

# Percival L. Prattis

## THE *PITTSBURGH COURIER*'S MAN FROM CHICAGO

By Charles A. Rosenberg

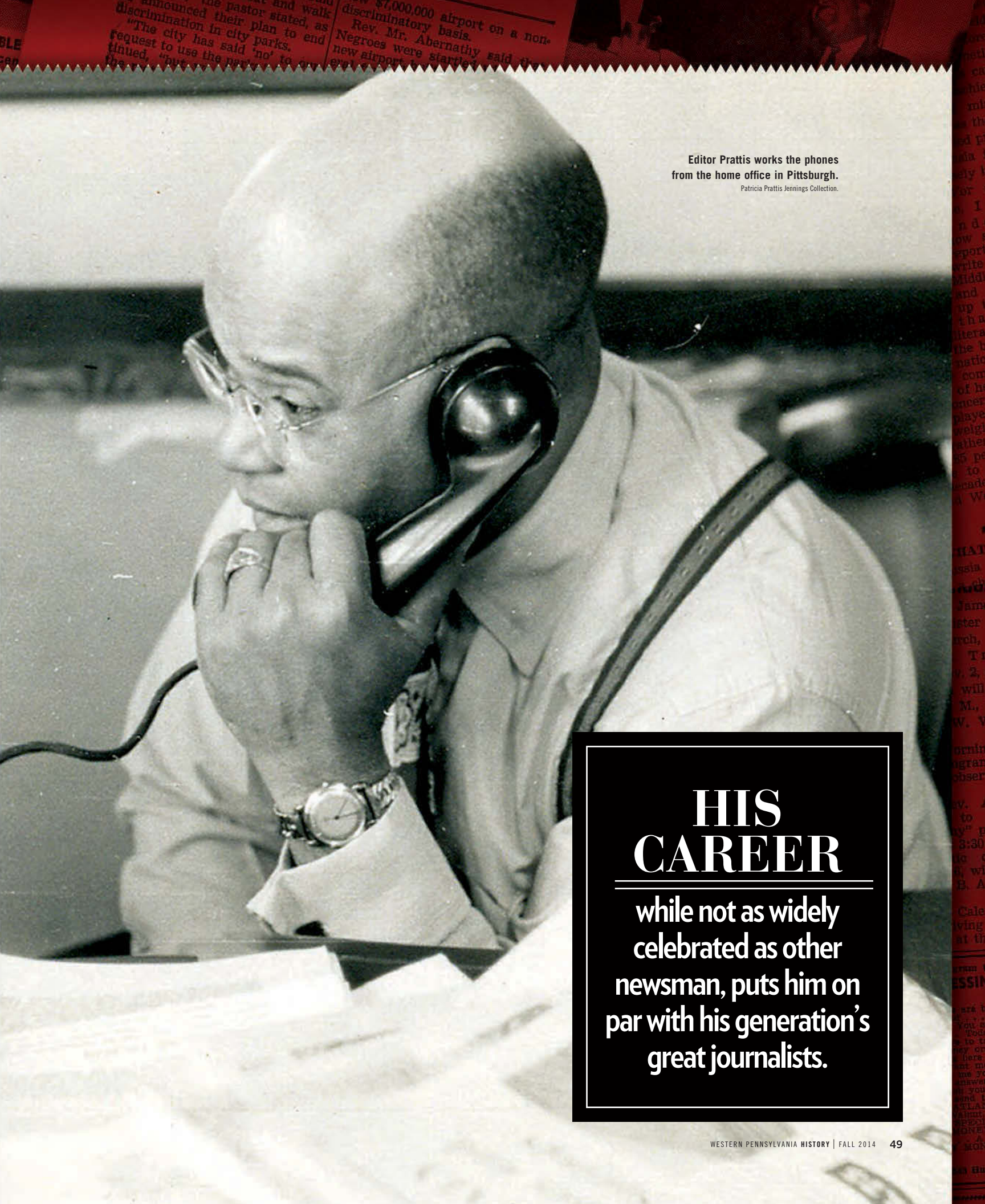
In November 1956, Percival Leroy Prattis was appointed editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the first to hold that position since founder Robert L. Vann died in 1940. In addition to his editorial roles and his weekly "Horizon" column starting in 1938, Prattis carried many overseas assignments for the *Courier*, interviewing exiled Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, documenting post-war reconstruction in Europe, and covering the founding conference of the United Nations.

Between the years 1935 and 1960, the *Pittsburgh Courier* had not only the largest circulation of any weekly published by and for Americans of African descent, but the greatest influence. Langston Hughes described it during its heyday in 1948 as "a high class paper" and "the best of the lot." While the *Courier*'s outstanding publisher and editor, Robert L. Vann, has received considerable emphasis, his genius was in part an eye for excellence and

expertise in assembling a talented set of editors, writers, and officers, whose lives are essential to presenting the paper's complete story.

Prattis was not a native of the city that became his adopted home. His career as a journalist began in Chicago, where he honed his skills as a columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, the *Courier*'s fiercest rival. He was a product of Vann's vision for a paper with a national circulation, publishing the quality of

news coverage that a purely local subscribing and advertising base could never support. As part of Vann's team of dedicated reporters at the *Courier*, Percival Prattis shaped the success of America's most popular black weekly by laying important foundations in Chicago and then continuing that work in Pittsburgh. His career, while not as widely celebrated as other newsmen, puts him on par with his generation's great journalists.



Editor Prattis works the phones from the home office in Pittsburgh.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

## HIS CAREER

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Pittsburgh old-timers who remember the original *Courier* have expressed many opinions about who, next to Vann, was preeminent at the newspaper. Probably nobody in the editorial staff was more responsible for the distinguished content, the high quality of aggressive news-gathering, and insightful analysis of events important to a mostly black readership, than P.L. Prattis. From a rough and tumble childhood on the streets of Philadelphia, to education in Virginia and Michigan, not to mention work experience on the Jersey shore, in New York City, and Rhode Island, Prattis acquired a breadth of experience that transcended the parochial views of any one locality. Military service in France, where he developed some life-long friendships, gave him the beginnings of a global perspective that served him and the *Courier* well in future reporting from Europe, Africa, and Asia. He acquired a nose for news as a writer and editor with Claude Barnett at the Associated Negro Press, as well as an eye for topics that would boost circulation. The quality of Prattis's editorials and columns is reflected in hard-hitting coverage of black workers' stake in the American Federation of Labor, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the varied practices of military officers toward black GIs, the complex intersection of cold war rivalries with colonialism and civil rights, down to a late 1950s skepticism of nonviolent resistance that is at the same time both conservative and militant in nature.

Begun in 1907 as a two-page literary sheet, incorporated in 1910 with Vann as legal counsel and treasurer, the *Pittsburgh Courier* came under the control of a group of local investors who turned to Vann to fill the role of publisher. Vann developed the paper as a respected voice with over 10,000 readers in the mid-1920s, beginning to attract national advertising. He drew on a local, Pittsburgh-

born pool of talent to fill many of the earliest staff positions.

William G. Nunn, sports editor and national editor in the 1920s and '30s, who briefly succeeded Prattis as editor 1961-1963, was born in Pittsburgh. He was hired in 1919, fresh out of high school, when he offered Ira F. Lewis, *Courier* business manager (secretary and Vann's

## FROM OFFICES IN CHICAGO,

ANP provided  
news and feature  
copy to subscribing  
newspapers across the  
country, primarily the  
local weekly papers  
collectively known as  
"the black press."

all around right-hand man) an unsolicited article about a baseball game between a Pittsburgh team and a Detroit team. Within two years he was the paper's sports editor. Chester L. Washington, who succeeded Nunn as sports editor in the early 1930s, was also born in Pittsburgh. He started with the *Courier* at the age of 17 as a stenographer, then a part-time reporter. Frank Bolden, correspondent in the Pacific and Asian theaters of World War II, and eventually city editor, was born in Washington

County, just south of Pittsburgh. A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, and one of the first *Courier* staffers other than Vann with a college degree, he started working as a reporter in 1935 after first specializing in education and biology (but blocked from medical school on account of his race).

When Percival Prattis arrived in Pittsburgh in December 1935, he was a 40-year-old successful journalist who already had experience working for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Born in Philadelphia, Prattis was educated in Virginia at Christiansburg Industrial Institute and Hampton Institute, then went to Ferris Institute in western Michigan to pick up the academic subjects that Hampton's vocational program had not provided. His big professional break was given to him by Claude Barnett, director of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), in 1923. The two remained friends for life. Prattis's official position on the ANP masthead was feature editor, and administratively he was almost a business partner.

From offices in Chicago, ANP provided news and feature copy to subscribing newspapers across the country, primarily the local weekly papers collectively known as "the black press." Barnett sought to build ANP in much the same manner as Associated Press served local dailies, generally known as "the white press." Since these dailies did not hire reporters of African descent and gave little or no coverage to events in the rigidly segregated communities where most people of African descent lived, the name "white press" was a clinically accurate description. This practice also left a large pool of talented writers and editors available exclusively to the black weeklies.

ANP did not have the capital to station reporters around the world providing original copy. Instead, it encouraged subscribing newspapers to provide copy for its distribution network, which it would make available to all

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# Pittsburgh Courier

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Photographer Russell Lee took this shot, titled "The Pittsburgh Courier is widely read in the Negro section of Chicago, Illinois," while on assignment for the Farm Security Administration in 1941. Six years after Prattis moved to the home office in Pittsburgh, the Courier's Chicago edition continued to grow and attract new readers.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF33-012992-M3.

FIRST MUSLIM MOSQUE  
OF PITTSBURGH

"A New Song." Mrs. Lillian Bradford will be guest soloist for the morning.

Family Friends Day

Sunday will be Family and

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subscribers. Prattis had represented ANP in 1930 as an accredited journalist accompanying the Special Committee for the Study of Education in Haiti, headed by Dr. Robert R. Moton, president of Tuskegee Institute. On that occasion, his travel expenses, like those of the commission, were paid by the State Department.<sup>1</sup>

In 1931, the *Courier's* Ira Lewis wrote to Barnett, "We have experienced quite a little difficulty, lately, in getting some reliable person to distribute our papers in Chicago." As the

Lewis hoped Barnett would find someone impressed with "the possibilities of becoming local representative for THE PITTSBURGH COURIER in Chicago if he makes good on this little detail."<sup>3</sup> Barnett suggested his friend and associate Percival L. Prattis, always in need of additional work and income. ANP was a low budget operation with uncertain cash flow, never able to pay adequate salaries. Subscribing newspapers were often behind on their weekly payments. Prattis got the job with the *Courier*, and at the end of the year,

since the turn of the century. Pullman porters clandestinely delivered bundles to distribution agents throughout the southern states, helping the paper to a national circulation of 200,000 in 1925.<sup>4</sup> The *Defender* dropped to a circulation of 100,000 in 1933, and continued to fall, while the *Courier* was on its way up from 50,000 in 1930 to over 250,000 by the end of 1937. The two papers were fiercely competitive, often lampooning each other. Robert Abbott, publisher and editor of the *Defender*, did



During his first six years in Pittsburgh, Prattis was often assigned to accompany publisher Robert L. Vann on meetings and civic functions.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

*Courier* was the exclusive ANP subscriber in Pittsburgh, Lewis and Vann were quite familiar with Barnett. Lewis sought Barnett's help in finding "a person we could trust to send us our part of the money. We have had a newsstand sale in Chicago as high as 1500 copies but due to poor agents and the lack of hustle on the part of the ones who had the job, the circulation has gone."<sup>2</sup>

Circulation Manager W.P. Bayless was pleased to get some ambitious plans to expand circulation from the new man in Chicago.

Why did the *Pittsburgh Courier* need a man pushing sales in Chicago? Vann aspired to publish a paper with a national circulation, covering local news in each area, as well as national coverage. He had both a model and a rival in the *Chicago Defender*, which had developed its own nationwide circulation

not subscribe to ANP. He had at one time employed both Barnett and Prattis, each of whom had left him on less than friendly terms.

In 1931, the *Courier* was a rising star, but had not yet pulled ahead of its main rival. Joining the *Courier* turned out to be a good bet for Prattis. By 1935, when he joined the Pittsburgh home office, the *Courier* published separate editions for Texas, Mississippi, southern national, New York,

New England, the Midwest, a national edition, and the Pittsburgh local edition. At its peak it published 14 editions, including one for the Pacific Coast, all printed at the *Courier's* own plant in Pittsburgh. In doing this, Vann and Lewis pioneered the business model that later made the *New York Times* into a nationally distributed paper. Chicago was the largest city where Midwestern circulation could be built up in a concentrated area.

Prattis enthusiastically proposed new ways to promote the paper. He recommended a list of people to receive the *Pittsburgh Courier* free of charge, to attract notice. "Those key people certainly should do us a world of good in perfecting the plan you have in mind.... I will co-operate with you to the fullest extent," Bayless wrote back.<sup>5</sup> In 1932, Prattis lined up a young man to write a column called "Carousing Around Chicago." Prattis wrote to Ira Lewis, "This boy lives in the nightclubs" and loiters with a bunch who "will buy papers. No other paper has exploited the possibilities of the group. I told the boy I would pay him if the stuff was used."<sup>6</sup> Chester "Chez" Washington, *Courier* sports editor, who also worked on the business side of the paper, wrote that, "this particular type of news will get a newspaper into more trouble than it perhaps cares to handle if it is not very careful as to responsibility and the tact of the person conducting such a column." Washington cautioned Prattis to make sure the young man could document anything he wrote, and that he confirmed any quoted statement before submitting the article for publication.

Prattis also sought to expand the paper's hard-hitting reporting. "As small as the sales of *The Courier* are" he wrote to Ira Lewis, "we sell more papers than any other including the *Bee*, except *The Defender*. *The Courier* can become an influence here by working on those things *The Defender* will dodge. They break every week. They did not touch the Metropolitan burial society story in *The Defender*. It brought

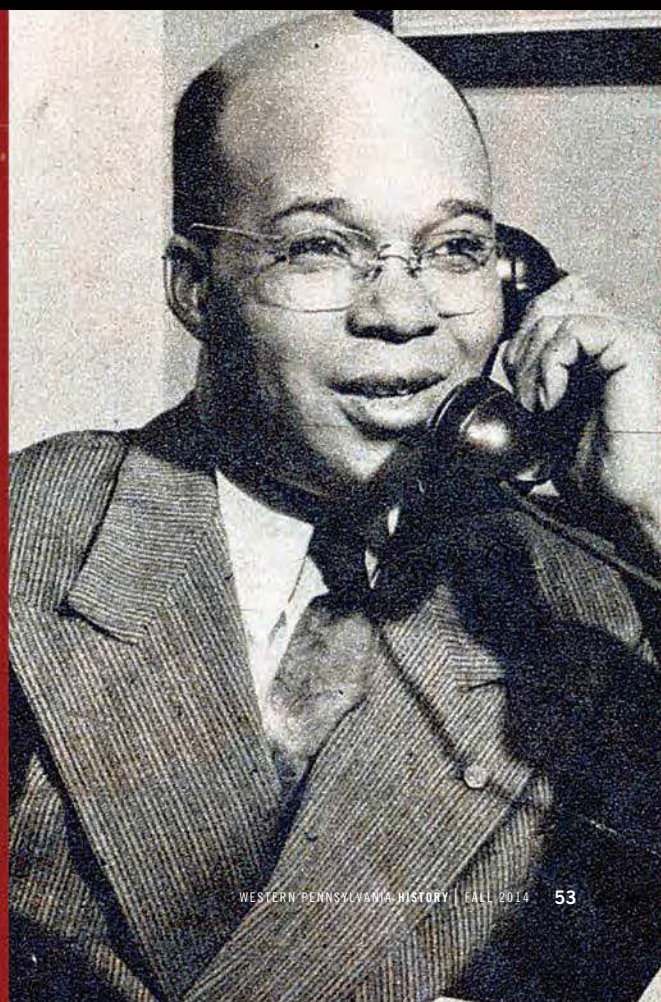
Prattis' only child, Pat, working on a hot lead linotype machine in the *Courier* print shop, mid-1950s.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.



## BY 1935, WHEN HE JOINED THE PITTSBURGH HOME OFFICE,

the *Courier* published separate editions for Texas, Mississippi, southern national, New York, New England, the Midwest, a national edition, and the Pittsburgh local edition.



Editor Prattis works the phones from the home office in Pittsburgh.

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Read more about the history of the Pittsburgh Courier.



Prattis relaxes at home with wife, Helen Sands Prattis, and their daughter Patricia in the late 1940s.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

us an immediate increase in circulation.”<sup>7</sup> The “burial society” referred to was the Metropolitan Funeral System Association (MFSA), one of several insurance companies offering to fill the gap left by companies such as Prudential that cited “excessive Negro mortality” to raise rates and later drop non-white policyholders entirely.<sup>8</sup> The population that had been dropped was an easy prey for scams, as well as legitimate companies short on capital to fulfill their promises. Prattis described MFSA to Lewis as a “fake insurance company with 35,000 members,” but warned, “I never wrote anything about embezzlement.”<sup>9</sup> He heard rumors that a lawsuit was threatened (no



Prattis, around the end of his first decade as *Courier* executive editor, talking with staff in the pressroom. To the left is publishing company president and treasurer Mrs. Jessie Vann, widow of Robert Vann.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection. Original Teenie Harris image © - Carnegie Museum of Art, Teenie Harris Archive, Pittsburgh.

documented record mentions who made the threat), due to a headline that used the word.

Vann made a visit to Chicago in January 1933, enthusiastic over the possibilities of putting the *Courier* right in the *Defender's* home turf. He authorized Prattis to use funds from local *Courier* sales to finance new correspondents' work until the paper was better established in the city. Following Vann's return to Pittsburgh, Julia B. Jones, the women's editor, wrote Prattis a gracious letter assuring him she was "eager to cooperate with you in every possible way and make the Chicago Columns grow." Jones worked out arrangements to get last minute copy from Chicago, and asked for good photos of popular Chicago society

1933 he wrote telling Prattis to cut expenses for local staff, except "the young lady and yourself." The news material from Chicago, and the photos "have been very well," but "we cannot of course indefinitely continue the plan under which we are now working."<sup>12</sup> Possibly if a net profit were to be turned, it could be applied to the *Courier's* bill to the Associated Negro Press, which would at least relieve the cash flow in Pittsburgh a little. Like most ANP subscribers, the *Courier* was chronically behind on its weekly payments, raised in 1927 from one dollar a week, to two dollars.

Others on the staff appreciated Prattis's news gathering. He was well on his way to developing a major piece on the Policy Game,

In search of another big-time story, Chez Washington asked Prattis to get an interview with Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the commissioner of baseball, "on the possibility of getting colored ball players in the big leagues."<sup>14</sup> The *Courier* was a leading advocate for this step, 15 years before Jackie Robinson first played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Landis was out of town, but Prattis got a comment from his secretary, Leslie O'Connor, which Washington thought "very fine."<sup>15</sup> It was a small step in a long battle to desegregate the game.

One of the biggest lifts to *Pittsburgh Courier's* national circulation in the mid-1930s was staking out a claim to be the "Joe

## ONE OF THE BIGGEST LIFTS

to *Pittsburgh Courier's* national circulation in the mid-1930s was staking out a claim to be the "Joe Louis paper," providing in-depth coverage of the boxer's rapid rise.

women to use with the columns. "Keep in touch with me from time to time and give me your ideas" she closed, "and I will do my best to develop them."<sup>10</sup> A good friend of the *Courier*, Thomas Spurlock reported that Prattis had one of the best news gathering organizations that could possibly be had.

In fact, Prattis was making a better impression with his newsgathering skills and ability to assemble a productive reporting staff than with the revenue from his sales. Ira Lewis wrote in January 1933, "we are very appreciative of the very good work you are doing for The Pittsburgh Courier in Chicago."<sup>11</sup> But as business manager, Lewis had a cold eye for the bottom line. In March

an illegal forerunner of the late 20th-century state lotteries. One of the few illegal businesses controlled by operators of African descent and played mostly by people of their own color, it allowed players to place small bets on numbers or combinations of numbers that would appear in features of the daily press. Bayless thought a story about the organization of the Policy game would be interesting to readers, and therefore would sell papers.<sup>13</sup> Nunn, a bit of a gambler himself, was backing the story and thinking of every possible way to advertise it in advance. However, word leaked out, and all the sources of information stopped talking to the paper. Readers would have loved the story, but operators weren't so interested in publicity.



Behind three young men outside the *Courier* office on Center Street, a poster advertises Prattis' epic three-month tour of military training camps, April-July 1941.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection. Original Teenie Harris image© – Carnegie Museum of Art, Teenie Harris Archive, Pittsburgh.

Louis paper," providing in-depth coverage of the boxer's rapid rise. In 1934, Nunn came to Chicago to report on a championship playoff between baseball teams in the Negro Leagues. On the sidewalk outside the Grand Hotel, Prattis introduced the national editor to a young Joe Louis, a national Amateur Athletic Union light heavyweight champion who had just turned professional. Louis was making quite an impression in Chicago, practicing at the south side YMCA, then knocking out Jack Kracken, the top heavyweight in the area, in his

Church, will be speaker at Trinity Church, Nov. 2, at 11 A. M. communion will be at 8:30.

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# Horizon

By P. L. Prattis

## U. S. Newspapers

I OFTEN wonder how much influence our daily newspapers and our weekly newspapers and magazines wield in respect to American foreign policy. I wonder sometimes whether our free press cannot be as deliberately mischievous

and misleading as the controlled press of Russia is purposely biased.

For example, I cannot understand how so many reporters can write from the Middle East and not play up the fact that poverty,

disease and illiteracy among the Arabs are the basic stimulants to Arab nationalism and not Nasser or communism. Is it the purpose of headline making that our concern in the Middle East is played up like a world heavyweight championship fight rather than as a struggle of 85 per cent of the Arab people to relieve themselves of decadent, dictatorial regimes and Western domination.



Mr. Prattis

Horizon was Prattis' weekly editorial column.  
Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

first professional fight. Nunn went to see Louis fight in New York, and wrote it up. The *Courier* cemented its reputation as Louis' newspaper by having its own printing press, allowing staff to hold up running off the latest edition while Nunn or Washington flew back from a fight with their on-the-scene report.

Suddenly, in August 1935, Prattis left Chicago. En route to New York, he stopped off in Pittsburgh for 24 hours to speak with Vann and Lewis. His letters to Barnett are coy about what his intentions were – looking for work, but not ready to make a firm application, thinking the *Courier* might be a

years after marrying Prattis, she encouraged him to come join her in New York.

He was also dissatisfied with his career at ANP. There wasn't much money to pay him; in fact, Barnett's wife, Etta Moton Barnett, made more from her singing career than either man made from ANP. Prattis left a cryptic note for Barnett:

I do not think any explanations as to why I have left will be necessary for anybody. This is not saying good bye. This is merely to let you know I have gone. It's the hardest thing I have ever done in my life – to part with so much of what we have been together. To have said good-

## IN 1941 PRATTIS WAS DISPATCHED BY LEWIS

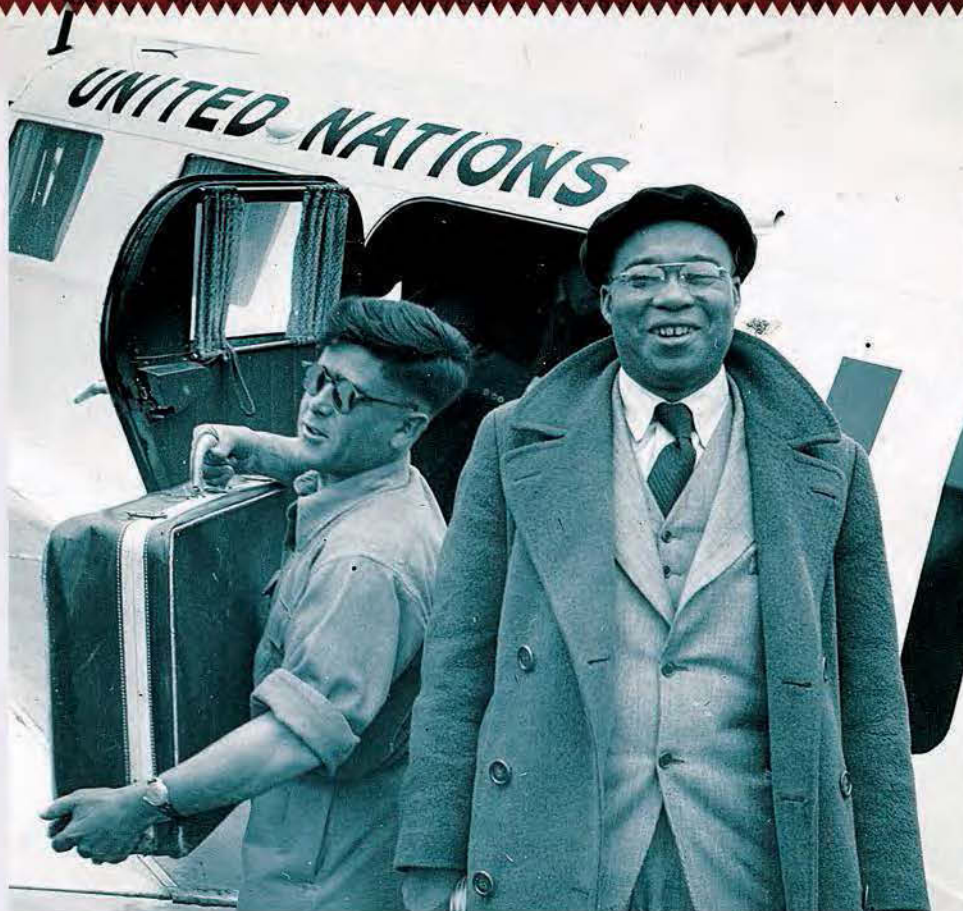
on an epic three-month tour of military training camps where large numbers of African American conscripts were stationed.

good career move. The immediate reason for leaving Chicago was that his wife, Lillian, had abandoned the city. He knew when he married her in 1932 that she had a history of running away. During their previous 11-year friendship Lillian had periodically gotten tired of Chicago and gone to New York, or gotten tired of New York and gone to Chicago, breaking several short-term marriages or common-law marriages in the process. Prattis was 37 years old, and had never married, once remarking that, during the 1920s, "I couldn't afford to buy a look at a girl."<sup>16</sup> When she left Chicago three

bye in words would have been too hard, for you and for me.

Prattis wrote of seeking happiness, of needing "a change of routine for my health's sake." Not knowing exactly what would happen to him, Prattis added, "I am unhappy in my private life and my work. I shall try to find work, any kind of work. If you can help me, I know you will." He gave a forwarding address at Lillian's apartment, and closed, "Let us see if there are not things we can do, far as we may be apart."<sup>18</sup>

In the later part of his life after retiring from the *Courier*, Prattis looked back on



(Above Left) Prattis was invited by his friend Ralph Bunche to witness the signing of the armistice between Israel and Jordan in Rhodes in 1947.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

(Above Right) Prattis made trips to Europe in 1945 and 1948, covering the occupation of Germany and rebuilding of the continent.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

1935 and wrote, "I was convinced that I must leave Chicago. I must become some sort of a somebody to myself. I was forty years old and twenty of those years, it seemed cruelly apparent to me, had been wasted. My family ties were distant. In a sense, I was alone in the world."<sup>19</sup> At the time, he wrote to Barnett, "there was no mention made of a possible job, although I reported that I was giving up the Chicago work. After I got to New York, Mr. Lewis made the first approach to me. I did not know what it might amount to, but let him know that I was in the market for work."<sup>20</sup>

He had some immediate work to do for the *Courier*, running around with several of the staff out from Pittsburgh to cover "the fight" (Joe Louis's boxing match against Max Baer, September 24, 1935) and "the wedding" (Joe Louis and Marva Trotter, announced in advance and celebrated after the Baer fight). Prattis proudly wrote to Barnett, "I was the only

one (colored) to get a squint at the wedding, and it took a lot of time (waiting) to do that."<sup>21</sup>


Prattis promised to knock off a story about the wedding over the weekend for ANP's Monday service. He mentioned that, "Johnny is strutting his stuff," meaning Colonel John Robinson, flying in Ethiopia's fledgling air force in the war against Italy. Drawing on his personal association with Robinson in Chicago, Prattis contributed a "Special to the *Pittsburgh Courier*" article on "Life Story of Johnny Robinson, Tuskegee Grad, Who Fought Off Two of Duce's Planes and Carried Message Through, Reads Like Fiction."<sup>22</sup> The last part was fiction: Ethiopia's planes were too slow for dogfights, and therefore unarmed. Robinson had some daring escapes from Italian planes gunning for him. From October through December, Prattis found work by crossing the picket line of striking Newspaper Guild employees at the *Amsterdam News*, which vied with the *New*

*York Age* as one of the premier papers serving the city's African American readers.

Prattis was also receiving repeated offers from Lewis to come to Pittsburgh. Vann and Lewis were impressed with his news-gathering in Chicago, and wanted him working in the home office. After several long distance calls, Prattis agreed that he would complete 10 weeks with the *Amsterdam News*, then move to Pittsburgh and work for the *Courier*, with starting pay of \$40 a month, and raises as

# He won acclaim

for sophisticated international coverage, presented with a twist that held the attention of his primarily black readership while seizing the attention of a global readership.



Prattis, on one of his working trips to Europe in the 1940s, renewed his acquaintance with legendary performer Josephine Baker.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

the business justified it. On December 15, he caught a ride to Pittsburgh with Nunn and Washington, while Lillian made arrangements to ship the couple's furniture.<sup>23</sup>

Prattis remained in Pittsburgh for the rest of his life, retiring in 1965. Lillian did not stay long. She tried to develop her own business in hair styling, then running the P&L Chicken Shack, which her husband financed. She found Pittsburgh too small and dull, running off to Chicago then New York, and Prattis finally filed for divorce. In 1939, he married Helen Marie Sands, a Pittsburgh native, telling Barnett he deliberately married a local girl as a declaration he intended to remain in a town where he felt there were "deep-rooted prejudices against all outsiders."<sup>24</sup> Sands had all the qualities Prattis found lacking in Lillian: "a hard-working girl who wants to get somewhere. She comes from a stable Christian family with eyes and ears for the solid virtues in living." He found her beautiful and "steady

as the Rock of Gibraltar."<sup>25</sup> This marriage lasted until his death in 1980.

Prattis' first five years were rocky. Vann gave him a glowing introduction to the staff. Prattis wrote to Barnett that it had perhaps been laid on too thick, because he saw a lot of conflicts with old-timers who had a natural resentment of a new guy coming in and being advanced rapidly. He was not without friends—later correspondence suggests that Chester Washington was close to him from the beginning—and over the years he and Nunn worked together despite some obvious rivalry. He received early plum assignments, including a trip to England to cover Pittsburgh pro boxer John Henry Lewis and interview exiled Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. But in 1938, conflict with those he called "the old aces" brought him to the point of resignation. He particularly detested being "cooped up" with the "unrestricted and unrestrained coarseness" of Julia Bumry Jones, the long-time women's

editor and columnist.<sup>26</sup> They viewed each other differently working in the same office, than when he had been the new man in Chicago.

However, by September 1938, Prattis was feeling more secure. Vann promoted him to city editor, and in October he was given his own editorial column, "Horizon," which continued to appear every week through 1965. Vann assigned him to write many of the official editorial positions of the paper. When Prattis was named managing editor in May 1940, he proudly wrote to Barnett, "This is the first time anybody except Mr. Vann or Mr. Lewis has served in that capacity." So in less than five years he felt, "I have made the grade. I have straightened out my domestic situation, built my own home, made myself more secure on my job.... Seems like a dream, doesn't it?"<sup>27</sup>

Vann died of cancer in October of the same year; his widow, Jessie Vann, inherited his majority stake in the publishing company's stock, joined the board of directors, and



Prattis, right, at dinner during the founding conference of the United Nations Organization in San Francisco, April 30, 1945. Second from left is Rayford W. Logan, *Courier* foreign affairs editor.

Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

assumed the titles of publisher and treasurer. Lewis, who succeeded to Vann's position as president of the publishing company, was the one person to whom everyone on the staff deferred. Prattis was appointed to the new post of executive editor, while Nunn moved up to managing editor — positions each continued to fill for the next 16 years. The position of editor was left vacant, with Robert L. Vann appearing in the masthead as "Editor Memoria en Aeterna."

Over the next two decades, Prattis emerged as one of the leading journalists in the United States. Assigned by Vann in 1938 to handle publicity for the Committee for the Participation of Negroes in the National Defense, in 1941 Prattis was dispatched by Lewis on an epic three-month tour of military training camps where large numbers of African American conscripts were stationed. (The nation's first peace-time military draft

was just getting underway.) After World War II, he spent 10 years covering the remaking of the world, including the founding conference of the United Nations (with Rayford W. Logan, *Courier* foreign affairs editor), the first World Trade Union Congress, the reconstruction of Europe, and a series of stories on the "brown babies" born to German women by American soldiers of African descent.

On one or more transatlantic crossings, he had a large cabin almost to himself, "just because I was colored, while nine white folks had to crowd into the same type cabin."<sup>28</sup> Prattis' coverage of Middle East conflicts was unique among journalists of African descent, and unusually comprehensive for any American journalist. He was invited to join Dr. Ralph Bunche in Rhodes, where the United Nations diplomat was hammering together a settlement of the Arab-Israeli war that began in 1948.<sup>29</sup> His 1954 series entitled

"Peace Prospects in the Holy Land" drew critical acclaim from both Arab and Israeli leaders. Prattis was probably the first journalist to report Jawaharlal Nehru's firm statement that, "colonialism is dead," not just in India, but all across Asia and Africa, having secured an interview with the help of Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nehru's sister, who had visited the *Courier* offices in Pittsburgh.

As the 1950s gave birth to the powerful forces that convulsed the 1960s, Prattis developed personal correspondence with the previously unknown Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and received an admiring letter from Malcolm X, after a series of *Horizon* columns expressing doubts about non-violent resistance as a strategy, while crediting King with "superb and dedicated and courageous leadership in Montgomery."<sup>30</sup> When Prattis was appointed editor by Mrs. Vann and the new publisher, W. Beverly Carter, congratulations poured in from Pittsburgh business, political, and social

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**Percival Prattis.**  
Patricia Prattis Jennings Collection.

leaders, as well as from friends, colleagues, statesmen, and scholars all over the United States and around the world.<sup>31</sup>

Only five years later, Prattis was elevated to assistant treasurer and associate publisher, but these roles proved anti-climactic. The new publisher, S.B. Fuller, had bought Mrs. Vann's controlling interest in *Courier* publishing company stock, but was not the committed investor she sought to save the financially ailing newspaper. Prattis declared that, "We are going to save the *Pittsburgh Courier*,"<sup>32</sup> and suggested that, "without giving up his special responsibility to his Negro readers," he and the editors of other historically black newspapers "should try to publish a newspaper which carries across race and color lines and promotes the welfare of the total community."<sup>33</sup> By 1964, the *Courier's* operating deficit had been cut to \$25,855.39, but debt amounted to \$399,326.86.<sup>34</sup> Prattis retired April 26, 1965, a year before the Pittsburgh Courier Publishing Company went into bankruptcy.

Percival Prattis helped to bring the *Courier* to its peak circulation of over 350,000. He won acclaim for sophisticated international coverage, presented with a twist that held the attention of his primarily black readership while seizing

the attention of a global readership. With better financial backing, from an investor who shared his vision, Prattis might have steered the *Pittsburgh Courier* from the intensely segregated mid-20th century into the new readership alignments of the next few decades. Even lacking this crucial support, he maintained the high standards set by Vann and kept the paper at the forefront of civil rights and international coverage as the revenue base declined. ❁

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<sup>1</sup> Dept. of State to Prattis, 6 June 1930, Percival L. Prattis Papers, Box 144-6, Folder 14, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis to Barnett, 18 May 1931, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 4, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Commission in Chicago Landmarks, "The Black Metropolis—Bronzeville District," 28 (August 1997): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Bayless to Prattis, 23 January 1932, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> Prattis to Lewis, 9 January 1932, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 138, Folder 9, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Weems, Jr., "The Chicago Metropolitan Mutual Assurance Company: A Profile of a Black-Owned Enterprise," *Illinois Historical Journal* 86, no. 1 (Spring 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Prattis to Lewis, 24 December 1932, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>10</sup> Julia B. Jones to Prattis, 28 January 1933, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis to Prattis, 10 January 1933, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis to Prattis, 9 March 1933, Claude Barnett Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>13</sup> Bayless to Prattis, 28 January 1933, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>14</sup> Washington to Prattis, 25 February 1933, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 159, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Washington to Prattis, 1 March 1933, Claude Barnett Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup> Percival Prattis, "Changing Years," unpublished autobiographical manuscript, 85. Manuscript access courtesy of Patricia Prattis Jennings, later donated to Percival L. Prattis Papers, 1916-1980, AIS.2007.01, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh, Series 1 Subseries 4: Writings, Box 2, Folder 85.

<sup>17</sup> Prattis to Barnett, undated, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 139, Folder 2, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Prattis, "Changing Years," 103.

<sup>20</sup> Prattis to Barnett, 1 January 1936, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 138, Folder 9, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>21</sup> Prattis to Barnett, 27 September 1935, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 138, Folder 9, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>22</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, National Edition, 12 October 1935.

<sup>23</sup> Prattis to Barnett, 1 January 1936, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 138, Folder 9, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>24</sup> Prattis to Barnett, 30 January 1940, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 139, Folder 1, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Prattis to Barnett, 1 February 1939, Claude Barnett Papers, Box 139, Folder 1, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>27</sup> Prattis to Barnett, 30 May 1940, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Box 139, Folder 1, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>28</sup> Percival Prattis, "Confetti Continentale," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 November 1945.

<sup>29</sup> Percival L. Prattis Papers, 1916-1980, AIS.2007.01, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh, Series I, Box 1, Folder 93.

<sup>30</sup> Percival Prattis, "Horizon," *Pittsburgh Courier* National Edition, 30 November 1957, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Percival L. Prattis Papers, Box 144-1, Folders 3-6, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>32</sup> Prattis to George Schuyler, 2 December 1963, Percival L. Prattis Papers, Box 144-25, Folder 22, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>33</sup> Prattis to Bryant Artis, *Newsweek*, 2 August 1963, Percival L. Prattis Papers, Box 144-1, Folder 14, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>34</sup> Balance Sheet, 31 December 1964, Box 1, Folder 43, Percival L. Prattis Papers, 1916-1980, AIS.2007.01, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.