

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

### Jackie Ormes

(August 1, 1911 – December 26, 1985)

“First African-American Woman Cartoonist”



**Jackie Ormes** was born Zelda Mavin Jackson on August 1, 1911, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to William Winfield Jackson and Mary Brown Jackson. Jackie's father, a printing company owner, died when Jackie was just six years old. Jackie's mother remarried and moved the family to Monongahela, PA. She began drawing and writing in high school and became the yearbook's arts editor, creating cartoons of caricatures of her fellow students and teachers. Her first real writing assignment, covering a local boxing match, came during her senior year when she wrote to the editor of an African-American newspaper, the Pittsburgh Courier.

After graduating high school in 1930, Jackie moved back to Pittsburgh and began her first job with the Pittsburgh Courier as a proofreader, and freelance writer of local special interest stories. She married Earl Ormes in 1931 and had one daughter that died at the age of two. In May of 1937, Jackie debuted her comic strip character called Torchy Brown in "Dixie to Harlem." Torchy Brown was a Mississippi teen who moved to New York City to make it as a lounge singer at the famed Cotton Club. Jackie became the first black woman cartoonist to be published in a newspaper. The comic strip ran in the Pittsburgh Courier for only one year, and by the time it ended, Jackie had already moved to Chicago with her husband. In 1942 Jackie began writing occasional articles and a society column for the Chicago Defender, one of the nation's leading black newspapers. At the end of the war, the Defender started running a single-panel cartoon she created called Candy, about an attractive and wisecracking housemaid. In 1945, Jackie's newest effort, Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger, featured a precocious, insightful and socially/politically-aware child as the only speaker, coupled with her beauty queen big sister. In 1947, Jackie contracted with the Terri Lee doll company to produce a play-doll. The Patty-Jo doll was on the shelves by Christmas, and was the first American black doll to have an extensive upscale wardrobe. As in the cartoon, the doll looked like a real child, in contrast to the mammy and Topsy-type dolls of the time.



In December 1949, Jackie's contract with the Terri Lee company was not renewed, and production ended. The comic appeared in the Pittsburgh Courier and ran until 1956. During that time, Jackie reinvented her character, Torchy, and she appeared in The Courier with "Torchy in Heartbeats." Torchy was now a beautiful independent woman seeking true love. It was the first time mainstream news readers saw the image of a black woman as confident, well-dressed, intelligent and brave. As a result, Torchy Togs, a paper-doll in the image of Torchy, was created and sold.



Jackie retired from cartooning in 1956. She continued creating art and volunteering in her South-side Chicago community. On December 26, 1985, Jackie Ormes passed away at the age of 74. In 2007, cartoonist and journalist Cheryl Lynn Eaton founded The Ormes Society, which promotes black female comics creators.

