

Battle of Bartlesville

The Wide Horizon

By Max K. Gilstrap

BARTLESVILLE, OKLA.

Quiet, silver-haired Ruth W. Brown, sitting in the parlor of her white cottage a block from downtown Bartlesville, didn't look like the militant type. But around her head a democracy fight—now being directed toward settlement in the Oklahoma Supreme Court—is being waged.

Bartlesville, oil-rich town of 19,000 inhabitants in northeastern Oklahoma, has mixed feelings about the growing publicity being given its battle in the national press. Some feel it would be better if the city were left to solve its own problems. Others take the attitude that publicity will help clarify the issues and help the city reach a solution that will be nearest right in the present situation.

The city's democracy tussle has involved not only Miss Brown, but a Citizens Committee, library board, the mayor, city commission and district judges.

According to Mayor E. S. Dunaway and Mrs. C. S. Warren, president of the former Citizens Committee, who met with this reporter in a private home, the whole affair grew out of complaints of Bartlesville citizens over the presence in the library of certain periodicals they described as subversive. Deciding to take action, a group of about 40 interested citizens met with the city commissioners in February of 1950. They listed the library's "subversive" publications as including Soviet Russia Today, the Negro Digest, Consumer Reports, the Nation and the New Republic, and recommended that they be removed from the library.

Following the citizens' reports, Mayor R. H. Hudson, who has since passed on, named Mrs. Warren, wife of an oil executive, as chairman of the citizens' group.

Soon thereafter the city commissioners enacted an ordinance placing the administration of the library under control of the commissioners and set up an advisory board. The former board was relieved of responsibility, and on June 15 the new board was appointed.

On July 25 Miss Brown was dismissed by the city commissioners, in the words of Mayor Dunaway, "for insubordination in refusing to answer the commissioners' questions unless they were in writing."

Specifically, Mayor Dunaway, a slender, formal man with an uncompromising reputation approaching that of Miss Brown's, said that Miss Brown told the city commissioners that she had been interviewed by a writer from a national magazine. She said he would tell of the civil-rights issue involved, thus giving Bartlesville derogatory publicity. But she refused, the mayor said, to name either the writer or his publication.

The main issue now in the "Battle of Bartlesville" is whether or not Miss Brown and the old library board can be reinstated. The big argument is whether the original library board, appointed by the city commissioners under provisions of a state statute and which administered the city library, was autonomous. If it was, then the city commissioners' enactment of an ordinance permitting the election of a new board under control of the commission, purported to have been done under a home-rule charter, would be invalid.

An outside district judge—after a local judge had disqualified himself because of local sentiments—rendered a decision in favor of the city commission. Now a defense committee supporting Miss Brown, after bringing action in the district court, is raising funds to carry the case to the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

Meanwhile the intellectual freedom committee of the Oklahoma Library Association has condemned—in the opinion of Mayor Dunaway, without proper investigation—the Bartlesville Citizens Committee for "an act of intolerance."

Mayor Dunaway and Mrs. Warren strongly deny it, but Miss Brown and her supporters believe that the racial question is

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intertwined in the whole affair. Miss Brown, city librarian for 30 years, has long been active in efforts to help secure rights for Bartlesville's 900 Negroes. Her enthusiasm has led her, in the opinion of some, to argue for rights that are presently beyond the compass of the racial outlook in this border state. She caused a local furor, for instance, when she took two Negro high school teachers—one a graduate of Tuskegee Institute and the other from Lincoln University in Missouri—to a downtown drug-store lunch counter, where a waiter refused to serve them. She ran into temporary opposition in taking Negroes with her to church, and in promoting the lecture of Bayard Rustin, Negro Quaker and pacifist, in the city.

Mayor Dunaway and Mrs. Warren said Miss Brown drew further criticisms toward herself by letting Paul Robeson's picture hang for a time in the library; by holding Negro story-telling hours near her library desk and by pressing upon the library's children visitors certain "questionable books" she felt they should read. Some of these activities, it should be stated, have caused even several of Miss Brown's most ardent admirers to wonder if she has not been more courageous than wise—if perhaps her objectives could not be better won by a slower, more considered approach.

Meanwhile, the local YWCA had, for some years, been promoting an interracial program including teen-age activities for Negro girls, mostly on a segregated basis. The "Y," too, ran into opposition from certain citizens who demanded that such activities be discontinued. When the question was put to the membership for a vote, last February, a majority decided the programs should continue. However, the "Y" board, thinking of its financial backing and harmony in the community, last August decided to abandon its interracial program.

A "Y" official explained: "The board felt that in continuing the program harm would be done to advances already made and that the people would return to their original prejudices."

Mayor Dunaway avers that the city commissioners' conflict with Miss Brown has been over "insubordination" and "subversive" publications in the library. On inspection of the city library some weeks ago, this reporter found that for a time, at least, copies of the Nation and New Republic were kept under the counter. An out-of-date issue of Soviet Russia Today was on hand. But Negro Digest was not available. Since then, the Mayor said, the magazines have been put back in the library racks.

Mayor Dunaway acknowledged that the subject of race relations had come up in the city commission's meetings with Miss Brown. He remembered one discussion in which Commissioner W. A. Forrest had remarked to Miss Brown, "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."

A participant in the writer's talks with Mayor Dunaway and Mrs. Warren supported their view that the subject of race had played no part in the controversy, then he proceeded to give his "deep South view" of the Negro, asking three times that he not be quoted.

It has surprised and somewhat embarrassed Bartlesville that its "battle" is continuing to attract national attention. The city would like nothing better than to see an end to the controversy so it can get out of the spotlight.