: 15: 07, Folder 72, Afro-American Newspapers Archives and Research Center, Baltimore, Maryland (hereafter cited as Afro-American Archives). Note: The Afro-American Archives use a unique filing system wherein the name of a civil rights leader combined with a two-number series divided by a colon constitute a de facto box number that precedes the folder number in these citations. See also Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998).

⁵Charlotte G. O'Kelly, "Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement: Their Historical Relationship, 1827-1945," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982): 8-9; Guy Johnson, "Some Factors in the Development of Negro Social Institutions in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 3 (1939): 334; and Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 908.

those divergent attitudes into something of a more homogeneous character.”⁶ That homogeneity was necessary during the Depression. African-American urban unemployment rose to fifty percent by 1932, making the maintenance of black business—newspaper or otherwise—a tenuous prospect at best. In the North, approximately half of all black families were receiving some form of depression relief. It was even worse in the South. For example, 65 percent of Atlanta’s black families needed aid.⁷

Such was the social and journalistic landscape that Lee entered, even as he was serving his sentence. As early as 1931, Lee was writing reports on conditions at his prison and submitting fiction stories to the *Afro*. “He seems to be able to smuggle mail past the guards and undoubtedly is a clever chap,” Carl Murphy commented. In December 1932, he reported on the *Blackman*, a new monthly publication from Marcus Garvey, and, after the closing of the *Negro World*, the official organ of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), his devotion to UNIA politics would ultimately garner Lee his first national exposure.⁸

In May 1933, Lee wrote to columnist and provocateur George S. Schuyler, who responded in his *Pittsburgh Courier*. Lee was upset with Schuyler’s criticism of Marcus Garvey and the “infantile paralysis of Garveyism.” Garvey’s movement, according to Lee, was one of the greatest “movements that was ever conceived in a black brain” and was founded with honorable intentions. Lee saw virtue in the back-to-Africa movement and thought that the black population could work to convince the government to help. “There may be bloodshed, but the end is worth the sacrifice.” Schuyler, however, was adamant. Garvey was “unquestionably a great rabble rouser,” but he “was and is without executive ability.” More important, he was “a

⁶The Ethiopian Crisis of 1935 helped broaden the black press message internationally, emphasizing the plight of all black and brown peoples and using national image as an argument against domestic race policy. O’Kelly, “Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement,” 9–10; Theodore Standing, “A Study of Negro Nationalism” (PhD dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1932), 69–70; and Maxwell Brooks, “A Sociological Interpretation of the Negro Newspaper” (MA thesis, Ohio State University, 1937), 42.

⁷Norman Thomas, *Human Exploitation in the United States* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1934), xiv–xv; Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 6; Lawrence D. Hogan, *Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006), 224–225; Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932–1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 13; and Harris Gaylord Warren, *Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 241–242.

⁸Davis Lee to Afro-American Co., May 2, 1931, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; NAACP to Carl Murphy, October 31, 1931, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Carl Murphy to William T. Andrews, November 12, 1931, Afro-American Archives; and “58 Other Prize Winners,” *Afro-American*, September 3, 1932, 1, Davis Lee, “Publishes New Monthly,” December 24, 1932, 3.

man who robs and deceives his followers,” and the notion that American and African governments would help subsidize the back-to-Africa movement was unlikely at best. “Garvey and his disciples are all wrong.”⁹ Lee fired back in the *Courier*, blasting Schuyler’s “ridiculously puerile” attack on Garvey. “Every reasonable man knows” that Garvey’s honesty and integrity “are beyond reproach.”¹⁰

In April 1933, Lee wrote an editorial for the *Afro* in response to the conviction of Scottsboro boy Haywood Patterson, turning his frustration at the verdict into a screed against white Christianity. “Young people have listened with extreme fortitude to their absurd and asinine ravings about their white God,” he wrote, “but from the treatment accorded us, the way that innocent members are lynched and crucified on the cross of prejudice and white supremacy, we are forced to the conclusion that Christianity is a huge joke, and only serves to further the unjust oppression and exploitation of us, and that this god is a myth.”¹¹

Lee seemed to remain under constant fire. Soon he produced “The Future of the Negro,” a controversial pamphlet that situated the black experience in the wake of economic collapse, which hit the black community twice as hard, first because of financial hardships and second because of the “fear and hate” propagated by angry, disaffected whites. Thus, he concluded, the “only hope of economic salvation lies in the redemption of Africa.” W. E. B. Du Bois, Schuyler, and others were opposed to the back-to-Africa movement, but their leadership had proven to be a failed proposition in the face of the economic collapse anyway. Lee defended Marcus Garvey’s ideas, acknowledging his faults, including that he “erred in the execution of some of his plans,” but argued that his ideology was sound and that the vast majority of his critics acted out of jealousy more than anything else.¹²

⁹George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 3, 1933, 10. Lee was publishing his early pan-Africanist ideas in Garvey’s *Negro World*. See November 21, 1931, March 26, 1932, or June 18, 1932. Tony Martin, *The Pan-African Connection: From Slavery to Garvey and Beyond* (Dover, MA: Majority Press, 1983), 108.

¹⁰Davis Lee, “Lee Answers Schuyler’s Attacks on Garvey and Back-to-Africa Move,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1933, A2. Lee was not the only *Courier* reader frustrated with Schuyler’s argument, as demonstrated by letters to the paper’s editor, which is surely exactly what Schuyler wanted. T. J. Gailliard, “Garvey a Moses,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1933, A2.

¹¹Davis Lee, “Says White Christian God Must Be Southerner and Capitalist,” *Afro-American*, April 22, 1933, 3.

¹²“With the Magazines,” *Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1933, 14; and Davis Lee, *The Future of the Negro*, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. In October 1933, *Afro-American* columnist Alfred Hendricks recommended Lee’s “The Future of the Negro” as a strong pamphlet “far away from the beaten path. Nowhere is to be found the average author’s hobby horse—‘Honey, I’ve waitin’;’ and such stuff.” Alfred Hendricks, “Small Business Man Is Making Good,” *Afro-American*, October 7, 1933, 17.

The South

Lee was released from prison in early March 1934.¹³ He married Lucile Davis in Baltimore in October and announced that the couple would head south after the wedding so that he could meet some lecturing obligations.¹⁴ It was a discouraging trip. South Carolina tenant farmers were “on the verge of starvation.” Charleston was even worse than the rural areas. Residents were “wholly at the mercy of the whites.” Housing conditions were virtually unlivable. The high school curriculum was incomplete. The streets in “the colored ghetto of this historic city of the South” had no paved streets or sewer system. Even more problematic for Lee was the state of the black business community compared to Baltimore. “There are 40,000 people here, and they do not have one decent restaurant, store, or barber shop.” There were plenty of churches, however, and the ministers seemed to be the wealthiest black residents of the city. “They have fairly decent homes and ride in sumptuous automobiles, while those who support them live in houses not fit for dogs to live in.” Even worse, the city kept a large oak tree on Ashley Avenue surrounded by a fence. It had been the sight of twenty lynchings, “and the good white folks are preserving it as a warning to other dark-skinned brethren.”¹⁵

The residents of Charleston did not take kindly to his interpretation. Writing to the *Afro*, E. B. Burroughs, the president of Charleston’s branch of the NAACP, explained that even in the poorest section of Charleston, all of the streets were paved, the tree on Ashley Street was never the site of a lynching, much less twenty, and there was a relatively thriving black business infrastructure in the city as well. But Lee was not just inaccurate, he was a con-artist, Burroughs charged, adding that Lee colluded with a “local newspaper man” to create a business guide for the black community. This “Negro Business Guide,” however, was less to help Charleston and more to help Lee, who “charged anything they could get, some 75 or 50 cents, for the same size space. There was no proofreading done and it was printed on paper that was about the cheapest obtainable.” Lee’s visit was nothing more than “a grand racket.” Burroughs’s response was one of several angry reactions

¹³By September, Lee had returned to his “farm” in Bel Air “for a much needed rest.” A report by the Negro Writers Guild wondered “if he will begin that long contemplated novel while in the quiet of rural Maryland.” M. Roberson, “Scottsboro Boys and Davis Lee,” *Afro-American*, March 31, 1934, 4; Davis Lee, “Young Girl Sentenced for Tale,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 28, 1934, 1; Davis Lee, “Denies Snubbing Tenn. Reporter,” April 22, 1934, 6; “Literary Flashes,” September 24, 1934, 6.

¹⁴The marriage was his second, following an earlier betrothal to Loretta Brooms. “Writer to Marry Baltimore Girl,” *Afro-American*, November 3, 1934, 9.

¹⁵Davis Lee, “Conditions Awful in S. Carolina, Says Davis Lee,” *Afro-American*, November 24, 1934, 3.

the paper printed in its pages, all from residents of Charleston who saw no truth in Lee's report.¹⁶

Lee acted as a correspondent for the *Afro* as he made his way down the coast. After Charleston, Lee ventured to Savannah, where he found conditions no better. He reported on the Coffee Bluff community, a group of fisherman on the Coffee Bluff River. He spoke of the "tribesmen" there as if on an exotic safari. The people lived in "old and dilapidated" log cabins, near "three or four white families who live close enough to exploit them." Their food, their lifestyle, and their sanitation were substandard. There was no public school. These people were "filthy and unsanitary." And they were always under the thumb of local whites.¹⁷

Lee had not, however, given up his militancy. While in Savannah, he took a trip to the still-active Hermitage plantation, "where I saw one hundred or more male members of my race working for one dollar per week." A white caretaker allowed him to tour the grounds, showing him the meager slave huts that were still on the premises, the auction block, and the overseer's house. The sights "made me feel like crying, fighting, doing anything to avenge the wholesale atrocities perpetrated upon my people." As he was leaving, he was stopped by "two little ragged colored boys" who offered to show him "de big oak whar dey usedta hung de slaves." Devastated yet again, he "drove back to Savannah, packed and left."¹⁸

Finally, however, in December, Lee reached Jacksonville, which, whether part of the initial plan or not, turned out to be his destination. There he submitted a tortured report to the *Afro* about Granville G. Bennett, a black man beaten to death by white police officers after refusing to confess to stealing some clothes. "Citizens of this prejudice-ridden city are in an uproar," he reported. The local NAACP was "making a thorough investigation" and sponsoring a private autopsy.¹⁹

Lee's goal was a paper of his own, and with only fifty-four dollars, in December 1934 he founded the *Jacksonville Mirror*, the first of what would

¹⁶E. B. Burroughs, "A Reply to Davis Lee," *Afro-American*, December 1, 1934, 4, W. Eugene Simmons, "Send Better Reporters to Charleston, S.C.," December 8, 1934, 4, George A. Allen, "Lee Observations Under Fire," December 15, 1934, 4.

¹⁷Davis Lee, "Eastern Shore Lynchers Didn't Defeat Ritchie," *Afro-American*, November 24, 1934, 16, Davis Lee, "Primitive Colony of Jewelry Wearing Men Is Found in Dixie" and "'Glad When You're Dead' Is Pastor's Text," December 1, 1934, 2, Davis Lee, "Maj. Wright Sells Haitian Coffee," December 1, 1934, 13, Davis Lee, "Ga. College Prexy Has a 10,000 Acre Co-op Farm Plan," December 1, 1934, 23, Davis Lee, "'Not Interested in Tuskegee,' Hubert Tells Davis Lee," December 8, 1934, 23.

¹⁸Davis Lee, "Brunswick Man Owns \$350,000 in Real Estate," *Afro-American*, December 15, 1934, 5.

¹⁹Davis Lee, "Duval County Fair Opens in Jacksonville," *Afro-American*, December 29, 1934, 8, Davis Lee, "Jacksonville Man Dies after Police Probe of Theft," December 15, 1934, 16; and Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, November 24, 1934, Folder 72, *Afro-American Archives*.

be many such creations over the course of his career.²⁰ Although a prison sentence was a unique entrance into the business, Lee's path to publishing—experience in the business without a formal education—was common. For example, Henry Houston, publisher of the *Charlotte Post*, a contemporary paper of Lee's *Mirror*, began his work in the business as an office boy at a young age. "I have never had but one job outside of the newspaper business. That was when I worked as an insurance agent for several years," said Houston. "I attended the city schools and have never been to nobody's college."²¹

To fill the gaps between his own reporting and editorials, Lee—like Henry Houston before him—became a member of the Scott Newspaper Syndicate headquartered in Atlanta, but his time in Jacksonville would be short. The *Mirror* billed itself as "Jacksonville's only Colored Standard Newspaper," but it was not, and that bravado, combined with Lee's penchant for sensationalism, precipitated a "double-barreled newspaper war" between the *Mirror* and the rival *Florida Tattler*, published by Porcher Taylor, throughout the first months of 1935. The "war" crescendoed with Lee swearing out a warrant against Taylor for criminal libel, claiming that a *Tattler* article "hurt his paper's circulation and damaged his reputation" after describing his criminal past.²²

The *Afro* wanted no part of it. In a letter to Taylor, *Afro* president Carl Murphy explained that Lee did not work at that time for his paper. "He was an unpaid member of our staff at one time. You have our permission to give him the devil."²³ Lee would ultimately solve his problems in Jacksonville by leaving. After six months, he sold his paper for two thousand dollars to Walker Commercial College.²⁴

Even after his escape from Jacksonville, he maintained his association with both the *Afro* and other syndication services such as the Associated

²⁰Earlier that year, Lee was paroled with a group of fifteen prisoners, among them James Davis, who would eventually follow his friend Lee to Jacksonville, where he would take over as managing editor of the *Mirror*. In a region without a preponderance of black collegiate journalism training, employers found newspapermen where they could. "Davis Lee Is among Fifteen Men Paroled," *Afro-American*, March 10, 1934, 23, "Ex-Convict Editor Lashed by Wilkins," December 27, 1958, 9; and James M. Davis, "Imposter Is Detected in Jax," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 29, 1935, 2.

²¹Cora L. Bennett, "Henry Houston (Negro Newspaperman)," August 29, 1939, US Work Projects Administration, Federal Writers' Project, Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936–39, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001755/>, accessed October 30, 2014.

²²"Florida Editor Sues His Rival for Libel," *Afro-American*, March 30, 1935, 7.

²³Carl Murphy to Porcher L. Taylor, February 19, 1935, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, January 7, 1935, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

²⁴The institution planned to continue its affiliation with the Scott Syndicate, but the paper would not survive. "Started Paper with \$54; Sells for \$2000," [newspaper article from unknown paper], May 25, 1935, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

Negro Press. His exposé detailing the lives and “actual slavery” of Tennessee sharecroppers appeared under an ANP heading in June. He produced a similar report on the horrors suffered by Texas sharecroppers the following month for the *Afro*.²⁵ In July 1935, he wrote Carl Murphy about his trip through Texas and his plan to travel west through the remainder of the year. “If you would like for me to write some exclusive stuff for the *Afro* while on the Coast at space rate I would be glad to.” And he did just that, sending several pieces to the *Afro* and the ANP along his travels.²⁶

In February 1936, Lee reported for the ANP on the NAACP’s successful push to get Western University graduate Benjamin Price admitted to the University of Maryland law school. It was an early example of Lee’s positive contact with and reporting on the NAACP, a position that would change drastically in the decades to come.²⁷

That summer, Lee again hit the road, even traveling to Birmingham for an ANP interview with the Scottsboro Boys. In that interview, Heywood Patterson told Lee that he and his fellow defendants would be willing to be represented by local Alabama lawyers instead of their current representation headed by New York attorney Samuel Liebowitz. It was something of a coup, raising Lee’s profile and helping establish his credentials.²⁸ The problem for Lee, however, was that even with successful scoops, he could not seem to avoid controversy. Libel charges and financial problems dogged

²⁵“Plight of Dixie Sharecroppers Is Desperate,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1935, 5; and Davis Lee, “East Texas Cotton Choppers Don’t Know Wages,” *Afro-American*, July 20, 1935, 1.

²⁶Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, July 12, 1935, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, August 8, 1935, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

²⁷Davis Lee, “Admit Second Race Student to Maryland University Law School,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 1, 1936, 5, Davis Lee, “Don Redman Tells of Rapid Rise of Band,” February 8, 1936, A6, Davis Lee, “Hold Philadelphia Tourist on Charge of Killing White Man,” February 15, 1936, 5, “Mrs. Davis Lee, Wife of Noted Lecturer, Dies,” March 7, 1936, 3; Davis Lee, “White Sculptor Now Doing Louis Statue,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 11, 1936, 5, Davis Lee, “AME Bishop Tells of Woes of Administrating Work in the West Indies,” February 15, 1936, 1, Davis Lee, “Baltimore Roosevelt Ball a Flop,” February 17, 1936, 2, “Mrs. L. D. Lee Is Claimed by Death,” March 9, 1936, 2; and “Writer’s Wife Dies of Pneumonia,” *Afro-American*, February 29, 1936, 21.

²⁸“Afro Writer Stops in B’ham over Week-end,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 21, 1936, 1, Davis Lee, “Nine Prisoners Ready for Next Trial,” July 29, 1936, 1, Davis Lee, “Brand Selby on Action in Church Lawsuit,” July 30, 1936, 1; Davis Lee, “Mob of 10,000 Hunts Man; Beaten, Confesses,” *Afro-American*, July 25, 1936, 6, “Hundreds at Notification of Gov. Landon,” August 1, 1936, 3; Katherine Kent Lambert, “Alabama State News,” *Chicago Defender*, August 1, 1936, 21; Davis Lee, “7 Scottsboro Boys Would Ditch Liebowitz,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 1, 1936, 3; and Davis Lee, “Scottsboro Boys Prefer Alabama Lawyers to Liebowitz, Reporter Learns on Prison Visit,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1936, 1, Davis Lee, “Omaha Lawyer Blames Dr. Hawkins for Result of Selby-Bryant Tift,” August 8, 1936, 24; and Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, March 16, 1936, Folder 210, Afro-American Archives.

him throughout the year. He eventually left the road in Topeka, Kansas, and settled down (as much as Lee ever settled down) and began publishing yet another newspaper, the *Capitol Plaindealer*, again contracting with the Scott Syndicate in September 1936.²⁹

Lee continued his tendency toward investigative journalism in Topeka. One advertisement for the *Plaindealer* announced, "It is chuck full of real live news—you must read this paper—it is the eyes and nose of Topeka—sees all and prints all worth printing."³⁰ His activism also spread beyond the bounds of the paper. In January 1937, for example, he headed an interracial Kansas delegation of the National Unemployment League on a trip to Washington, DC.³¹ Still, times were hard. The *Plaindealer* folded, and soon Lee was on the road again, this time moving to North Carolina to start another paper. As of September 1937, Lee listed himself as general manager and managing editor of the Outlook Publishing Company, headquartered in Winston-Salem, publishing the *Winston-Salem Outlook*, the *Greensboro Tribune*, and the *Forsyth Liberal*.³²

In late 1938, he left North Carolina to take over the *Savannah Journal*. Savannah was in the heart of the region he found so offensive earlier in the decade. From there he reported on mob violence, acts of racial terrorism, regional elections, and the failures of Jim Crow.³³ Both for the *Savannah Journal* and in his space-rate reporting for the *Afro*, he did his best to publicize local lynchings. He also worked with attorney Austin Walden of the Georgia NAACP to help stay the execution of Marion Hunter, a black Savannah man accused of killing five people, because black members were excluded from the grand jury.³⁴

²⁹Thelma Chiles Lee to Carl Murphy, August 20, 1941, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Author, "Newsman and Kansas School Teacher Wed," [Name of newspaper not included], July 11, 1936, Folder 210, Afro-American Archives.

³⁰"Stop! Look! Listen!" *Plaindealer*, [n.d.] Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

³¹Lee still maintained his connection with the *Afro*, and the group stopped in Baltimore on the way. "On Way to Washington, D.C.," *Afro-American*, January 23, 1937, 20.

³²Thelma Chiles Lee to Carl Murphy, August 20, 1941, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, September 6, 1937, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

³³Mrs. Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, October 12, 1938, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; *Afro-American*, Davis Lee, "Minister Slays White Slugger; Mob Fires Home," August 20, 1938, 5, Davis Lee, "I Visited a Hoodoo," September 17, 1938, 8, Davis Lee, "S.C. New Deal Trick Fails," September 24, 1938, 1, Davis Lee, "Plan to Murder Dr. Moton Fails," January 28, 1939, 1, Davis Lee, "Southern Youth Group Endorses F.D.R.'s Work," May 6, 1939, 1, Davis Lee, "White Woman Is Riled by Jim Crow," May 6, 1939, 8.

³⁴"Say Ga. Man Lynched," *Afro-American*, March 18, 1939, 1; "Editor, N.A.A.C.P. Save Convicted Man Just as Death March Begins," *Chicago Defender*, July 29, 1939, 6; and Davis Lee, "Editor's Action Saves Accused Man from Chair," [Name of newspaper not included], July 22, 1939, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee to Carl Murphy, July 17, 1939, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

It could be a frustrating endeavor. At one point, Lee wrote to Murphy about the possibility of writing an exposé about black journalism in the South called “Editing a Paper in Hell,” prompted by watching a judge sentence a black woman to thirty days in jail “because a poor white man said she cursed him.” He described a litany of racial injustices that he witnessed every day. “You don’t have the slightest idea about the pressure that is brought to bear on a colored editor in Georgia, if he has manhood.” A similar letter referred to the region as Hades. “When I leave here,” he told Murphy, “I don’t even want to see the south on the map.”³⁵

The Migration

In 1940, he made his escape, this time heading north to Newark, New Jersey, to work for his original benefactor full time. In October 1940, the *Afro* board authorized the creation of a Newark office, with Lee at its helm. “It is necessary to be extra careful, temperate and discreet in handling affairs because your main job is to keep business running smoothly without breaks and to keep everybody working harmoniously yet productively at highest efficiency,” Murphy told him. “You are in charge of the office from now on.”³⁶

It was an auspicious time to take that kind of journalistic leadership role. In the run-up to World War II in the late 1930s and 1940s, the FBI devoted significant attention to the black press, whose reporting on race and discrimination were seen as detrimental to national unity. Along with the *Afro-American* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, the FBI also visited the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, ostensibly because of antidiscrimination editorials being printed by publisher P. B. Young. Soon the FBI made its way to the *Atlanta Daily World*, interviewing columnist Cliff McKay about external influences on editorial policy. Both the *Courier* and *Daily World* published editorials decrying the practice of pressuring the black press. “The investigation was a farce. They never harassed anybody or threatened anybody. They just expressed their dissatisfaction at what we were doing,” said *Courier* columnist Frank Bolden.³⁷

³⁵Davis Lee to Carl Murphy [n.d.], Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; and Davis Lee to Carl Murphy [n.d.], Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

³⁶“140 Afro Employees and Forty Guests from Six Cities at Annual Christmas Dinner,” *Afro-American*, December 21, 1940, 12; “Afro Board Hosts 195 at Annual Christmas Dinner,” December 21, 1940, 17; “Rites Held for John W. Slator,” July 19, 1941, 18; Carl Murphy to Davis Lee, October 28, 1940, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; and Carl Murphy to Davis Lee, October 2, 1940, Folder 210, Afro-American Archives.

³⁷Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press, 1827–1965* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 74–75; and Patrick S. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government’s Investigation of the Black Press during World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 84.

By all accounts, Lee's relationship with the home office seemed to be strong.³⁸ In December 1941, Lee joined a local Newark committee to promote the sale of war bonds. The following month, he accepted an award for his *New Jersey Afro-American* "for most progress during the year." In September 1942, the *Afro* included Lee in a feature of those who "make the wheels go round in 6 Afro offices."³⁹

In March 1942, he appealed to the FEPC to hold hearings in Patterson, New Jersey, because of the glut of defense contractors refusing to hire black workers. He even ran a photo, reprinted in the Baltimore *Afro*, of his donation, on behalf of the paper, to the Bridgeton chapter of the NAACP to help them prosecute a white police officer accused of killing a black Atlantic City man. He reported favorably on an NAACP investigation into a May 1942 race riot on Long Island. He reported on the plight of black southern migrants trying to escape the horrors of tenant farming, only to find themselves in Farm Security Administration camps that were desolate and poorly maintained.⁴⁰

In late October 1943, just months before his break with the paper, Lee penned an editorial castigating southern senators for killing an education bill that would have provided millions of dollars of funding to public schools. It was a stand he would not continue to make for long.⁴¹ In late September 1943, the *Afro's* personnel director filed a critical report on Lee's management of the Newark office. "Mr. Lee must be told that it is up to him to get along with his staff as a means of developing a closely-knit and productive unit," the report detailed. "If he cannot curb his temper and use of profanity, he should be removed as manager and given a roving assignment." The Newark operations had been "loose" and had "carried on without due regard to company rules, regulations and directives." The personnel director traveled to Newark to generate the report in response to accounts that Lee had brandished a gun during one office row. Following the incident and the report, in December 1943 his circulation manager was arrested in the office for marijuana

³⁸For examples, see "Former Associates Mourn with Slater Family," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 12, 1941, 9; and "Rites Held for John W. Slater," *Afro-American*, July 19, 1941, 18, "Jersey Bowlers Start Ball Rolling for Fifth Season," October 4, 1941, 22, Davis Lee, "Cop Verdict Priceless," October 25, 1941, 4, "25 Employees Get Service Awards at 20th Annual AFRO Christmas Dinner," December 20, 1941, 8.

³⁹Lillian William, "New Jersey," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 27, 1941, 21; and "Afro Newspapers Awarded Bronze Plaques for 1941 Progress," *Afro-American*, January 17, 1942, 2, "They Make the Wheels Go Round in 6 Afro Offices," September 19, 1942, 10, "21 Afro Employees Get Service Awards," December 19, 1942, 21.

⁴⁰"FEPC May Hold Hearing in N.J.," *Afro-American*, March 7, 1942, 14, "Afro Backs Prosecution," March 28, 1942, 20, Davis Lee, "NAACP Starts Probe of L.I. Race Riot," May 9, 1942, 2, "Here's How Southern Toilers Come North," July 4, 1942, 3. His coverage of Southern migrants would continue through the war. See, for example, Davis Lee, "Migrants Refuse to Move for Jamaicans," *Afro-American*, May 29, 1943, 12, Davis Lee, "Jamaican Workers Yield Disease Scare," June 12, 1943, 12.

⁴¹"More Senatorial Shenanigans," *New Jersey Afro-American*, October 30, 1943, 4.

possession. At that point, Carl Murphy designated Lee for assignment and deposed him from the Newark office.⁴²

Even that minimal version of employment was short-lived. By April 1945, Lee had severed all ties with the *Afro* and formed the *Newark Telegram*, originally a typical black weekly featuring local news and crime stories. A March 1946 editorial, for example, pilloried senator Albert Hawkes for not supporting the FEPC, and a bold announcement told its readers to “Join the NAACP.”⁴³ But it would not remain typical for long. Freed from the constraints of established journalistic operations in Baltimore and Pittsburgh, Lee and his paper would undergo a significant change.

The Turn

In 1948, the *Roanoke Times* reprinted an editorial from his *Telegram*. Lee had returned to the South, as he had done in 1934, but this time he had a very different impression. He had traveled to meet with newspaper distributors, but he came away with a vastly different impression of the region he once condemned. “The racial lines in the South are so clearly drawn and defined there can be no confusion,” he argued. White and black were separated, and that separation served as a functional roadmap of stores and restaurants that were amenable to black customers. It allowed everyone to “know the score,” unlike the situation in New Jersey, where racism was diffused but omnipresent. In addition, segregation also helped foster the development of a black middle class of business owners that, specifically because of segregation, had a captive audience for their services or products: “There are some sore spots down there,” he argued, “but it is not as bad as it is painted.” It was not hatred that whites felt toward Negroes, but instead a feeling of superiority that could be mitigated by an expansion of black capacity: “White people of this country are not only our friends, but they want to see us get ahead as a race.” Black activists do not need to spend money trying to convince white people that they are equal. They should simply “fight for recognition, justice, civil rights and equality” within the race and “demonstrate to the world by our living standards, our conduct, our

⁴²Carl Murphy to Thomas P. MacCarthy, January 31, 1944, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; and Carl Murphy to Davis Lee, January 10, 1944, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

⁴³It was still a Lee paper, however. In May 1946, Lee was charged with criminal libel by a local AMEZ minister and released under five hundred dollars bail. James H. Murphy to Carl Murphy, May 9, 1945, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Author, “Newspaper Editor Faces Grand Jury,” [Name of newspaper not included], May 18, 1946, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; and *Newark Herald*, March 3, 1946, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

ability and intelligence that we are the equal of any man." The white South would then accept the black South on its own terms.⁴⁴

The immediate reasons for Lee's turn remain a mystery, but whether the change was opportunism to create publicity, bitterness over his break with the *Afro* and more established black news outlets, a sincere (if bizarre) philosophical change, or some combination of all three, it was clearly one that white southerners liked. Both Virginia senator Harry Byrd and his counterpart A. Willis Robertson read Lee's editorial into the Congressional Record, Byrd describing it as "one of the most accurate and clearest presentations I have ever seen of the racial controversy," an article that "should be read by every patriotic American."⁴⁵

Patriotic black Americans were not as impressed. John H. McCray of the *Lighthouse and Informer* had a formerly cordial relationship with Lee, but his editorial had turned the two into foes. "To Governor Thurmond and the several daily newspapers" that quoted and reprinted Lee's editorial, McCray suggested that they "check on the gentleman." Lee had come to the South "to do some of the bountiful business he now says exists" in the region, founding the *Savannah Journal* in 1938. But he failed miserably and fled north to Newark. "In fact, the gentleman ran out on a bondsman who had bailed him out of jail on a criminal libel charge." If his white acolytes wanted to champion a black message, they should choose "one for whom there is respect and esteem among Negroes. Lee has neither." In reference to his work prior to December 1943, McCray assured readers that "his worshippers' eyes would pop out if they could but read some of the views he wrote eight years ago." He closed by arguing that "white people sometimes commit monstrous blunders by clinging to words of a Negro they know nothing about."⁴⁶

McCray's criticism continued in the following issue of his weekly, reporting on the letters he had received from "irate South Carolinians." Lee was "a traitor and nincompoop" who ran a "trashy journal." McCray himself added, "The Negro newspaper people would be very happy were the Dixiecrats to adopt him permanently." Another of his former papers, the *Afro*, also excoriated its former employee. "It should be the responsibility of rep-

⁴⁴Davis Lee, "The Viewpoint of a Negro," *Roanoke Times*, August 2, 1948; and Lauren F. Winner, "Doubtless Sincere: New Characters in the Civil Rights Cast," in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 164–165. Even the conservative but relatively ubiquitous *Time* magazine published an excerpt from the piece, noting with satisfaction that in the South Lee could "know the score" about which restaurant to attend. "Jim Crow's 'Other Side,'" *Time*, September 6, 1948, 53. So, too, did the Congressional Record, after Louisiana's F. Edward Hebert included it as part of his remarks in June 1962. 108 Cong. Rec. A4421–4422 (1962). The *Dallas Morning News* published it, June 21, 1963 (and because of that reprinting, it was again included in the Congressional Record by Bruce Alger of Texas). 109 Cong. Rec. A3992–3993 (1963).

⁴⁵94 Cong. Rec. A4947 (1948).

⁴⁶"They Might Have First Checked," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 19, 1948, 6.

utable individuals and organizations,” it argued, “to bring these impositions to their attention promptly. Nothing spreads faster than a lie.”⁴⁷ By October 1948, Thomas W. Young, president of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association, had publicly denounced Lee, explaining that he was not respected among the community of black journalists and should not be assumed to be representative of that fraternity. The final word on Lee’s editorial came from Lester Granger, executive director of the National Urban League, who considered Lee’s “cringing editorials on the South and the colored citizen as the most harmful action taken against our case by any colored American.”⁴⁸ And that kind of harm only made Lee a cause célèbre among white supremacists.

In the late 1940s, Lee published an article titled “Black Supremacy” in the right-wing anti-communist magazine *Plain Talk*. He used the space to ridicule black congressman Oscar DePriest for attempting to integrate a Washington restaurant owned by white North Carolina congressman Lindsay Warren.⁴⁹ In the summer of 1948, Lee went after “outside agitators” as destroying the racial balance in the South. Governor Strom Thurmond, as noted by Sid Bedingfield, “hailed Lee as the true voice of black southerners.”⁵⁰

Lee’s work, in fact, would become a favorite of white southern congressmen and newspapers. In 1949, Louisiana’s Allen Ellender read another Lee editorial into the Congressional Record, this one in response to the Truman administration’s proposal for federal civil rights legislation. “Does Mr. Truman and the advocates of civil rights know that millions of Negroes in the South are not affected by segregation and discrimination?,” Lee asked, in a complete reversal of the reporting in his early journalistic career. He argued that the region provided the best potential base for future economic growth, despite its general poverty. “The South is still the poorest section of our Nation,” he concluded, “and it is only human that southern whites will provide better schools, hospitals, etc., for their own than for Negroes. After all, they carry the bulk of the tax load.”⁵¹ It was a message that Ellender and

⁴⁷Citizens Flail At Editor Davis Lee,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 26, 1948, 4, “More on the Davis Lee View,” September 9, 1948, 6; “Here’s How Lies Get Out,” *Afro-American*, August 28, 1948, 4; and Charley Cherokee, “National Grapevine,” *Chicago Defender*, August 21, 1948, 13, Albert Barnett, “Moral: Don’t Be a Jellyfish,” September 18, 1948, 15, Marie Wilson, “Ridicules Dixie,” September 25, 1948, 14.

⁴⁸“Press Association’s Head Assails Newark Telegram,” *Afro-American*, October 2, 1948, C4, Lester B. Granger, “Granger Says 52 ADA House Members to Sensitize Congress,” January 8, 1949, A2.

⁴⁹Davis Lee, “Black Supremacy,” *Plain Talk*, Folder 72, Afro-American Archives.

⁵⁰Sid Bedingfield, “John H. McCray, Accommodationism, and the Framing of the Civil Rights Struggle in South Carolina, 1940–48,” *Journalism History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 91–92.

⁵¹Quoted in 95 Cong. Rec. 2367 (1949). Like so many of Lee’s segregationist articles, it was reprinted more than once. It was also read into the record by Alabama congressman Frank Boykin, in combination with a similar editorial by Lee’s former nemesis, George Schuyler. 95 Cong. Rec. A652–A654 (1949).

his colleagues wanted heard and a message that gave Lee the publicity to keep his fledgling business afloat.

It was also a message that veered sharply from that of Booker Washington, who never argued that “it is only human” that white schools and hospitals would receive more economic resources than those for black students and patients. That is not to say black southern journalism was not generally more conservative than its northern counterpart. “When it comes to Negro newspapers you can’t measure Birmingham or Atlanta or Memphis Negroes by a New York or Chicago Negro yardstick,” claimed an SNS editorial.⁵² The Meharry plan serves as a representative example of such differences. On February 25, 1948, in response to Supreme Court graduate school integration victories by the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, the governors of several southern states sent a proposal to Congress arguing that further NAACP suits could be circumvented through the pooling of funds from southern states to establish a black graduate school at Meharry Medical College—a proposal that Congress ignored and the black press categorically renounced. There was a general acknowledgment that the expansion of opportunity for black southerners was a positive step, but, as the *Amsterdam News* noted, the Meharry plan sought “to establish Jim Crow on a more solid and permanent foundation.” It was “a solution by the South to solve the problem in its own nefarious Jim Crow way before it is too late to keep the sunlight of democracy from coming over the horizon of the Southland.”⁵³

In a 1950 editorial, Lee returned to a still problematic but far more Washingtonian position. “It appears to me that the first things should come first, and that our economic well-being is of greater significance than the privilege or right to attend a white school or to associate with white people on an equal basis provided by Supreme Court decisions and pressure legislation.” He argued that he wanted to see Negroes “enjoy every right, privilege, and opportunity enjoyed by any other American,” but he opposed “agitation designed to deprive the other fellow of a right to be associated with his own kind exclusively, if he so desires.” He cited the NAACP’s graduate school

⁵²“No unifying central agency directs the opinions expressed in the Negro press,” wrote Gunnar Myrdal in 1944. “Like white newspapers, Negro newspapers are in keen competition with one another for circulation.” “Negroes Are Different in Dixie,” *Atlanta World*, February 28, 1932, 6; and Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 909.

⁵³The *Defender*, *Courier*, and *Argus* all had similar reactions, interpreting the plan as a nefarious hustle to stanch legitimate attempts at equal education. Bill Weaver and Oscar C. Page, “The Black Press and the Drive for Integrated Graduate and Professional Schools,” *Phylon* 43 (1st Quarter 1982): 22–24. See the front pages of the *New York Amsterdam News*, February 28, 1948; *Chicago Defender*, January 31, 1948; *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1948; and *St. Louis Argus*, February 6, 1948. In an era of the Dixiecrat revolt, there were myriad other examples. See, for instance, Sid Bedingfield, “The Dixiecrat Summer of 1948: Two South Carolina Editors—a Liberal and a Conservative—Foreshadow Modern Political Debate in the South,” *American Journalism* 27, no. 3 (2010): 91–114.

desegregation decisions in Oklahoma and Texas and argued that a handful of graduate school entries “is of no benefit to the millions of our people who are in need of the bare necessities of life.” Black educational success, he argued, always has been funded by white people, through legislative decree and, most importantly, tax dollars. Thus “instead of spending thousands of dollars to finance unnecessary court fights for privileges which will cost the race millions in lost valuable friendships and racial good will, our leaders should go into the Negro ghettos and force the local grocer to carry prime meats and sell to our people grade A products which will make us healthy.”⁵⁴

In 1950, Lee appeared on the FBI’s radar while giving FEPC speeches in Birmingham. They had received information from an executive at the Southern Natural Gas Company that Lee had communist ties back in New Jersey. Lee was known “among the colored people as being a small-town racketeer and a petty extortioner.” In 1943, the agency recorded him as railing against Jim Crow in a speech and vowing to fight against it “with the backing by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” but something had clearly changed.⁵⁵

“Davis Lee expresses the antithesis of the American creed when he declares that fighting for and winning justly due citizenship rights loses good will and friendships,” argued the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins in 1951. “On the contrary, such activity increases respect, which is vastly more important than mere good will.” He made the point that Lee’s demands for economic redress were not mutually exclusive of rights activism. “Among the colored, there is a decreasing number of honest Uncle Toms who really believe that colored people must accommodate themselves to the whims of white people just because whites are white and colored are not,” Wilkins argued. “Then there are dishonest Uncle Toms, full of a kind of guile, industriously working their own accommodation racket for their own benefit.” Wilkins did not name Lee as one kind of Tom or another. But he was a Tom, and thus he was a problem.⁵⁶

E. D. Nixon, as founder of the Montgomery Voters’ League and leading member of the Progressive Democratic Association, cosigned a public protest letter printed in the *Montgomery Advertiser* protesting a 1953 planned appearance by Davis Lee at the city’s municipal auditorium. It worked. Only seventy-five people showed up for the speech, and only twenty-five of those

⁵⁴The editorial, originally from the *Telegram*, was reprinted in the *Opelousas Daily World*, among, most likely, many others. It was also, like other Lee articles, read into the Congressional Record by white southern representatives. This time, both Louisiana’s Henry Larcade and Mississippi’s John Bell Williams found it worthy of note. 96 Cong. Rec. A7377, A7466 (1950).

⁵⁵Davis Lee, Case File NK 100-33578, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark Field Office, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁵⁶Davis Lee and Roy Wilkins, “Davis Lee All Wet, Wilkins Tells Dixie,” *Afro-American*, January 6, 1951, 19.

were black.⁵⁷ “All kinds of wild stories are being told about the poor down-trodden Negro; how he lives in terror 24 hours a day,” Lee wrote in his *Telegram* in 1952. “It so happens that I just returned to Newark from these States under attack, and I found none of these conditions.” Lee acknowledged that “there have been two or three isolated instances” of violence and injustice, but such were rare occurrences. Herman Talmadge, white supremacist governor of Georgia, was scolded as “a bigot and a Negro hater,” but, “he is neither.” It was a strange ledge from which to dive and was, of course, completely wrong. “What Governor Talmadge is doing for Negroes speaks much louder than anything he could say against them.” But as shocking as such statements were, his pronouncement about Charleston, South Carolina, was perhaps even more problematic: “I was in Charleston recently; I found more democracy being practiced there than in any northern or eastern city where I have visited. There is no Negro section there. Negroes live everywhere, and on most streets the next door neighbor is white.”⁵⁸ Not only was the statement completely false, but it was a direct contradiction of his earlier, tortured writing about his experience in Charleston. There were methods of circuitous reasoning that could perhaps place Lee’s current thinking in a theoretical line with that of his former Garveyist bent. But this was different. Proclaiming the virtues of white Charleston was a renunciation of the most basic principles that Lee originally espoused.

The Movement

That particular Rubicon crossed, it should come as no surprise that Lee opposed the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision. Southern states had spent millions of dollars to “give Negroes equal school facilities,” Lee wrote in 1954. “Now after these States have spent millions as they were requested to do, a group goes back into courts declaring that the Negro is not now satisfied with equal facilities, that the separate but equal law is unconstitutional, that nothing less than integration will do. That doesn’t seem fair to me.”⁵⁹

He would continue to make that case. Lee’s *Newark Telegraph* editorial on *Brown* and integration as a bad idea was republished in full on the front page of J. Oliver Emmerich’s *McComb Enterprise-Journal*, a white Mis-

⁵⁷John White, “Edgar Daniel Nixon: A Founding Father of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Portraits of African American Life since 1865*, ed. Nina Mjagkij (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 205–206; and “Few Attend Pro-Bias Meet,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 15, 1953, 6. The *Afro* listed the total black attendance at only 18. “Davis Lee Finds Cool Reception in Alabama,” *Afro-American*, July 25, 1953, 18. See also *Alabama Journal*, November 22, 1954, 1.

⁵⁸Like so many other of Lee’s more vituperative commentaries, this one, too, ended up in the Congressional Record, placed there by Clyde Hoey of North Carolina. 98 Cong. Rec. A1021-1022 (1952). And again by Spessard Holland of Florida. 98 Cong. Rec. A4488 (1952).

⁵⁹100 Cong. Rec. A4334-4336 (1954).

Mississippi paper that had been searching for black voices opposed to *Brown*. “Southern Negroes may lose a lot more than they gain. Integration in the North and East is not a howling success. This movement to integrate the schools of the South is loaded with more racial dynamite than appears on the surface and the Negro will be the one who is blown away.”⁶⁰ Again, Lee’s argument was defensible (if ultimately wrong) and not as accommodationist as much of his late material seemed. Still, the *Savannah Tribune*, a Scott Syndicate paper, slammed Lee’s views. “We have our doubts,” a SNS editorial ran, “about any literate Negro who says he willingly accepts the practice of segregation and discrimination.”⁶¹

In 1955, his willingness to do so convinced the FBI to try to develop Lee as an informant. His newspaper, the *Telegram*, took “a position concerning the Negro Question indicating that the Southern Negro has not been treated too badly by the White.” That sounded good to the Bureau, but Lee was “a controversial figure” and had “been charged with several minor violations concerning obscene literature.” In addition, the FBI’s Savannah office had approached Lee about the possibility, and he declined. The Bureau decided not to press the issue.⁶²

In the spring of 1956, Lee began giving speeches in Alabama school districts, invited by county superintendents of education, to discuss integration, with the obvious intent of the administrators to demonstrate that even black experts disagreed with the idea.⁶³ In November 1956, the NAACP’s director of public relations, Henry Lee Moon, sent letters to publishers across the country who picked up and reprinted the *Newark Telegram* story, berating Lee’s work for repeating “many of the hoary clichés used to defend segregation.” Most importantly, although Lee was entitled to his opinion, his writing “reveals that he is either woefully misinformed or is knavishly trying to mislead the public. Certainly, he does not speak for the Negro race either

⁶⁰Davis Lee, “The Negro and the Schools,” *Enterprise-Journal* (McComb, MS), August 9, 1954, 1; and Susan M. Weill, “Mississippi’s Daily Press in Three Crises,” in *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement*, ed. David R. Davies (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 28. The editorial was also, unsurprisingly, reprinted in the Congressional Record, placed there by John J. Flynt of Georgia. 103 Cong. Rec. 2766-2767 (1957).

⁶¹“It’s Mr. Lee Again,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 18, 1953, 4.

⁶²John L. Whalen to H. G. Foster, July 25, 1955, Davis Lee, Case File NK 100-33578, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark Field Office, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁶³G. A. Rodgers, Anniston dentist and president of the Alabama NAACP called Lee “a modern professional carpetbagger and is not accepted by Southern Negroes [sic].” Gordon A. Rodgers to Roy Wilkins, March 19, 1956, frame 0248-0249, part 24, reel 33, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm.

in the South or in the North.” The letter refuted Lee’s claims point by point. It also refuted his statistics.⁶⁴

In 1957, Lee argued that the Supreme Court “has given the Negro civil rights in exchange for jobs, bread, and shelter.” The minimum wage just led to the firing of thousands of black workers. Farm policy “threw thousands of Negroes out of jobs and homes.” Northern factories being built in the South to avoid the reach of unions hired only white workers. Job opportunities would supply economic opportunity, and economic opportunity would take care of education and politics. “Don’t promise [the Negro] civil rights and full access to the ballot, and flood the Nation with Hungarian refugees to take his jobs.” Of course, the problem with such claims is that civil rights and economic opportunity were not mutually exclusive propositions. Still, those arguments, however wrong, were not incendiary. Similar misinterpretations of cause and effect still befuddle many political thinkers today. Business owners did take advantage of the minimum wage to fire black workers. Northern factories did run from unions and discriminate in hiring. Lee’s mistake was in tying the opportunism of racist business practices to governmental civil rights policy or, even worse, to black southerners themselves.⁶⁵ Regardless, what began as a wrongheaded but understandable argument devolved into absurdity, but it did get him the publicity he craved. In another editorial, he claimed that North Carolina “Negro schools, in most instances, are better than the white.”⁶⁶

It was during this period that Lee relocated to the region he had once seen as hell, settling in Anderson, South Carolina, and forming the *Anderson Herald* (while still sporadically publishing editions of his *Newark Telegram*). In 1958, Lee sent letters to white businesses in South Carolina to solicit funds for a special school edition of his *Herald*. “I know that you do not operate a business to accommodate Negroes, but I am sure that you are interested in the current efforts afoot to force integration upon the races in the south,” he told them, before explaining that “Negro schools are better, newer and more modern than the white schools,” and that black South Carolinians would understand if they just had a black voice explaining it to them. Of course, he would need advertisers to make such a project happen.⁶⁷ The letters provided a glimpse into Lee’s potential motives. With established black papers no longer supporting him, his stories became calculated to curry favor with a new and wealthier set of benefactors.

⁶⁴Letter of Henry Lee Moon, November 13, 1956, frame 0251-0253, part 24, reel 33, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm.

⁶⁵103 Cong. Rec. 14982-14983 (1957).

⁶⁶103 Cong. Rec. 12136 (1957).

⁶⁷“Lee Publications, Canal 6-1752,” Folder 72, Afro-American Archives; Lee advertising letter, November 6, 1958, frame 0405, part 24, reel 22, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm; Excerpt from Letter of Roy Wilkins to W. H. Young, December 4, 1958, frame 0406, part 24, reel 22, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm; and Davis Lee, “Negroes—Stop, Look, and Listen,” *Anderson Herald*, November 9, 1959, 1.

“The liberals, who are frothing as the mouth and shedding crocodile tears over the plight of the poor Negro in the South, will gladly give him integration, but won’t give him a job or provide his family with clothing or bread,” Lee explained. “Negroes can’t eat integration. They need jobs. They need the opportunity to develop their talents. The South is the only section of the Nation that offers such opportunities.”⁶⁸ Claims such as these waked the echoes of Tuskegee and had the ability to convince white moderates of their veracity in a way that his more phantasmagorical claims never could. And that made them matter more. It made them more dangerous.

Writing in 1951, Howard University professor Lewis Fenderson portrayed southern papers as being far more soft-spoken about the breaking of racial mores. When such stories did run, they constituted brief accounts, rather than running as features as they would in northern black weeklies, a necessity caused by a concern about white reaction. As an example, he cited a brief 1947 article in the *Atlanta Daily World* about black delegates being seated at a Republican meeting, a story that “would undoubtedly have rated feature treatment in a Northern paper.”⁶⁹ Lee’s later journalism was concerned about white reaction in the extreme, in large measure because, as Maxwell Brooks noted several years after Fenderson, the principal interest of the black press and its publishers was profit. That interest drove an emphasis on circulation, and the desire for higher circulation led to the papers to publish the kind of content its readers wanted. And readers wanted militancy. The direction of that militancy, it turns out, could be variable.⁷⁰

Of course, profit motive and militancy would also feed Lee’s paranoia and self-aggrandizement. Once his battles with the South Carolina NAACP began, his persecution complex metastasized in earnest. “Roy Wilkins has set the NAACP up as the national clearinghouse for Negro thought and opinion,” he argued. “If a Negro leader expresses himself, and his expressions do not coincide with the policy of that organization, he will be discredited and destroyed. This has happened dozens of times.” Although untrue, it was

⁶⁸It was a popular argument with southern congressmen. Robert Hemphill of South Carolina first introduced it into the Congressional Record. 103 Cong. Rec. A1244-A1245 (1957). The following year, his fellow South Carolinian Olin D. Johnson included it as well. 104 Cong. Rec. A7245 (1958). The year after that, Alabama’s George Huddleston did, too. 105 Cong. Rec. A1293-1294 (1959).

⁶⁹Lewis H. Fenderson, “The Negro Press as a Social Instrument,” *Journal of Negro Education* 20, no. 2 (1951): 184.

⁷⁰That profit was never much, particularly for small-time journalists. “Black papers are a miracle in themselves,” commented Raymond Boone, a journalism professor at Howard and former employee of *the Afro-American*, “because they have managed to survive on money so minimal that white publishers wouldn’t even consider existing on that level.” O’Kelly, “Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement,” 14; and Maxwell Brooks, “Content Analysis of Leading Negro Newspapers” (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1953). Boone quote from Phil Garland, “The Black Press: Down but Not Out,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 21, no. 3 (1982), 47.

understandable how a dissenter would come to such a conclusion. But Lee was not satisfied without a liberal dose of hyperbole. "The NAACP is a vicious, undemocratic, un-American organization that is dedicated to the destruction of our way of life," claimed Lee. "Racial strife, dissension and prejudice is sweeping this Nation like a prairie fire as the result of pressure and agitation by this irresponsible organization."⁷¹

In December 1958, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins penned a letter to the organization's Anderson, South Carolina, branch. He admitted, "We do not know what motivates Mr. Lee. We do not know whether it is the revenue he receives from white advertisers and contributors or whether it is some other factor. We do know that he faithfully follows the line laid down by the White Citizens Councils and other race hate organizations." Wilkins explained that "he publishes what he calls a list of the members of the NAACP in Anderson, S.C. This is a White Citizens Council trick. It is doing the white man's dirty work for him. . . Here is a Negro editor toadying to the enemies of the Negro."⁷²

In February 1959, Lee responded with a lawsuit against the national and Anderson chapters of the NAACP, asking for half a million dollars and claiming libel. The criticism, he argued, was retribution for his publication of the membership list of local NAACP members. He also filed suit against the *Afro-American* for running the story and including excerpts of his letter to white businesses." He then sued its various satellite offices in Newark, Philadelphia, and Richmond.⁷³

In June 1962, Lee sued the Anderson District Five School Board for not allowing him to use one of the Negro high schools for "a banquet to honor worthy Negro employees who have worked on a job for 15 or more years." Of course, their refusal was the result of NAACP manipulation. "There is no other Negro in this nation who has had the courage, intelligence and the know-how who has publicly opposed the NAACP." So the schools allowed

⁷¹Cong. Rec. A361-362 (1959).

⁷²Roy Wilkins to W. H. Young, December 4, 1958, frame 0263-0264, part 24, reel 33, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm.

⁷³Lee's suit against the NAACP ultimately reached five million dollars, but he would lose his judgment in state court. Fletcher Ferguson, "Editor Sues NAACP," *Greenville (SC) News*, February 3, 1959, 1; "Negro Sues NAACP for Half Million," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 14, 1959, 1; Sydney C. Orlosky to Carl Murphy re: Davis Lee v. Phila. Afro-American, Civil Action No. 27480, February 8, 1960, Folder 196, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee to Harold R. Boulware, November 17, 1959, Folder 196, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee v. Philadelphia Afro-American, Civil Action No. 27480, Motion to Dismiss and/or for Summary Judgment" [n.d.], Folder 196, Afro-American Archives; Davis Lee v. Richmond Afro-American, Civil Action File No. 3036, Answer to Motion to Dismiss or for Summary Judgment, Folder 196, Afro-American Archives; "Supreme Court Rejects Appeal in \$5 million suit," *Afro-American*, December 22, 1962, 17; "Court Refuses to Review Case Against NAACP," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 15, 1962, 1; Lee v. Peek, 240 SC 203 (1962); and Lee v. Peek, 371 US 184 (1962).

the NAACP to hold a meeting, but Lee was unable to hold his banquet. He interpreted conspiracy and predictably sued. "The Negro leaders in Anderson could provide the forum for NAACP agitators to peddle their fraudulent stock in trade, and help raise money to create strife and bitterness in our state, while thousands of little Negroes in our midst lack food, shelter, heat, medicine," Lee wrote. It was yet another quixotic and ultimately doomed effort.⁷⁴

When a group brought a class-action suit against the state to integrate the state parks, Lee filed an answer to the original complaint, arguing that as a member of the racial group filing the class action, he was opposed to their claims, and thus he filed a countersuit, citing the South Carolina NAACP as his principal target and asking for ten million dollars. He argued that the attempt to integrate the parks would lead to their closure. "Now if the state did close all of the parks, who would be hurt?" he asked in an editorial. "The answer is simple, it would be little Negroes and little white people." It was, in his mind, an obvious ploy by the NAACP to raise funds for its coffers on the backs of those most vulnerable. It was an argument that had long since run its course, long since failed to convince anyone. He would lose on both counts, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling in April 1964 that the parks had to be integrated and that Lee had no standing to include additional parties into his counterclaim.⁷⁵

Conclusions

Despite the drama, or perhaps because of it, Lee was still attempting to expand his business. He had formerly published the *Savannah Journal*, which came under heavy criticism from many outlets, including the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which referred to the paper as a "scandal sheet." But in December 1960, Lee essentially took over ownership of the venerable *Savannah Tribune*, eighty-five years old, one of the papers that originally criticized his pandering.⁷⁶ But it was an uneasy marriage. Lee had negotiated a price of \$20,000 with Willa Ayers Johnson, to be paid over the course of what he described as a six-month "lease with an option to buy." Lee's lawsuits against the NAACP in South Carolina, however, made Johnson incredibly uneasy. The problem became more acute when students boycotted a local high school when its principal was fired by the white school board. Lee's *Tribune* supported the decision and denounced the "NAACP students strike." It was the last straw, and in May 1961, Johnson and her husband shut down

⁷⁴[n.t.] *Anderson Herald*, March 15, 1964, 1, printed in Charles H. Behling, "South Carolina Negro Newspapers: Their History, Content, and Reception" (MA thesis, University of South Carolina, 1964), 128–129.

⁷⁵*Brown v. Lee*, 331 F.2d 142 (4th Cir. 1964); and [n.t.] *Anderson Herald*, June 1, 1964, 5, printed in Behling, "South Carolina Negro Newspapers," 136–137.

⁷⁶"Resumes Publication," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 29, 1960, B6.

the plant and changed the locks. Lee interpreted the move as a conspiracy with the NAACP and sued for \$250,000 in damages, charging a conspiracy between Johnson and the Savannah branch of the rights group.⁷⁷

By 1963, Lee was publishing his *Herald* only sporadically, but it remained caustic. In an opinion piece from a 1963 edition, for example, Lee blamed civil rights “pressure groups and the Kennedy Administration” for the state of “the race issue.” South Carolina in no way restricted black voting, he argued. The fact that so few black voters were registered was the result of apathy bred by the civil rights movement itself. “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his organization,” he argued, “has done the Negro more harm than good.” He and his contemporaries were opening themselves to the possibility of becoming the tools of communism, and “one of the greatest tragedies that could befall any race is to have its youth contaminated by communistic controlled and directed pressure groups.”⁷⁸

North Carolina journalist Reed Sarratt classed editors like Lee as the exception but noted that “a few Negro editors” called for the maintenance of segregation, arguing that “the help of the white man was necessary to Negro progress and that the greatest gain was to be made within the framework of a segregated society.”⁷⁹ The second part of that proposition is unquestionably true, though the first part is not mutually exclusive of the second and might not accurately depict Lee’s thoughts. White Charleston editor Charles Waring considered promoting Lee as bulwark against segregation, but upon learning about both his reputation and criminal past, decided against it. Waring knew that Lee was critical of the NAACP, as did the NAACP, who attempted to discredit Lee in the black press. Journalist Charles P. Behling described Lee’s *Herald* as “a study of paradoxes.”⁸⁰

An internal NAACP memo also tried to explain the publisher. “Generally, a person is identified in terms of his personality, character, outlook, and accomplishments. In this regard, Lee is a complex person to describe. But at first glance one notices that he is well informed and highly intelligent.” His newspaper reputation was one of “being a master exposé artist,” and thus he was “always feared and hated by ‘upper class’ Negroes.” It was that fear of journalistic retaliation that bought him a level of cover for his more outlandish pronouncements.⁸¹ The report claimed that he was a personal friend of Roy

⁷⁷“Davis Lee Charges He Was Locked Out of Savannah Tribune; Sues for \$250,000,” draft document, Tubman: 02: 02, Folder 1167, Afro-American Archives.

⁷⁸[n.t.] *South Carolina Herald*, June 1, 1963, 1, as quoted in Behling, “South Carolina Negro Newspapers, 132–135.

⁷⁹Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 250.

⁸⁰David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 175; and Behling, “South Carolina Negro Newspapers, 101.

⁸¹“Who Is Lee?” frame 0521, part 23, reel 39, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm.

V. Harris, leader of the White Citizens Council. It claimed that "Lee is a friend of the Ku Klux Klan and regularly addresses their assemblages." The hatred that he earned from members of his own race led to a fear for his life that led him to carry a revolver.⁸²

Lee kept letters of introduction from segregationist southern senators, then drove around the region "in his high powered, mobile-telephone equipped convertible," meeting with white business-owners and leaders, drumming up support and advertising for his newspaper. "Lee's 'program' in its pure state consists of selling segregation." He was "a dangerous man." His cultivation of southern segregationists meant that any black opposition he faced would be threatened with potential layoffs or other reprisals.⁸³

It was a dramatic turn for someone who started by describing his plight as "Editing a Paper in Hell." He would continue creating controversy for the rest of the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s before passing away in South Carolina in 1987. He was, to be sure, an extreme case. But his evolution over the years and his willingness to create small time paper after small time paper, adjusting his position on issues and getting himself noticed so as to keep his enterprises afloat, is an outsized example of what many small time black journalists had to do to compete for readers.

Surely a case as operatic and hubristic as Lee's was not the common experience, but neither was, for example, Madame C. J. Walker's experience common to the budding black middle class of the late Gilded Age. Still, we use her story as an example because, although her experiences were bigger and broader than most, the commonalities of selling to a black customer base and sustaining internal economic growth demonstrate with largesse what her counterpart business owners in black neighborhoods across the urban north were doing on a smaller scale.

So, too, is Davis Lee a demonstration with largesse of what his counterpart newspaper publishers were doing in small towns across the country and the South in particular in the middle of the twentieth century. Not all of them made the transition from murderer to publisher, from rights crusader to segregationist, but each had to stop and start, to rely on self-aggrandizement and syndication, and each publication ultimately had a short lifespan, just as had each of Lee's myriad publications. Because for small time black newspaper publishers trying to exist during the racial tumult of the mid-twentieth century, and in competition with larger black weeklies with national appeal and circulation, editing a newspaper in hell was hard.

⁸²"Who Is Lee?" frame 0522-0523, part 23, reel 39, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm.

⁸³"Who Is Lee?" frame 0525-0527, part 23, reel 39, *Papers of the NAACP*, microfilm.

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