

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Robert Sengstacke Abbott (1868–1940)

By Susan Engle



Slavery was abolished after the Civil War in the U.S., but injustice against black people was far from over. Into this hostile and turbulent atmosphere, Robert Sengstacke Abbott was born in Georgia in 1868. He faced bullying and discrimination, yet grew up to be a champion of unity.

A few months after Robert was born, his father, Thomas Abbott, died. His mother, Flora, cared for him on her own, in spite of relatives who wanted to take him away. When Robert was five, Flora married John Sengstacke. John loved Robert and taught him that all people are God's children in one human family.

After high school, Robert had a chance to attend the Juilliard School in New York with a vocal music scholarship, but he decided that prejudice would make it hard for him to earn a living. Instead, he earned a law degree. But narrow-mindedness followed him—he couldn't get clients to hire him. Robert had studied printing in college, so he turned his energy toward journalism.

Destroying Race Prejudice

When Robert began the *Chicago Defender* in 1905 at age 37, he had 25 cents in his pocket. From this small beginning, the *Defender* grew into a popular publication that reported the hardships that African Americans suffered. Black citizens were beaten, shot, and killed by white people. Since most papers were written by whites, the stories of African Americans weren't told. But the *Defender* spoke up, even though Robert's life was threatened by racists.

The paper's slogan was "American race prejudice must be destroyed."

Robert wanted to empower kids as well as adults. In 1921, he began a section for kids called the *Defender Junior* with its own kid editor who had a fictional name: Bud Billiken. Later, the Bud Billiken Parade was started in Chicago. It's now one of the largest annual parades in the U.S. In time, the *Defender* published 200,000 copies per issue and was read throughout the country.

Meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá

In 1912, Robert attended a talk in Chicago on the oneness of humanity. The speaker was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the leader of the Bahá'í Faith at the time. After the meeting, 'Abdu'l-Bahá put his hand on Robert's head and told him that he would someday offer "a service for the benefit of humanity."

Robert had read books about the Bahá'í Faith and written articles about it. In 1934, he stood up before a roomful of Bahá'ís and said, "I am identifying myself with this Cause and I go up with you or down with you. Anything for this Cause! Let it go out and remove the darkness everywhere. Save my people! Save America from herself!"

Just six years later, Robert Sengstacke Abbott died at age 71. The front page of the *Chicago Defender* announced, "He educated his race to demand their rights as men . . . His early life as a journalist and abolitionist against wrong was one of toil, poverty and hardship . . . Farewell, Chief, you have pointed to a star . . . may it give light to our weary feet along the pathway to hope . . ."