

PATRIOTISM IN BARTLESVILLE - Nation, August 12, 1950

(Letters to the Editors Department)

Dear Sirs: Bartlesville, Oklahoma, a town of some 19,000 inhabitants, contains the home office of two oil companies, the Phillips Petroleum Company and the Cities Service Oil Company, and a large part of the working population is employed by one or the other. Politically, the people are predominantly conservative; although the many young scientists and technicians working for the oil companies form the core of a substantial minority of liberals. So far as racial attitudes are concerned, the town is typically border-state.

For the last six months Bartlesville has been afflicted by a ruthless and devious campaign to suppress civil liberties, conducted by a so-called Citizens' Committee composed of a small segment of the local American Legion chapter, members of "Pro-America" - a Republican women's club - and members of the local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

The first target of this group was the local Y.W.C.A. Over a period of years that organization had put into effect a limited interracial program, which meant permitting the teen-age "Y" club of the segregated local Negro school to hold meetings in the Y.W.C.A. building on the same basis as the white girls' clubs, holding a monthly meeting of all officers of the teen-age clubs - including officers of the Negro club - and holding a yearly non-segregated meeting of all members of the "Y" teen clubs. The Citizens' Committee appeared before the Y.W.C.A. board of directors and demanded the discontinuance of this staff. The Y.W.C.A. board referred the matter to the membership which then voted its approval of the established interracial program by a large majority. The Citizens' Committee is now attempting to impose its demands by means of pressure exerted by the local Community Chest, through which the Y.W.C.A.'s funds are received.

The next target was the City Library. Miss Ruth Brown, who has served the community efficiently as city librarian for thirty-five years, has long been active in local groups interested in securing civil and economic rights for Bartlesville's Negroes. The so-called Citizens' Committee appeared at a meeting of the City Commissioners to complain of Miss Brown's activities and of "Subversive" literature in the library. The matter was referred to the Library Board, which met with the Citizens' Committee. At that meeting no complaint was made concerning the librarian, but three publications were alleged by the committee to be subversive - The Nation, the New Republic, and Soviet Russia Today. The ground of complaint against the Nation was its ban by the New York City Board of Education.

The Library Board drew up a report for the city commissioners in which the inclusion on the periodical list of the three publications was defended, and this report was presented at an open meeting of the city commissioners on March 6. That meeting was very close to a riot. Speakers in support of the Library Board's position were hissed, heckled, and charged with being Communists. The Mayor, who presided, was either unable or unwilling to preserve order. At its conclusion the Library Board was requested to investigate further and report back to the Commissioners.

The Library Board then proceeded to make a thorough appraisal of the contents of the library's periodical and political and sociological sections, and a thorough investigation of the operation of the library. Its second report to the City Commissioners

reaffirmed the propriety of the inclusion of The Nation and the New Republic on the periodical list by virtue of their appraisal in accordance with standards approved by the American Library Association, their inclusion in the subscription lists of other public and school libraries in this area, and their general character as reputable periodicals necessary to preserve a proper balance with respect to conflicting viewpoints in the light of other publications on the subscription list. Soviet Russia Today, which is published by the Friends of Soviet Russia and had been received by the library without charge, was removed from the shelves on the ground that it was of insufficient value, from the standpoints of interest and information, to justify occupation of the limited space available.

At the City Commissioners' meeting which received the Library Board's final report the Citizens' Committee also presented a report. Its substance was: 1) that Soviet Russia Today, the Negro Digest, and Consumers' Research are subversive because they have been cited by the Tenney committee in California; 2) that the Nation and the New Republic are subversive because some issues carry advertisements for pornographic books and books published by publishing houses cited by the Tenney committee or the Un-American Activities Committee of the United States House of Representatives (a signed book review in one issue of the Nation discussed a book written by a homosexual, and the authors - including Carey McWilliams - of some articles in these publications have been cited by the Tenney or other investigation committees). The City Commissioners have not at any time discussed with the Library Board its report, the report of the Citizens' Committee, or the operation of the library.

In the meantime at least one of the town's oil companies has intervened. Employees of the Phillips Petroleum Company who had been vocal in support of the Library Board were instructed to be silent. Two employees who had been active in interracial activities in the community were transferred to other locations; one of these two was advised that his activities in this regard constituted the reason for his transfer.

Before this hubbub the Library Board had administered the City Library as an autonomous board appointed by the City Commissioners, under the provisions of a state statute. On June 15 the City Commissioners, purportedly under the authorization of the city's home-rule charter, enacted an ordinance placing the administration of the library under the control and direction of the commissioners, with an advisory Library Board. It is my opinion that this ordinance is illegal. The members of the old Library Board were relieved of responsibility and a new board, consisting of representatives and supporters of the so-called Citizens' Committee, was appointed. On July 25 the services of Miss Brown were terminated by the City Commissioners. On July 31 the Nation and the New Republic were removed from the library shelves.

(Name withheld upon request)
 Bartlesville, Okla., August 2