

THE STORY OF THE OKLAHOMA CASES

Since last November, Mrs. Ina Wood, 33, born and raised in a New England Catholic home, and three young men -- one of them her husband -- have been tried and sentenced to 10 years and \$5,000 fine each under the Oklahoma Criminal Syndicalism Law. The men are Robert Wood, 22 year-old Alan Shaw and Eli Jaffee. Mrs. Wood, Shaw and Jaffee were convicted on the charge of "membership in the Communist Party". Robert Wood was convicted for "ownership and possession of books". He too is charged with "membership", while the other three are also indicted on the "ownership" count. All four face new trials and additional 10 year sentences on the charges remaining against them.

These cases arose in August, 1940, out of illegal raids on five private homes and a public bookstore owned by Robert Wood in Oklahoma City. During the raids which occurred on Saturday, August 17, 1940, at least 18 persons, including a 73 year old farmer who had dropped into the bookstore to buy a newspaper, and a family consisting of a mother, father and 17 year old son, together with some 10,000 volumes of books, pamphlets, etc. were seized and thrown into the county jail.

Only the books were given a private cell -- in which they are still locked up.

After a bitter fight which took from September to Christmas, 1940, the International Labor Defense succeeded in forcing reduction of the bail from the fantastic sum of \$840,000 originally set to \$54,500, simultaneously raising the lower sum and freeing the prisoners one by one. All the defendants are now free on bail.

The four trials -- beginning with that of Robert Wood on Sept. 30, 1940 -- and ending with his wife's in June, 1941, followed the same pattern. The prosecution neither proved nor charged any acts of force and violence -- or any overt acts at all. Its entire case was based on "evidence" which consisted of voluminous readings from some of the thousands of books seized. Though there were copies of the Constitution of the United States, biographies of Thomas Jefferson, current works of popular fiction in the store, the readings were limited to works of classical political economy of the Marxist school, books describing life in the Soviet Union, pamphlets describing the lot of the Negroes in America's Black Belt, etc.

Typically, the assistant county prosecutor, John Eberle, would read a passage out of the context from a book by Joseph Stalin, stop in the middle of a sentence and say "and so forth. More revolution -- just revolution."

The juries which rendered the verdicts were hand-picked to the extent that juries in Oklahoma County are chosen from tax-payer lists rather than from the rolls of eligible voters. On at least one jury (in the Jaffee trial, May, 1941) there were 5 admitted members of a vigilante organization called Oklahoma County Civil Guards the avowed aim of which is to "crush Communism."

Eight more men and women face the same kind of trials. (There are 12 defendants in this case.)

Public sentiment -- where the facts of these cases become known -- strongly condemn the prosecutions. That the prosecutors are ready to go to every length to keep the facts from being known is best illustrated by a court order which forbids Robert Wood to speak a single word about the Oklahoma cases outside the State of Oklahoma under penalty of forfeiting his bail (\$15,000) and his right to appeal.

Entirely consistent with this vindictiveness was the treatment of the defendants while they were in jail. The women were thrown in among prostitutes, the men beaten. Further proof of the determined efforts of local officials to "get" their victims is to be found in their unannounced and unwarranted doubling of the bail in the Jaffee and Ina Wood cases, just before they were formally sentenced to the penitentiary. Jaffee had to spend several days in jail before an additional \$5,000 could be raised and rushed to Oklahoma. In the case of Mrs. Wood, the International Labor Defense, forewarned, was prepared and had the necessary funds on hand to secure her immediate release pending appeal. Their bail is now \$10,000 each. Further proof? George Croom, local defense counsel, was arrested on the highway 48 hours before Ina Wood's trial was set to begin -- held for 36 hours, while defense files in his possession were rifled and the FBI questioned him and finally released him without any charges.

All four convictions are now being appealed to the Oklahoma Criminal Court of Appeals. County officials have not yet set definite dates for beginning the next trials in the lower courts.