

RUTH BROWN'S DISMISSAL SHOCKS FORMER BARTLESVILLE RESIDENT

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Ruth Brown, for 31 years librarian of the Bartlesville, Okla. Free Public Library, was notified on July 25, 1950, by the City Commissioners that her services were terminated. The assistant librarian, Mrs. A. R. Riggs, resigned under protest. To provide library service for the public, two persons were appointed as temporary librarians.

On July 26th, the day following her dismissal, Miss Brown released the following statement: "I have not been advised by the City Commissioners of the reasons for termination of my employment as City Librarian. Neither during my interview with the City Commissioner on July 25, nor at any other time, have the Commissioners, the City Manager, or any other person told me that my services as city librarian have been unsatisfactory. I believe, as do many others, that my dismissal is attributable to certain of my personal opinions and outside activities which are distasteful to members of the Board of City Commissioners.

"I have always believed that discrimination on account of race, creed, or color is contrary to democratic and Christian principles; and I have tried to live as a Christian in a democracy in accordance with this belief. This has in no way interfered with my duties as city librarian; for the recently discharged Library Board found my work completely satisfactory. The newly appointed Library Board has given me no reason to believe they have found it otherwise."

The background of the controversy and the chain of events which led to Miss Brown's dismissal are given in the following letter from a former resident of Bartlesville, James W. Henderson, head, searching section, preparation division, reference department, New York Public Library:

Sir:

I want to describe to your readers a town in Oklahoma and tell them something about what has happened there. I do this because I think the town is, in many ways, a typical community, and what has happened there may be symptomatic of what is happening in our democracy.

The town of which I speak is called Bartlesville. It is a small place of about 19,000 people. The railroad goes through Bartlesville and divides the town. On the east are the homes of the upper middle-class and the wealthy, most of them connected with the oil company offices located there. On the West Side live the lower middle-class and the poor. And on the West Side, too, is Colored Town. Near the heart of the city, just off the business district, is a building called the Civic Center. This building is principally an auditorium, but it houses also several municipal offices and the Public Library.

"I lived in this town for about 10 years, and that is how I remember it. I remember it, too, as a good place to live. It was a conservative and not very socially conscious community, but it was enlightened, and it gave its

young people a good education. Not a little of that education was provided by the Public Library. Along with the radio and newspapers, I remember the library as an important channel of communication with the outside world.

"The city librarian was one of the town's most familiar figures, not only because of her position, but because she had served in that capacity for over thirty years. They were not always easy years. It is no commentary on Bartlesville in particular that it did not give its Library adequate support; that has been a common failing of communities throughout the country. But it is a credit to Miss Brown, the librarian, that she was a zealous ~~civil~~ servant and kept the library going, even during the most difficult depression years. It is also to her credit that she took seriously her responsibilities as a Christian and democrat. She took children into her own home, reared them, provided the means by which several young people were able to go through college, and helped many others in countless ways. Through the years, being in constant contact with ideas, she developed a liberal philosophy consistent with her religion and her innate sense of what was right and just.

"What has happened in Bartlesville is described in some detail in the August 12th issue of THE NATION. Briefly, it is this. A citizens' committee complained to the City Commissioners about Miss Brown's activities in securing civil rights for Bartlesville's Negroes and about subversive literature in the library. In later developments, no further charges were made against Miss Brown, but the subversive literature was particularized as CONSUMERS' RESEARCH, THE NEGRO DIGEST, SOVIET RUSSIA TODAY, THE NEW REPUBLIC, and THE NATION. THE NATION was cited as having been banned by the New York City Board of Education. The Library Board which investigated the charges and found, in substance, no basis for ^{them} charges, was dissolved by the enactment of a new ordinance which placed the control of the Library directly under the commissioners. Miss Brown's appointment as city librarian was terminated, and the periodicals in question have been removed from the library.

"The legality of the new ordinance will be contested, and I am confident that the citizens of Bartlesville will demand Miss Brown's reinstatement. I am prompted to write this letter because, remembering this town, I realize with sudden shock that if such a thing could happen there, it could happen almost anywhere. I wonder if those who love liberty and justice should not be on guard to recognize the symptoms of hysteria before it does such harm."

Sincerely yours,
JAMES W. HENDERSON