

NOBODY CALLED ME CHARLIE

The Story of a Radical White Journalist Writing
for a Black Newspaper in the Civil Rights Era

by CHARLES PRESTON



MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS

New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Monthly Review Press

146 West 29th Street, Suite 6W

New York, NY 10001

www.monthlyreview.org

5 4 3 2 1

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Editor's Note

This book came to us by way of the author's son Gregor, who wrote the moving introduction. It was written more than thirty-five years ago. This is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because it gives readers an unfiltered account of a time in the history of the United States with which most of us are unfamiliar. While we live in a society that is still racially stratified, we no longer inhabit the completely segregated world that existed in this country for nearly two hundred years. The Civil War might have ended slavery, but from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the full flowering of the civil rights movement, there existed the "Jim Crow" system, in which black people were denied even the most basic rights.

Despite their harsh exploitation and brutalized lives, the former slaves and their progeny built a vibrant black culture. There were black professionals, black businesses of every kind, black athletic teams, black clubs, black colleges, black fraternal organizations, and, at the heart of this story, black newspapers. The black press played a critical role in black communities. It was a source of vital information to its overwhelmingly black readers; it provided a kind of social glue for the places it served; and it acted as a major protagonist in the struggle for black liberation. It kept the flame of black freedom alive in the worst of times and fanned freedom's fires when the times were

more auspicious. And it showed more clearly than any other institution that there were two Americas, which saw the world in fundamentally different ways. For example, the case of the murdered teenager Emmett Till was seen in an entirely different light by the leading black newspapers than it was by the influential mainstream journals, much less the racist press of most of the South. James L. Hicks, bureau chief for the National Negro Press Association, did some remarkable investigative journalism into the case, at considerable risk to his life, while the mainstream papers were pretty much Johnny Come Latelies, following the lead of the black journalists. The daily racism that was taken for granted by white America was presented in the black newspapers as the affront to human dignity that it should have been to any thinking person.

Black America was a mystery to most whites, but not all. There have always been white persons who were interested in various aspects of the black experience, and there were a few who championed their fight for equality. White concern for the black cause, or as it was called, The Question, grew considerably during the Great Depression, a product in part of the prominence of radicals in the burgeoning labor movement. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) would never have succeeded in organizing the mass production industries without the leadership of socialists and especially of members of the Communist Party. The Communists were committed to the principle of racial equality, and they strove mightily to put this principle into practice in their daily organizing activities.

Charles Preston became a Party member during the 1930s, and he fully embraced its racial egalitarianism. When personal circumstances forced him and his wife to return to Indiana from New York City, he put his commitment to the full integration of black people into every aspect of life in the United States into practice by going to work for a black newspaper, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the third oldest black newspaper in the country. His time at the paper and his life as a white person in a thoroughly black milieu, not just at work but in his daily life, are the subjects of this memoir. It is an account readers are not likely to find anywhere else, and it is, in this sense, a unique historical document.

But if *Nobody Called Me Charlie* provides a perspective not often encountered, the fact that it was written when it was is also something of a curse. The language used and some of the views expressed might irritate modern sensibilities. First of all, the word “Charlie” in the title refers to a derogatory word black people used for whites. It is no longer used this way, at least not in ordinary conversation. We thought of other titles for the book to avoid using a word modern readers wouldn’t recognize. But in the end, we decided to stick to the original, since this is what Preston himself used. Second, the author uses the word “Negro” throughout the book, something he probably would not have done had he written the book today. And finally, Preston is also a product of his times, and, despite his radical sensibilities, he is not immune to some of what are, today, at least questionable points of view. The most striking examples almost always involve gender relationships. The author’s world is very much a man’s world, and he occasionally says things that to a modern ear are sexist. Readers should keep in mind that while the Communist Party preached gender equality, it did not always practice it. Neither did Charles Preston, although he frequently did do political work with women, and in this, he did indeed participate as an equal and often took the lead from women.

These caveats aside, *Nobody Called Me Charlie* is a remarkable story, one that Monthly Review Press is proud to publish.

—Michael D. Yates

Introduction

My father, Charles Smith Preston, was born in the small town of Monticello, Indiana, on June 1st , 1911, and grew up in the larger town of Anderson (pop. 38,000 in 1930). His father, a newspaperman, died at a young age in 1919. His mother, a high school teacher, raised him and his younger brother, Dick, who became a journalist for the Scripps chain.

Chuck, as many of his friends knew him, went to DePauw College in Greencastle, Indiana, starting in the foreboding year of 1929. There were few jobs for an English major when he graduated four years later in 1933.

Sometime after graduation, he met my mother, Lucy Ashjian, at a John Reed Club social function. The club, named after the famous revolutionary journalist, was sponsored by the Communist Party (CP). Both of my parents joined the Communist Party sometime in the 1930s, as did upwards of 100,000 others during this period. I don't recall them describing any specific incidents that led them to communism. Both were intellectuals who read widely in the radical material available at the time. Marx and Engels seemed to them to have the answers to the terrible crises brought on by the capitalist system.

They were rank-and-file Party members until the heyday of McCarthyism in the early 1950s. My father described a meeting with

a CP functionary during that time in which CP members were given dispensation to resign their membership. My parents accepted the idea as the wisest course of action. Both remained communists in spirit for the rest of their lives and activists on the left, especially in the anti-Vietnam War movement.

Both my mother and father were enamored of life in New York City where they were married in 1937. Mother studied photography and was a member of the Photo League. Her photos are held in collections at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, George Eastman House, Princeton Museum of Art, Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art, and The Jewish Museum. The remaining photographs and all materials relating to her photography career are deposited in the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.

During the 1930s, Chuck worked at *Junior Scholastic* and was an editor of *The Fight Against War and Fascism*. He published short stories and verse in *Story*, *Partisan Review*, and *The New Masses*. He wrote a long unpublished novel, *Richard Perhaps* or *Passion and Action*, about a young fellow who travels from Indiana to New York City and gets involved in the left-wing movement. Most of his writing was unpublished, but he never stopped writing. He wrote many poems and three plays, one of which, *The Tragedy of King Richard The Tird*, was subtitled "With Apologies to William Shakespeare and Barbara Garson" and was a satire, *MacBird*-like, of the Nixon-McGovern presidential race. He advertised and distributed this one himself.

My father was not without his demons. When I was struggling with some of my own, in 1969, he told me that he considered himself a "psychoneurotic." Shortly after I was born in February 1943, he had what he considered a nervous breakdown and he was hospitalized. Unable to take care of me and also earn a living, my mother took me and moved us to her parents' home in Indianapolis in December 1943. After recuperation with the help of a relative, father rejoined the family and not long after, they bought a modest home not far from my mother's parents, who loaned them the money for the mortgage. My mother got a decent secretarial job with the International

Typographical Union. The local Negro weekly newspaper, *The Indianapolis Recorder*, was publishing a special huge “Victory” edition celebrating the Allies’ victory and the Negroes’—as they were then known—role in the nation’s history and its hopes for “a new world a-comin’.” They needed people to do research and write short articles. It was just the thing that appealed to a fellow still feeling a little shaky and who believed in the solidarity of black and white.

This is where *Nobody Called Me Charlie* begins. Chuck wrote it beginning in 1969 and he revised it up through 1973. In a letter to publishers in June 1973, he wrote: “This is a query in search of a publisher. . . . I take this recourse after the book has been handled by two reputable literary agents in turn, because I despair of their methods reaching a satisfactory sampling of publishers in any reasonable time.” And he described it thus: It “is a memoir, with names and place-names changed, of the eighteen years during which I, a white man, worked as a regular employee on the staff of a Black weekly newspaper. At the same time I was an activist in the NAACP and countless other movements for Negro freedom and advancement. The book is in no sense sociology, but an autobiographical novel or ‘narrative with a human face.’ My principal interest has been to examine the Black society and every aspect of black-white relationships as they came to me in the concreteness of experience. I have tried to portray various Black personalities whom I knew, reacting to their continually desperate situation with ingenuity, paranoia, humor, alcoholism, incredible courage, and abiding fear. In all, I found an ‘extended family’ filled with life and mutual support despite the grave wounds inflicted on it by racism and poverty.”

Finally, he wrote: “I have also been concerned to draw the white people as I saw them from the other side of the line: their crude and frightful, or subtle and sickening, manifestations of prejudice (including my own); the antics of various exploiters and opportunists. And by no means least, I have taken particular pains to tell the stories of those white individuals who found one way or another to assert their fellowship with the Blacks.”

For obvious reasons, he had to change the names of people and places. It would make a more informative book today if we had the real

names in front of us, but it does not detract in any meaningful way from the power of the narrative. For, it is what he describes that holds our interest, not who he describes. However, there are two famous personalities Chuck mentions in the book whom I would like to identify. One is the All-American basketball player, Oscar Robertson, who is called “Oscar Bentley” in the book. The author, along with the rest of Indianapolis, had the good fortune to watch Oscar grow into one of the all-time great basketball players, bringing two state championships to his high school, Crispus Attucks, on his way to collegiate and professional stardom. The other is the Reverend Jim Jones, of Jonestown, Guyana, infamy, who led hundreds of his followers to their deaths by “drinking the Kool-Aid” in their jungle encampment.

The Rev. Jones and my father met and became friends in the 1950s; they kept in touch over the years and Jones was skilled at pushing my dad’s buttons—and mine, to a certain degree. When I visited Jones and his church in late 1969 in Ukiah, California, I was surprised—and pleased, as well—to hear the group launch into a chorus of “the Internationale.” My father received similar treatment when Jones came through Philadelphia. So it was very difficult for my father to believe that Jones had become a madman, despite the phony “faith-healings” he had observed so many years ago in Indianapolis.

My father was especially affected by the Jonestown tragedy of 1978. Although none of the books later written about Jones ever uncovered the relationship between them, Chuck was assuredly the first white friend Jones had outside church circles. Jones urged him to come to Jonestown, and were it not for my dad’s ill health and most importantly my mother’s refusal to go, it is likely that they, too, would have perished at Jonestown.

Although I never got to know my father’s coworkers at the *Recorder* while I was growing up (I went to the office only once and it was as dirty and messy as he describes), I did identify with black people, especially when rooting for Negroes in sporting events. The family employed a black domestic who enabled both parents to work and me to be looked after in the early years. Especially when very young, there is some evidence that I considered Mildred to be another moth-

er. From the first to sixth grade, I lived in an integrated neighborhood and thus went to an integrated school. Until the age of thirteen, when the Prestons moved a few blocks north, to an all-white school district, most of my friends were black. From then until I went to college, I was a pretty unhappy camper. My parents explained the move by the need for another room for my maternal grandmother. An unspoken reason may have been their desire that I attend a more academic junior high.

On the other hand, I felt like the prince of the city when, for a couple of years, I went with my dad to sit in the press box to watch all the Triple A Indianapolis Indians home baseball games. We even got to order free food and drinks during the fifth inning. I thought that was integration at its best and as it should be!

As for politics, communism was so far beyond the pale of Hoosier experience that it never came up in my circles. It is possible that in 1950 or 1951, on one of the annual vacations that our family took to Canada, we visited the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa. I was so impressed that I thought we were going to visit the Queen. That may have been the time that Chuck asked for an audience with a Soviet functionary about the possibility of emigrating to the Soviet Union—that's how bad things looked under the Red Scare juggernaut then sweeping the United States. He estimates that there might have been possibly forty Communists in Indianapolis at the time of the Progressive Party campaign in 1948, no more than eight to ten of them black. I cannot think of more than three or four whom I may have met. All this meant that there were no "red diaper" babies to become friends with in Indianapolis. I remember only one family who might have qualified, but our get-togethers never became anything more political. For my college freshman English class in 1961, I did write my first essay, entitled "Why I Am a Socialist." So there is no doubt that something stuck in my mind from my parents' tutelage as well as surprising the hell out of my teacher—who asked me, favorably, I thought, where I got my ideas from!

After he finally left *The Recorder*, Chuck got a position as public relations director for the Job Corps in 1965 at Camp Breckinridge in Morganfield, Kentucky. He was fired from that position when he did-

n't "manage" the press releases following a "riot" at the camp as the executives would have liked. He tried but failed to get his job back despite a strong editorial in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. He thought it was because his name was on a list in Washington.

His last regular job was with the York, Pennsylvania, *Gazette & Daily*, a newspaper owned by a homegrown radical. During this time he made many good friends in the local antiwar and anti-nuclear movement (Three Mile Island was only a few miles from his home) and became the first editor of Maggie Kuhn's *Grey Panther Newsletter*. In 1980, my parents moved to Davis, California, and we were together again, as I worked as a librarian at the University of California, Davis. Chuck again made many friends in the short time he was with us before his death at age seventy-one in 1983 of heart failure. He even managed to join yet another Unitarian church.

I only wish there really was a hereafter. My father would be so thrilled to see *Nobody Called Me Charlie* finally in print. And I believe he would think it very timely, what with a black president and people having "beer summits" on the subject of race. We still have a lot to learn, but we're getting there, and thanks to Monthly Review Press, Chuck Preston can add his bit. I happen to think it's a unique viewpoint. I hope you enjoy it.

—Gregor A. Preston, August 2009
Davis, California

NOBODY CALLED ME CHARLIE

PART ONE

It is a more difficult matter to get rid of the communal guilt. One lives in a colour-bar world, and one cannot behave in all respects as though one did not. But one must begin by challenging the customs; there can be no relief from melancholy until we do.

—ALAN PATON

For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat.

—THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW

1. A White Man among Them

The fact that I was a white man working among them was for a long time seldom alluded to by my fellow workers of *The Clarion*. Since my presence was an example of racial equality and integration—ideals which they all held in their hearts like an obsession—their attitude was that it should be taken absolutely in stride. This made a very pleasant and agreeable working atmosphere for me. I was annoyed only when I realized that to a considerable extent this point of honor was undergirded by a feeling that I should be treated with deference for the very reason that I was white, and that well-behaved Negroes should show respect for white people. I tried to get across my objections to it, but with little success. I think no one had yet figured out how to treat me.

I use the word “Negroes” because it was then, in the closing years of the Second World War, the expression finally replacing “colored people.”

Among themselves, however, Negroes still said “colored” or much more generally, “nigger.” Frequently one of them, after saying “nigger,” would turn to me and beg my pardon. “Spade” and “spook” were used by the more lively talkers, along with “ofay” and “paddy” for a white. (I speculated that the curious “ofay” originated as Pig Latin for “foe.”)

Euphemisms such as “tan” were popular in sports writing and sometimes elsewhere, as in “tan GIs.” “Tan” was a beautifully short word for headlines. “Sepia” also was used in journalism.

“Black,” now the obligatory term, at that time was nearly always disparaging, as in, “You black bastard, get your black ass out of here.” There was a lot of playing the dozens on the theme of one another’s degree of blackness, or more properly the blackness of someone’s mother.

The subject of my color was at last brought down out of the clouds through an incident resulting from the explosive pressures of the weekly Thursday night poker game, which was always straight five-card stud.

The hand had come down to a battle between Mike and me. Mike was a short and ancient man, dressed in poorly fitting secondhand clothes, who eked out a living as a numbers runner. He was considered a member of the newspaper fraternity because he played some part many years before with *The Clarion*’s predecessor, *The Freeman*. I think he might have sold copies on the street. He was bald, and he was jet black.

I held a pair of aces showing and another ace down. Mike had two kings showing and a third in the hole. After the others had dropped out, we kept raising and back-raising each other. Blue chips were a quarter, and eventually a nice pile of them was amassed on the table.

“Blue up,” I would say, as I sat there with my mortal.

“See you and a bluedy up on you,” said Mike, squeezing his “three kings of Orient.”

“And a bluedy up on you,” I retorted.

Finally, Mike reached the point where his self-confidence was shaken. He sat there for a long time, bending his cards in his hand so he could glimpse that king in the hole, peering across at my double aces.

Suddenly he shouted, “That black motherfucker’s got an ace!” and threw in his cards.

The others roared with laughter and Lehman Scott, the old pro who presided over the game, wiped his eyes and said, “Preston’s made it at last! Mike has done put him in the club!”

From that moment on, it seemed to me, things were easier regarding my color. I was openly acknowledged as being white; discussions were held with me about it; and I even began to take some kidding on the score. If I was still occasionally spoken to obsequiously, it was frankly satirical and with a memory of Mike Gale's *mot*.

I thought it was about time. I had been there for seven years.

I suppose that because of the earlier avoidance of communication on the subject, I had not realized how great an object of curiosity I was. When my fellow workers felt the necessity to account for my presence, they did so by some motive other than the obvious one. They seemed to be embarrassed for me because I had fallen out of white society into their own.

"He's getting material for a book," George Brown, somewhat spifflicated, once ventured with his leer.

Bill Whitcomb had another explanation. He would spin a great yarn that depicted me as "the scion of Quaker forebears" who had been working for Negro liberation since the Underground Railroad days.

They were all wrong. My Quaker ancestry ended when my grandfather joined the Methodist Church. The only person I ever heard of him rescuing was a Lincoln-hating congressman who was threatened by Unionists with a lynching on his way home from a Copperhead convention. My grandfather used to say that he first saw my grandmother when she was riding in a parade on a float bearing the sign, "God Save Us from Nigger Husbands." In fact, I never knew of my family's Quaker past until several years after I started working at *The Clarion*. But Bill Whitcomb seized on the "Quaker" story and elaborated it like a Negro mother making a neck-bone stew.

Nor had I any serious intention in those days of writing a book. Occasionally I took notes of some colorful turns of speech, but all together they never filled four pages of a notebook, and years went by without an entry.

The truth was that I needed a job that wouldn't make too heavy demands. I was recovering from an illness that had obliged me to come home from New York. My field was editorial work, but I didn't wish to become associated with the city's daily newspapers, two of

them notoriously reactionary, and the third, which had once been liberal, at that time trying too hard to “me-too” the others.

As for the race question, I was amongst the first generation of white people who joined in the integration movement of the postwar decades. I had been educated by the Communist Party, of which I had been a member since shortly after I came out of college into the depths of the Great Depression. It was the Party that taught me to identify fully with the cause of the Negro.

I was an “underground” member in that I didn’t make my affiliation public knowledge. My employer at *The Clarion* never inquired into my politics, though he several times resisted outside pressure to do so. It was a matter of principle with him, and also, he didn’t think I was a Communist. The more the police and the “respectable” people, Negro and white, told him he was harboring a Red, the less inclined he was to believe it.

At the same time, of course, I was still a white man from the Midwest. Anyone who has lived as such a person for his first twenty-five years won’t need to be told what racism is, for he will taste it on his own tongue. Even when he is trying to help the black man, he must recognize the motive of noblesse oblige, with its measure of racial vanity.

But if there was one lesson I learned from Cassius M. Talbott and the staff of his weekly paper, it was not to be fussy about motives. “The Devil may have brought you, but the Lord sent you. Praise the Lord, I’ll make use of you.”

It was Penelope Parker, a radical friend from the John Reed Club days, who told Susan and me about *The Clarion* and its “Victory Edition.” This was planned as a special project of 192 eight-column newspaper pages—the largest Negro newspaper ever published—celebrating the Allies’ triumph in the war and also recounting the Negro’s history throughout the ages and projecting his “Fair Hopes. . . . For a New World a-Comin’.” This was Bill Whitcomb’s phrase he was editor of the edition and it was to be blazoned across the top of page one. The work was being done in a separate office from *The Clarion*’s, a dank basement across the street from the newspaper’s regular offices.

Penny was a statuesque redhead whom Susan had known since grade school. She had gone to Ward Belmont, and she lived with flair—working for a Negro newspaper was just the sort of thing she would do. She introduced me to Whitcomb; we were at once drawn to each other as kindred spirits, and he said help was needed and urged me to make an application.

I went to see Mr. Talbott, as I was always to call him, and was hired for part-time work on the special edition. Little did either of us dream that I was signing up for the better part of a lifetime.

2. The Special Edition

Our editor, Mr. Talbott, had grey eyes that he said came from a white grandmother in the family's old hometown, a place that dated from French control of the territory. He and I used to engage in mock arguments on the subject, with me saying, "You must mean your grandfather," and him replying, "No, my grandmother!" There was an albino strain in his family, most strikingly exemplified in his younger sister, Mrs. Luvenia Weyhouse, who was office manager of *The Clarion*.

The staff of *The Clarion*, not counting white people such as Penny and myself and "Senator" Anderson, a little old ex-convict who sold advertising for a while, ranged in color from Lehman Scott, the advertising manager, who could have been taken for a swarthy white person, to such an ebony-skinned person as John Elliott.

Lehman told me he was from Darke County, Ohio. He said the town was unusual, in that there were numerous families with white branches and black branches, who, instead of avoiding each other went so far as to hold reunions together. I can't vouch for that—I suspected that light-skinned persons like Lehman exaggerated such stories—but I once got the surprise of my life when I covered a meeting of the Negro Masons in Weaver, Indiana, a ghost-town community descended from a very early Negro settlement. Several blue-eyed, red-necked, prosperous-appearing farmers drove up in big cars and began talking in the nasal Hoosier twang. They were, however, "Negroes."

In between, on our staff one found the complexions of Smitty Smith, café au lait; George Brown, who might have had Puerto Rican blood; and Walt Evers, a wandering Mexican, if one ever wandered. But they were all Negroes, because that's how they were treated. By the same token, they were all colored people or niggers, and I assume they are now all blacks.

The subject of color was continuously a matter of detailed discussion, as was the topic of "good hair," meaning straight like a white person's. Most of my coworkers would imply quotation marks about "good" with a little laugh, but others used it as a simple adjective.

But while I triumphantly demonstrated that it was impossible to define "Negro" in biological terms, I was burningly aware that Negroes existed as members of an oppressed social group, and it was my aim to destroy the arbitrary groundwork for such oppression. Since there was "no difference," I reasoned, there should be no disparity in citizenship. In an editorial I wrote for the Victory Edition, I addressed the constituency as "Americans of Negro origin." In my endeavor to wipe out all distinction, I even asserted, "there have been many nations of black masters and white slaves." Perhaps I had in mind cases of Europeans being captured and enslaved by the Moors and Berbers. It seemed to me that, theoretically, there could just as well have been nations of black masters and white slaves, for there were black masters and black slaves, and white masters and white slaves. But I'm afraid my history was lacking.

This piece was accompanied by my picture, which showed that I was presumably white. Every member of the staff had his picture published. Mr. Talbott, his mother, Smitty Smith (who was then city editor), and Mr. Talbott's older sister, Mrs. Peggy Talbott Lewis, had double-column pictures, as, of course, did Bill Whitcomb as editor of the edition. So did Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other historical figures. So did Neanderthal Man and Paleanthropus, who were thus tacitly claimed as early Negroes.

Mr. Talbott's deceased father, George W. Talbott Sr., founder of *The Clarion*, had a four-column cut, as did Abraham Lincoln.

Page one of the edition bore the banner "UNITED NATIONS PLEDGE NEW WORLD," and beneath it were four photos:

Roosevelt, Truman, Churchill, and Stalin. Mr. Talbott, who stuck to the business side of the publication and rarely intruded into our sanctum, argued that Haile Selassie should be included in the group. But Bill Whitcomb, with my support, rebuffed this intervention into his province, and stood by his duty to protect the work from what we thought was Mr. Talbott's crass desire to sell newspapers. "Ya can't put him in with these men just because he's a nigger," he thundered. "These are the biggest men in the world!"

Keeping his opinion, Mr. Talbott lapsed into silence. This continued for several years, when he exercised his power of command hardly at all. There was an atmosphere in which freedom of the press seemed to mean freedom of the writer rather than freedom of the owner. Even later on, when he began throwing his weight around more like a publisher, his rule was far from dictatorial, and he lost his battles as often as he won them. I wished all the newspapermen on the tyranny-structured white newspapers of America could have had a taste of working at *The Clarion*.

On the question of Haile Selassie, Mr. Talbott, of course, was right. The newspaper's significance was not well represented by the pictures of three white men and a Caucasian Red. When this became obvious after publication, the difficulty was circumvented by wrapping Section II on the outside instead of Section I. Section II dealt with "The Armed Forces," and displayed a full-page drawing of a tan GI in battle garb with a smoking automatic in his hand. That was more like it.

Besides getting our pictures in the Victory Edition, all the workers were granted titles. Penny was Women's Editor, while Kitty Curtis, a Negro woman, was Society Editor. I was Copy Editor. In later years, when I would speak at meetings in Negro churches, the minister often would introduce me as "the Editor of *The Clarion*." He knew, as presumably did all the members of the congregation, that the editor and publisher of *The Clarion* was Cassius M. Talbott. I might have suspected it was because I was white, and even a satirical motive, if I hadn't seen that black people were also the recipients of this courteous upgrading. It was the gift of dignity, which people without it can still

confer on each other. Its widespread dispensing was part of what I understand as “soul.”

The special edition boasted a large number of “editors,” most of whom prepared their articles and brought or mailed them in, but only four of us were on-the-job workers. Bill Whitcomb—William Jefferson Whitcomb from Hopkinsville, Kentucky—was a tall, handsome man with a neat mustache and a serious demeanor, a man of great sensitivity who larded his talk with rich folk expressions. I often felt that one could have written a classic simply by following him around with a tape recorder. But when he sat down to write, he thought it incumbent to put all that aside and employ long, Latin-derived words and contrived sentence structures to the degree that sometimes you actually could not tell what he was trying to say. I surmised this attitude went back to his school days in Hopkinsville; it seemed to me a bitter commentary on the Negro’s condition in America: the mind of a Bobby Burns, lynched in childhood. I didn’t feel it was possible to speak to him about it.

There was Penny, flouncing around our basement hangout in her bizarre and gay-colored clothes, and there was Robert Morgan, who was the Fine Arts Editor. Robert, who was then in his early twenties, was undoubtedly a genius or near it, not only in the field of music, but in general intellectual competence. He had already written a serious musical work, “Prelude to a Symphony at Sundown.” He wrote and edited newspaper articles rapidly and with great ease, always turning out perfect copy.

Robert was a homosexual. As I got to know him, I learned he was from a broken home and had been brought up by his grandmother. There had been no money for college; he had given himself a higher education by reading. I couldn’t imagine why he should not have received a scholarship and financial aid from some institution. If it was any consolation, of all the persons I have known, no one was better equipped to get along without a college education than Robert Morgan. At the same time, he was entirely without ambition to rise out of his environment and to do something with either his musical talent or other abilities. Or almost entirely, as we later saw.

So the four of us worked through the spring months and into the early summer of 1945, in the basement of the decrepit building tucked away on the shore of the broad avenue that, like a mighty river, bore its fish of many hues on the myriad errands of their existence. There was none of the wound-up tautness that marks the operations of daily and even weekly white newspapers. We had frequent visitors, and even when we did not, we often got into discussions that lasted for hours. The publication deadline had to be posted several times.

We were working for beggars' wages, but the wonder was that Mr. Talbott was able to come up even with these week after week. The edition carried little advertising and there were no foundations in those days. I assumed that the bite had been put on some politicians for money. In fact, I heard later of a U.S. senator who was quite nettled because I, not knowing he was a donor, had landed hard on him in an article. Aside from this case, I never learned the sources of *The Clarion's* financing.

The edition was sold for a dollar, and as a virtual encyclopedia of Negro life, it was well worth it. Unfortunately, there was no money for promotion, and the organization of a wider circulation proved too difficult a task. Years later, I was told that thousands of copies were gathering dust in a warehouse.

When our work was complete, Penny got a job in the union office where Susan was employed. I took the course of least resistance and moved across the street to *The Clarion*.