

SECTION

D

Sunday
February 21, 1993

Features

Features D-1-10
Crossword puzzle D-7
Travel..... D-10
Home & Garden D-11-12

Joe Page stands
outside his Illini
Lincoln-Mercury
dealership in
Champaign.

News-Gazette photo
by Robert K. O'Daniell

Despite all the
progress in the
last 30 years,
there still aren't
many
African-American
business owners



Where are the Black Businesses?

By PAUL WOOD
News-Gazette Staff Writer

Four decades after the long process of desegregation began, a certain separateness along color lines remains on the local business scene.

For decades, white barbers refused to cut the hair of black people, white embalmers refused to handle the corpses of black people and white restaurants and bars refused to serve black people. As late as the 1940s, blacks were restricted to a balcony section of Champaign theaters.

In 1993, as yet another Black History Month is celebrated, a *de facto* segregation is firmly in place — albeit in piecemeal fashion: Local schools are all integrated, local churches rarely so.

Black beauty parlors cater to black hair needs, black funeral homes (Bluitt-Parker in Champaign, Leek and Sons in Danville) deal almost exclusively with black customers.

There's still an American Legion for white veterans on Champaign's Bloomington Road and one for African-American vets on Fifth Street.

White businesses aren't found on First Street north of University, and the row of profitable businesses along Devonshire is predominantly white, activists point out.

"AFTER ALL THESE years, you still won't find African-Americans contractors getting large construction jobs, unless they have a bonding agreement with a white contractor," says former

Champaign City Council member John Lee Johnson.

"Black people are still excluded from many highly profitable businesses and from administrative jobs. It's a service-worker economy. Used to be when you drove down through the black community, you'd see a barber shop, a bar and a restaurant. And that's what you see now."

Actually, you're not even likely to see many black bars. Clarence Davidson, who owns Buddie's, 120 N. First St., can remember when the first black bar owner in Champaign was able to get a liquor license. That was about 1950, when a Miss Boswell began legal sales of alcohol along a corridor of Main Street (since demolished, now a railroad underpass).

"Before that, it was strictly bootleg sales," Davidson says. "Bootlegging was tolerated as long as it kept people in their neighborhoods. There was nothing but racism behind it, and I think Miss Boswell had to slip some money under the table to get that license."

Much has changed. Today, two minority-owned bars in Champaign have liquor licenses.

A glance through an Urban League directory of black-owned companies put out in 1974 shows that, like many small businesses, a large proportion have failed in a fairly short time. Of 101 listings, more than 40 are long-gone.

A more recent list found in the Champaign Public Library shows that many African-American-owned businesses have disappeared in a matter of



Above, Morris Hunter in his shoe shop on Vermillion Street in Danville.

At left, Dottie Robinson-Herrington with daughter Ashley, 5, in her hair salon on Church Street in Champaign.

News-Gazette photos by Robin Scholz and Delfina Colby

a couple of years, from beauty shops to attorney's offices.

THE HISTORY OF black-owned businesses in Central Illinois is intimately tied with that of black churches and social organizations.

The late Charles Everett Phillips, for instance, owned a cleaning and pressing business in Champaign at the turn of the century; moved it, surprisingly, to Monticello; organized the first Negro Business League; and had a successful career in politics in Springfield. (He hired a campaign manager before he was old enough to vote).

Mr. Phillips' work, his biographers note, created black-owned businesses to meet fill gaping voids. The Frederick Douglass Saving and Loans offered mortgages to African-Americans. The Estate Benefit Corp. sold insurance to people who'd never had it before. The State Employees' League organized low-paid civil servants.

When Phillips returned to Champaign, he brought largess and the money to fund it with him.

In 1947, with two other men, he formed the Northeast Improvement

Association to create a subdivision called Carver Park with affordable housing for African-Americans.

Through Salem Baptist Church, which his grandfather had helped found, he founded youth groups. He was the first vice president of the local Urban League.

"THERE'S ALWAYS been a pattern of support within the community," says Vernon Barkstall, director of the local Urban League.

The case of Phillips, however, is not frequently repeated; many locally born African-Americans who have made it have made it elsewhere.

And the men who own the largest businesses in both Champaign and Danville were not raised here. Joe Page, the owner of Illini Lincoln-Mercury in Champaign, and Mike McDonald, owner of Courtesy Ford-Lincoln-Mercury in Danville, had worked their way up in the Ford hierarchy starting in St. Louis and North Carolina, respectively.

McDonald, whose business has placed in the Black Enterprise Top 100 since 1989 and won an administrative

award from a federal agency, says a great deal of his business comes from the black community . . . and a great deal comes from the white community.

"I operate it as a Ford store, not as a black store," he explains. "On the other hand, it's also important to give back to the community." He is concerned about the lack of jobs for black people, especially at the management level.

JOHNSON SAYS the business atmosphere of Central Illinois makes it hard for minorities to get rich unless they're rich already.

"For one thing, getting a loan — whether it's for a business or for a house — isn't any easy thing for someone whose job pays \$5 an hour," says Johnson.

"African-Americans are still being judged by credit standards which do not reflect their historical accessibility within the economic status of the community. You cannot use a set of credit standards that apply traditionally to white middle-class standards for other Americans who have not had the same opportunities."

Specifically, he says, if in the debt-to-income ratio, debt cannot exceed 30 percent of income, "that means everybody working in the (Illini) Union, everybody in support staff of the public schools, everybody automatically becomes credit risks."

The same people interviewed in person, as individuals, he says, look better than they do on paper. "These are often types of people who pay their bills and pay them on time — they are not subject to a high default rate," Johnson says.

IF IT'S HARD FOR a man to start a

See **BLACK BUSINESSES**, D-8

Black businesses

Continued from D-1

business here, he says, it's harder for women. A large proportion of local businesses owned by minority women are beauty shops.

Dottie Robinson-Herrington has one, and though she says it "isn't a big thing" and has limited hours, the shop enjoys a following in the community.

Beauty shop owners tend not to join the Rotary and similar organizations. "We wish we had black women in our group," says Gloria McDuffy, of the American Business Women's Association's Shooting Star chapter, "but so far, I don't think we've had even one."

Minority-owned businesses which have persevered seem to have done so on the basis of personal loyalty and word of mouth, like the respect given to Robinson-Herrington.

It's a matter of finding a niche, says Morris Hunter, who owns Simon's Shoe Shop in downtown Danville.

"If you do a good job, customers bring their friends in," says Hunter, who repaired his first shoe when he was 12 and continued to work weekends at Simon's during his long career as a Danville firefighter.

In 1975, when shoe repair shops didn't seem to have a big future, he retired from the firehouse and bought Simon's.

"It's a skill that few people do well," he says, "and it's still important if you happen to have quality shoes.

"Of course, you don't see many hat blockers nowadays, and one-time that was a skilled job. As long as people don't buy those throwaway shoes, and as long as I do the custom orthopedic jobs, though, I could move to any town in the country and find work."

He says business experience and his craft are more significant than the color of his skin. "I'd say 90 percent of my regulars are white people. My being black doesn't seem to come up much," Hunter says.