

Black Panther Party press

San Francisco/Oakland, ~1968-1978; offset

Although primarily used for printing BPP flyers and posters (except for their newspaper), this shop did handle occasional work for other progressive causes. The first BPP printing operation was at the BPP National Distribution office in San Francisco, which was set up by Benny Harris. Benny had recently restored an industrial shoe stitcher and was invited to help out at the print shop, where the equipment needed mechanical attention.

After arriving at the SF distribution office, I saw two old and incomplete "Chief 20" printing presses sitting side by side on the concrete floor. After examining them and discussing what was required to rebuild them, I decided to take on the challenge. I did not have any knowledge of the printing process but I did have the required mechanical skills to do a rebuild of the presses. I got help from an individual at the office - I remember his name being Ken, or Kenneth - who understood how printing presses operate. A few months later with one machine used for spare parts, the rebuild was complete. One functional "Chief 20" 14x20 printing press was up and running. After receiving a few lessons on the basics of printing, I was left on my own to develop my printing skills. Emory Douglas also provided me with valuable artistic guidance and proper artistic layout etiquette. My printing skills gradually developed over time as the press was used to print flyers, posters, pamphlets, restaurant menus, and business cards.

Around 1971 they moved to Oakland, where the print shop expanded with the acquisition of tabletop A.B. Dick duplicator, a litho plate burner, a guillotine paper cutter, and darkroom camera built by Benny. A Heidelberg KORD had been donated to the BPP, possibly from supporters in Chicago, but never ran because the shop lacked wiring for three-phase electric power. Press operator Steve Long describes the shop:

For a brief time we were on 79th and MacArthur, but soon moved to the back of 8501 East 14th Street (now International Boulevard) in Oakland, in a building now owned by Allen Temple Baptist Church. Phoebe Allen and I were Benny Harris' helpers/apprentices. Benny knew the press inside and out and was able to fix any and all problems. We printed almost all of the campaign literature for the Bobby Seale for Mayor and Elaine Brown's campaign as well. When Benny left the Party, Phoebe became the head operator because she had the most training. It was a particularly difficult task for her, as she was raising twin girls. When she left the party, I was left to run the press. During the latter days of the party, we sold some of our old presses, including the Chief and KORD, and purchased a Multilith 1250LW which printed 11 1/8" x 18 3/16". ("It cost less to operate and was easier for an untrained person to learn," adds Bennie). We were still printing largely Party material and materials for Oakland Community School, but began doing more commercial work.

