

**RUTH
WINIFRED
BROWN**
1891-1975



**CENSORSHIP
AND
INTOLERANCE**

In 1950 the Bartlesville City Commissioners fired the librarian, who had served thirty years. She was highly regarded in town and there was no question about her competency. The official reason was the library's subversive literature, but the real reason was her membership in civil rights organizations.

Ruth Winifred Brown was born in July 1891 in Hiawatha, Kansas. She graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1915 and moved to Bartlesville in 1919 to become the librarian. She was passionate about the children and knew them all by name.

In the 1940s Brown became interested in civil rights. She joined a progressive group affiliated with the Congress of Racial Equality, which spearheaded the 1960s Freedom Riders. She began championing equal library access for African-Americans, by "reading to the children of Douglass School" on Saturdays. She associated with African-Americans socially and visited a segregated drugstore lunch counter with two Douglass teachers.

On February 16th some citizens appeared before the city commission accusing Brown of having subversion materials. The questionable magazines – The Nation, The New Republic, and Soviet Russia Today – had been on the shelves for years. On March 9th the newspaper published a picture of the magazines, with the book "The Russians", which had been published in 1943 when we were World War II allies. Ironically, it had been checked out from the Tulsa Library.

The Library Board was asked to examine the library's collections. On July 10th, the board reported they could not find any subversive materials. The commission thanked the board for its service – and summarily dismissed them, replacing them with anti-Brown people.

On July 25th Brown attended a private meeting with the city commissioners. An hour later, she was dismissed by unanimous vote. Her supporters believed that it had nothing to do with her professional work and everything to do with her personal work for racial equality. The American Civil Liberties Union brought national attention to the incident. Two years later the Oklahoma Supreme Court ruled it was not an issue of censorship but civil liberties and intellectual freedom.

Although defeated, Brown was unrepentant. In 1951, she left Bartlesville to teach at an African-American school in Mississippi and later moved to Sterling, Colorado, where she was the librarian until her retirement in 1961. Brown died in 1975 at age 84 in Collinsville.

The saga of Ruth Brown would not die quietly. The 1956 Bette Davis film Storm Center honored her heroism. There were numerous magazine articles, newspaper columns, and an award-winning book The Dismissal of Miss Brown – Civil Rights, Censorship, and the American Library by Louise Robbins published in 2000. In 2007, the Bartlesville Public Library unveiled a bronze bust in her honor.

As a civil rights activist, Ruth Brown challenged the racial taboos of her time. She lost her job because of her courageous struggle. Her story helps us understand the personal and community forces that can lead to censorship and intolerance.