

Oil-Rich Bartlesville in Throes Of Fight Over Civil Liberties

Judge Disqualifies Self Rather Than Rule on Firing of Library Board, Librarian on Censor- ship Issue.

By F. A. BEHYMER
A Staff Correspondent of the
Post-Dispatch.

BARTLESVILLE, Okla., Oct. 14—Civil liberties, under attack in this oil-rich city, are being defended with such effect that a district judge has refused to rule on the issues involved. Censorship of the public library and dismissal of the librarian and the library board, following dissension over race relations, have brought on what is called "The Battle of Bartlesville" against "thought control."

After months of strife, the issues were finally joined in court in a suit to mandamus the reinstatement of the librarian and library board. There was to have been a decision last Monday but District Judge James D. Shipman disqualified himself because as a resident of the community he did not want to rule on so controversial a question. The case was reset for Nov. 9, when an outside judge will be brought in to hear it.

Bartlesville, population 19,000, 20 miles from the Kansas border, was born in oil and raised on oil and as the capital of the Phillips and Cities Service empires is fabulously prosperous. The companies, employing most of the able-bodied men and women of the community, dominate it in many obvious ways and some that are more devious. Their interest is on the side of conservatism. The community is normally assumed to share this attitude because its well-being derives from the two companies.

Undercurrent of Liberalism.

There is, however, an undercurrent of liberalism. There is in the town a high percentage of college and university graduates who reserve the right to think for themselves, even though most of them are employed by the oil companies. In the present instance some of them have been admonished to keep out of the fight.



MISS RUTH W. BROWN

Bartlesville, back in 1911, emerging from its oil field rawness, decided that it needed a library. The big oil men gave their nod of approval. The city council passed an ordinance under the state law creating a library board which, in 1920, employed Miss Ruth W. Brown as librarian. The library, expanding from time to time, became the pride of Bartlesville. Miss Brown, to all intents and purposes was the library and in her own right one of the institutions of Bartlesville.

Accepted as such, there was never a murmur against her administration until last winter. For years, because of the presence of 900 Negroes in the city, there had been a growing interest in race relations, manifested in group discussions. Miss Brown took part in these as she did in other cultural activities. For ten years the Y.W.C.A. had encouraged limited racial projects, mostly segregated but occasionally inter-racial.

In February persons who disapproved, mostly non-members, demanded that the inter-racial activities be discontinued. The Y board put it up to the members. They upheld the board by more than two to one.

Demand for Firings.

Continuing outside opposition, which went so far as an attempt to deprive the library of Community Chest assistance and a demand that Miss Betty Davis be dismissed, was extended to Miss Brown because of her participation in racial relations discussions. There were demands that she be removed.

Thereafter Miss Brown became aware of a heightened interest in what the library was purveying. Persons who had not hitherto been patrons came in to look around and scan the titles of books and magazines. They found current issues of The Nation and The New Republic and, worst of all, a copy of Soviet Russia Today. Somebody had sent it in and Miss Brown, on the chance that

somebody might want to know about Soviet Russia today, had put it on the shelf.

The talk went around that Miss Brown was putting out subversive literature at the library. Loyal citizens were called on to rally at the next meeting of the City Commission.

Attacks Nation, New Republic.

The Citizens' Committee, making another report, attacked The Nation as "peddling the prattle" of the Communists and vending the wars of the Communist party in its advertising columns. The New Republic was denounced on similar grounds and the situation was called a surrender to "a fifth column invasion of the library."

The city commissioners at their next meeting, on June 14, revoked the public library ordinance and passed a new one giving themselves control, with power to remove the board and librarian "without cause." Under the old ordinance the board was autonomous and could only be removed for misconduct or neglect of duty.

On July 10 the commissioners announced the dismissal of the old board. A new board was appointed.

Then Miss Brown was invited to a private meeting of the commissioners for what she says was "an inquisition." She refused to answer questions of a personal nature unless they were put in writing. On that ground she refused to answer inquiries concerning her attitude toward race relations.

Commissioner's Comment.

Commissioner W. A. Forrest said: "We know your attitude on race relations. It may be according to the Bible and the Constitution but it is not according to the wishes of the majority of the people of Bartlesville."

Half an hour after the meeting, City Manager E. E. Jones called her on the telephone and read to her a notice of her dismissal, ending her almost 31 years of service. Mrs. Alta Riggs, assistant librarian, resigned. Miss Virginia Lasley, a retired school teacher, was named acting librarian. The Nation and The New Republic were taken from the shelves and put away behind the librarian's

desk, to be issued only at the librarian's discretion.

The new library board said Miss Brown had been dismissed by the City Commission. At the ensuing meeting of the commission, with a large crowd in attendance, demands were made for the reason for Miss Brown's dismissal. Mayor Dunaway said it was for insubordination in refusing to answer commissioners'

questions unless they were in writing.

Thereafter friends of Miss Brown formed a defense committee.

Thurmas S. Hurst of Tulsa, former chief justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, filed suit for the reinstatement of the old board and Miss Brown on the ground that the new ordinance is in conflict with the state law.

Judge Shipman signed an alternative writ of mandamus ordering the commissioners to make the reinstatements or appear on Oct. 2 to show cause for refusal. On that date Judge Shipman disqualified himself.