

Myriad Issues Obscured by Smoke of Library's 'Battle of Bartlesville' Ra



MISS RUTH BROWN
... Fired because

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BARTLESVILLE, Sept. 16—Opposing forces are lining up strength for a showdown in one of the most heated controversies ever to rock this northern Oklahoma community. Smoke from the battle, which began last February, clouds many of the issues, but it is apparent that the central figure is Miss Ruth Brown, 59-year-old former city librarian.

She was fired July 25 by the city commission after nearly 31 years of public library service. The commission claimed Miss Brown, a soft-spoken, white-haired woman, was ousted because of insubordination. Friends of Miss Brown deny that this was the real reason.

Now the fight has been taken to district court where a hearing will be held October 2 before Judge James T. Shipman.

The ruckus began last February 16 at a meeting of the city commission when a group of citizens appeared before the commission and asked that certain magazines in the library be examined to see if they were subversive or communistic. The magazines were Nation, New Republic and Soviet Russia Today.

The library board, composed of six citizens, was asked by the commission to check the periodicals. Those who brought up the issue also were given permission to investigate the literature.

At that meeting there was some discussion of Miss Brown's views and activities regarding equal rights for Negroes, but the mayor ruled this matter incidental to the magazine issue.

The controversy rocked along until May when the reports of both the library board and the citizen's committee were filed with the city commission. The board stated that the administration was good. The



MAYOR E. S. DUNAWAY
... "She was insubordinate"

An hour later she was notified that she had been fired.

On August 7 an estimated 150 persons attended a meeting of the commissioners. Supporters of Miss Brown asked why she had been fired.

"I just kept my temper, which is unusual for me, and said nothing," Mayor Dunaway said. "We expected a large crowd, and I had policemen with tear gas bombs at the dance hall where the meeting was held in case there was trouble."

A spokesman for the friends of Miss Brown said the mayor was asked if she was fired because of her racial views.

"He said no," the spokesman recalled. "He said the same thing when asked if she was fired because of the magazine controversy. When asked if she was fired because of insubordination he said that might be the reason."

"He couldn't cite any specific instances of insubordination when asked to do so," the spokesman said.

On September 12 the backers of Miss Brown filed suit to have the new library ordinance declared void and to have the old law reinstated.

Mayor Dunaway claimed the majority of the citizens are behind the commission.

"Miss Brown's backers are just a minority, about 200 people," he said.

Miss Brown's friends claim the 200 people mentioned by the mayor are just the people who have actively supported her.

"The town is about evenly split over the matter," they said.

The library is now being run by Virginia Laaley, a retired school librarian. No new librarian has been hired to replace Miss Brown.

"We can't find anyone with the

RUTH W. BROWN
ARCHIVE: 2/

board also said that in its opinion Nation and New Republic should be kept in the library. It did say, however, that Soviet Russia Today, an acknowledged Russian propaganda organ, should not be on the library shelves.

The citizens' report, condemning the three magazines, also named the Negro Digest as subversive. A later report by the committee added Consumer's Report to the list of magazines that should be removed.

The city commission apparently took no action. While the investigation was being made by the board, files of Nation and New Republic were taken from the public reading room while their contents were studied.

On June 14 the city commission adopted an ordinance which abolished the old board and set up a new one. Under the old law the library board supervised the hiring and firing of library employees, and board members served for staggered periods of time. The new law gives the city commission full control over the library. Employees may be fired without a statement of cause for removal.

On July 10 the city commissioners announced dissolution of the old library board, composed of Russell W. Davis, Olga A. Beecher, George N. Cade, Darlene A. Essary, Effie H. Frieburger and Richard Kane.

The commission also named the new board, whose members are E. R. Christopher, Mrs. Lloyd Lynd, Dr. Elizabeth Chamberlin, Don Koppel, Russell Blachly and George Cohrs.

Mayor E. S. Dunaway, serving his fifteenth year on the commission, gave this reason for the ouster of the old board:

"Nobody could remember how long they were supposed to serve, so we decided the easiest way to handle it would be to appoint an entirely new board. We told all the members that was why they were replaced."

Mrs. Darlene Essary, former board member, and a strong supporter of Miss Brown, said that the members were given no reason why they were replaced.

"We simply got a letter thanking us for our service and saying that we had been replaced," she said.

A new phase of the battle developed July 25 when Miss Brown was called by Mayor Dunaway to attend an executive session of the commission.

"It was a routine matter," he said. "We just wanted to make sure that she was the right person to run the library."

He admitted that talk about Miss Brown's activities concerning Negroes was one reason for the interview.

Miss Brown's backers say her beliefs that Negroes should have equal opportunities have nothing to do with her job of running the library.

"At that meeting she told us that she would answer questions about operation of the library orally, but any questions about her personal life would be answered in writing if submitted to her in writing."

"She, an employee of the city commission, spoke to us that way. We considered that insubordination."

Miss Brown said no stenographer was at the meeting to take down the questions asked her. She said some of the questions asked pertained to her association with Negroes, and her agreement with the old library board on the matter of the magazines.

proper qualifications, the mayor said.

"They can't get a librarian because no one will work under the new library ordinance," Miss Brown's friends said.

Meanwhile the magazines which were under fire are still available at the library. They are not out in the open, but Miss Lasley will pull them out from under the counter for anyone who asks for them.

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