

GESTAPO ON THE POTOMAC

The capital's police with the help of some congressional Simon Legrees go in for Negro baiting. Reviving the strong-arm squads. Investigations that get nowhere.

WASHINGTON's police department is used to congressional probes. Every few years they take place. Some have been whitewash jobs, plenty have resulted in mud-slinging, and most of them have been publicity plugs for congressmen who pray to the ballot box that the folks back home will think their representatives are cleaning up the capital. But not for many years have Washington's voteless citizens seen the likes of the police investigation by the House that ended July 11 after two weeks of scorching testimony. Witnesses told of policemen spying on fellow officers and tapping each other's telephones. Examples were given of shameful inefficiency and demoralization in the detective bureau. But the sensational features of the probe were less important than the fact—plain to all progressives—that the investigators and police had joined in an unholy alliance with a common purpose: to stir up race hatred by blaming the city's crime situation on the Negroes. The result might well be a return to the days of police "strong-arm squads" with bloody drives on both Negroes and "radicals."

The congressional probe began soon after the discovery on June 16 that Jessie Elizabeth Streiff, twenty-three-year-old War Department clerk, had been raped and strangled. The police haven't discovered the murderer yet. In fact they haven't solved a number of Washington's recent murder mysteries. The Streiff slaying fired public sentiment to a degree of heat that was felt in Congress. Washington's supposed governing body, the Board of Commissioners, had already scheduled an investigation of the police department, but chances were that the inquiry would be tame stuff. So Congress set up an investigating sub-committee of its own, chaired by William T. Schulte of Indiana. One of its members was Rep. F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana, a leading Negro-baiter. Even before the inquiry started, it was apparent from the talk of committee members that the investigation would be used to whip up sentiment against Negroes and "subversives."

Once the probe got under way, the purpose became quite clear. Typical of the committee's general line of questioning was the following:

REPRESENTATIVE COPELAND (Nebraska): Are most of the colored race here gainfully employed?

POLICEMAN CALLAHAN (captain of one of the downtown precincts): They are.

COPELAND: Do they belong to labor organizations?

CALLAHAN: Most of them.

COPELAND: This pressure to bring them here could then come from the CIO, the AFL, and the Communists?

CALLAHAN: The Communists have done considerable work among them.

Most of the testimony by police officials on what they thought about Negroes, Communists, and "pressure groups"—i.e., organizations like the National Negro Congress—was "off the record." However, news of the unholy alliance got around. With several days of the investigation still scheduled, a Negro girl reporter from the Baltimore *Afro-American*, Negro weekly, came into the committee room. Near the close of that day's hearing, Representative Hebert noticed her presence. He and other committee members held a quick, whispered conference, and it was decided to recess for the day. On the following day a secretary announced in a low tone to the sub-committee that the *Afro-American* reporter wanted to get in again. Again there was a whispered conference and Representative Hebert said he would leave the room if the girl were allowed in. But some of the representatives had a different problem: they had to remember the Negro voters in their districts.

Someone then thought of demanding a House press-gallery card from the Negro reporter. Negroes just don't get cards to the press gallery, and besides the *Afro-American* is a weekly—only reporters for daily papers get cards. But a consultation with other reporters present revealed that assistants of reporters covering the hearing for two of Washington's leading newspapers also did not have press-gallery passes. However, the *Afro-American* reporter was quietly told, outside the committee room, that a pass was needed for admission. None of the Washington papers printed this story. Nor did they tell the real reason why the committee abruptly ended its investigation on July 11, several days ahead of schedule. The "affair of the *Afro*" was too much for the congressmen. They themselves had become frightened at the extent to which they had gone to make the Negroes the scapegoat in the congressional game of "What's Wrong with Washington?"

Only a few years ago, the usual practice of the Washington police was to beat their prisoners, with particular sadism toward Negroes. Investigations and protests by progressive organizations put an end to the open beatings and to the "strong-arm squads" which gleefully swept through the city picking up "suspects"—mostly Negroes—from private homes or pool halls, and then beating them. Plenty of brutality is still indulged in by the capital police, but the most flagrant practices were ended by the progressive campaigns. If the Schulte sub-committee has its way, however, the "good old days" will return.

Detective Sergeant Joseph Shimon, on the witness stand, made it clear that he wanted to resume his earlier activities in dealing with "suspects." When Representative Schulte

asked him, "Do you feel such a strong-arm squad is needed in the situation facing Washington now?", Shimon replied: "Yes, but I wouldn't call it a strong-arm squad, but a roving squad of good effective men to clean things up." Schulte then asked: "Why shouldn't we recreate this roving squad . . . and keep the undesirable elements on the move? No responsible citizen would complain, only the people with ulterior motives." Shimon agreed again. If such a squad were established, he informed the investigators, "within thirty days the commissioners will be beating off every Communist group in town." It is well to remember that a "Communist" to Shimon means any progressive who objects to the beating of Negroes.

But for all the agreement among the police that a little beating of prisoners is a fine thing, the department hardly presented a picture of all for one and one for all. Actually, testimony brought out that the department contained a "Gestapo" to spy on the other members of the force. The telephones of fellow officers were tapped, by order of the chief. And the main duty of the spy group was to track down so-called subversive elements. The FBI, the State Department, and the Dies committee offered full support. This witch hunting succeeded in terrorizing individual policemen and demoralizing the entire department. Recently retirements have opened up many vacancies in the police command. The race for these jobs is a free-for-all—and to get them, an aspirant libels his competitor.

Captain Callahan, who was graduated from the FBI police school, told the committee that the department suffered from four main evils: (1) its "Gestapo"; (2) the illiteracy of superiors, whose crude grammar and lack of professional qualifications impair efficiency; (3) the system of selling tickets for police benefits which amounts to "rather thinly veiled extortion"; (4) the individual's ties to certain religious and fraternal bodies—ties so strong that promotions are usually made according to the wishes of outside groups.

All in all, Washingtonians were treated to the sorry farce of a congressional investigation which only confirmed their worst fears about the "guardians of the public." And Washingtonians have no illusion that anything will be done about it. The recommendations which will be made will probably read well but mean very little. So long as Washington citizens can't vote, can't choose their own representatives—so long, in other words, as they are excluded from the workings of democracy—they have little hope of correcting abuses. The most they can expect is another investigation in a year or so.

PAUL ROBERTS.



Picked clean

OKLAHOMA ORDEAL

"What was happening in Oklahoma to my people was enough to break one's heart." The "mystery woman" of the trials tells her story. Ten years in the penitentiary for selling books.

IT WAS on Aug. 17, 1940, that the raids took place in Oklahoma County. Houses were searched and ransacked. A score of people vanished from the streets. Books and private papers were seized and locked up in the county jail. Later a dozen men and women were brought to court, the men manacled together, and charged with criminal syndicalism. Bail was set at \$50,000 to \$100,000 for each person.

Since then a year has passed. Month after month the trials drag through the Oklahoma County Court. Last October Robert Wood, then state secretary of the Communist Party, was sentenced to ten years in prison and fined \$5,000 for the crime of *selling books*. A month later Alan Shaw, who spent his twenty-second birthday in the county jail, received the same outrageous sentence for membership in the Communist Party. In April it was Eli Jaffe, former state organizer of the Workers Alliance. And in June the same ten years, \$5,000 fine were handed out to Ina Wood, the wife of Robert Wood.

During the last few weeks a national protest has arisen over these prosecutions which have sentenced young men and women to the penitentiary for longer terms than are served by the average Oklahoma murderer. But County Atty. Lewis R. Morris, who intends to run for governor next year on the basis of his anti-Communist successes, and the fanatically anti-Communist Asst. County Atty. John Eberle have announced that the trials will continue when the court reopens on September 9. Eight people remain to be tried. The next to come

up, they say, will be Elizabeth Green, social worker from New York.

I AM the "mystery woman" of the Oklahoma trials. Of course, the mystery is of the Hearst Sunday supplement type, completely manufactured.

At the hearing on the bonds, Prosecutor Eberle waved a passport before the judge to show that I was ready to "skip the country at any moment." The passport was unused and had expired.

Through every trial Eberle has flaunted my almost exhausted bank account. He hints at God knows what mysterious connection with Moscow and the Comintern. But Eberle likewise has in his possession my birth certificate which clearly says that I was born in Minnesota, and my income tax returns, showing that I receive a regular income from the estate of my mother who died in December 1936 and that of my grandfather who died in March 1939.

This mystery woman fabrication makes a wonderful yarn which strikes me as very funny.

One of my grandfathers was living with his parents in Missouri before the Civil War. My other grandfather settled in Minnesota in 1873. My people farmed and tailored and taught school and preached in the churches of the Middle West for decades before Oklahoma was opened for settlers. My mother's father was very fond of farming but he liked an eight-hour day. He often told me how at the age of sixteen he left the long hours and

poor returns of farm life and went out as a drummer for sewing machines in the country west of the Mississippi. He always had a way with women when I knew him, and he must have had it even then, for a few years later he was able to open up a drygoods store in a little town in eastern Missouri. Here my mother was born, baptized, and married, and here today she lies in the cemetery.

My father was brought up on a farm in Minnesota. He tells today how he used to walk six miles to school through the snow in the bitter cold. He had shoes but not socks, a suit of clothes but no coat. His people had come from Bohemia, the country later known as Czechoslovakia, which at that time was suffering under the yoke of the Austrian emperor, as it suffers today under the rule of Hitler. My Czech grandparents died before I was old enough to remember anything about them. But I know many stories about my grandfather. When he was a little boy the village priest wanted him to study for the priesthood but he took more to the village tailor who told him wonderful stories. So my grandfather became a tailor instead of a priest. After he came to this country he worked for a while in a trunk factory in Wisconsin and it was there, I believe, that my father was born. Then he bought a farm in Minnesota. Later, as the boys were growing up, the State of Minnesota established a university. Grandfather Z. moved into the city and opened up a tailor shop so that his sons could have an education.

My family was part of the Middle West,

growing up with it. They prospered with its expansion. They had no ambition to be millionaires. When my grandfather in Missouri thought he had enough money to last him the rest of his life, he sold his store, retired, then went back to farming on an eight-hour day. My father became a teacher in a university and later a well known scientist. The Middle West of the nineteenth century offered to my people all that they wanted—comfortable homes and a chance to make a living at a congenial occupation. That is all, I think, that most people want out of life.

FOR SOME YEARS I had been a social worker in New York City, when I decided to move to Oklahoma. That was in February 1940. I knew that all was not as it had been in the Southwest when I was there many years ago. My cousin Otie had lost his farm through foreclosure despite all the money my grandfather had sent him, and despite the fact that he was known to be a hard-working farmer with a fine farm. My grandfather's farm wasn't bringing in any money at all. The town where he had lived for nearly half a century had dwindled in population. It was a farm town. Business depended on the farmers, and apparently the farmers no longer had any money.

And I knew, too, that Oklahomans had never had it easy. My grandfather has told me how, a few years after Oklahoma was opened for settlers, streams of homesteaders had been driven out by repeated droughts and grasshopper plagues; they fled from starvation and went back east through Missouri, selling their claims for anything that they could get for them. But that had been a long time ago. Oklahoma had good land and rich land, and there was a time when Oklahomans enjoyed more comfortable years.

I love Oklahoma. The land stretches away endlessly with a gentle roll. And the people of Oklahoma are like my people—quiet, slow-speaking folk who go to church on Sunday and make friends with whoever comes along. No matter how long a Westerner lives in the East, he is always a stranger. When you get back to the West, you know you've reached home.

But what was happening in Oklahoma to my people was enough to break one's heart. The men and women who had gone to Oklahoma to farm its soil were living on dump heaps in shacks made of wooden boxes and on whatever could be dug out of the garbage. They had seen their land rise up in the wind and blow away. The mortgage companies and the insurance companies and the big landlords had their farms, and the tractors had driven them off the land and nobody offered them a job selling sewing machines or anything else. One farmer out of every six was driven off his land in Oklahoma between 1935 and 1940.

But land is not the only thing that Oklahoma has to offer as a means of livelihood. They say there is enough coal in Oklahoma to last the entire United States for at least 200 years. And there is oil aplenty. The derricks out in the open country rise like a new

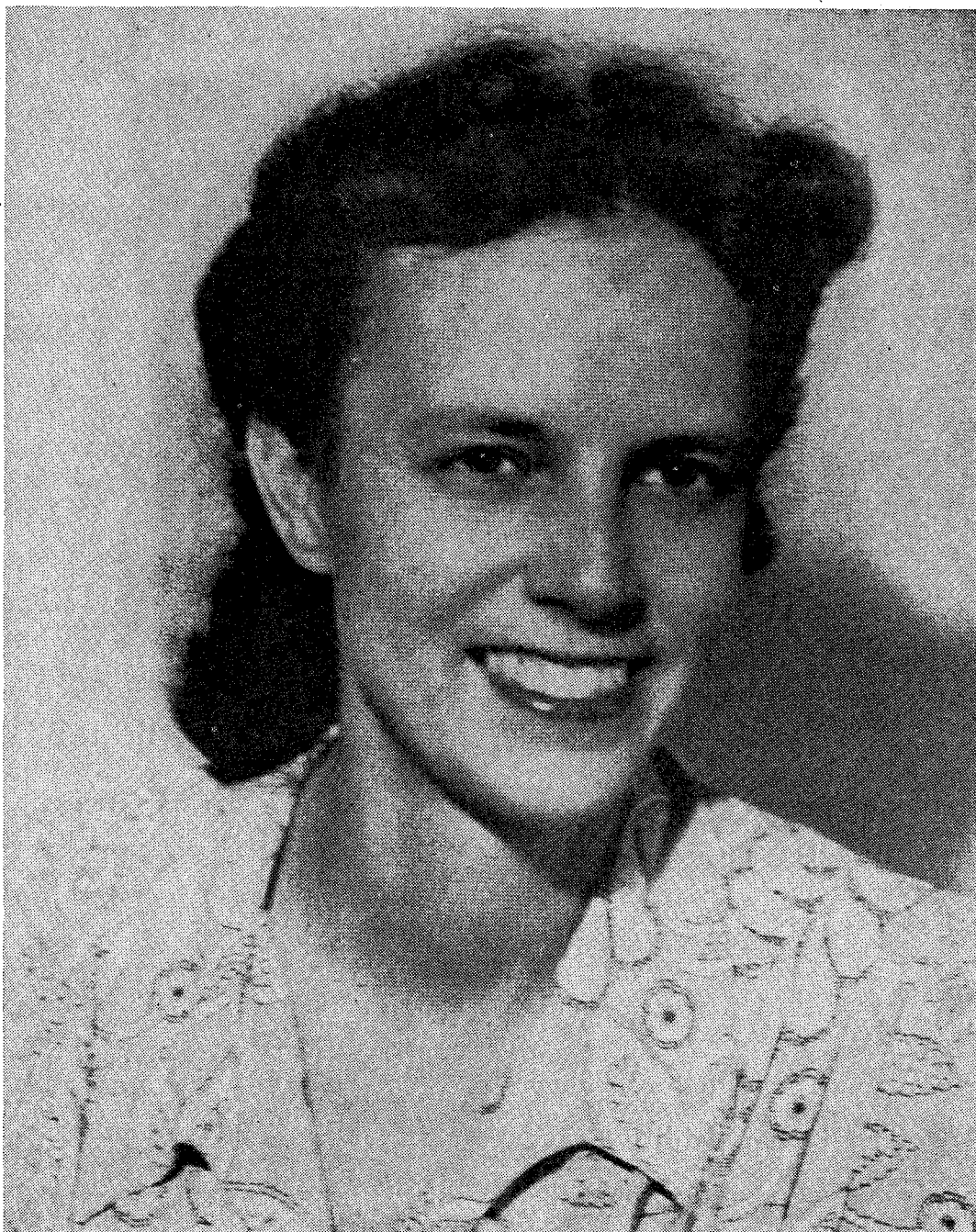
kind of forest. In Oklahoma City, they cover the entire east side of the town. Millions of barrels of oil have been shipped out of the state. But the miners, who are the oldest settlers—they came with the railroads long before Oklahoma territory was opened to homesteaders—are almost always unemployed. And the oil millions flow into the pockets of a few, while the industry gives employment to only about 35,000 of Oklahoma's workers.

When I reached Oklahoma one person out of every ten able to work was unemployed. What I saw meant this to me: that the West, which had brought opportunity to my family and to me and to many others, now brought starvation and disappointment. Not only were people denied the opportunity to work but, in a land with plenty for all, food was refused them. These people were my people. And just as my grandfather tried to help my cousins through the long years of farm hardship, it seemed to me that I must do what I

could to see that the people of Oklahoma got something like half a chance in America.

Was I to divide up what little money I had? But that would have amounted to only a few cents for each and would have helped nobody. Besides, that is charity—not the kind of which the Bible speaks, but the kind of which the Rockefellers speak. What my people in Oklahoma needed was not charity but things to which they had a right. So I did what seemed right for me to do, as an American and as a granddaughter of pioneers. It landed me in the Oklahoma County jail and today I face trial on charges of "criminal syndicalism" and advocating the overthrow of those American principles which I was trying to defend.

IT MAY BE I who will go on trial in September. Or the County Attorney may change his mind. It may be Herbert Brausch, or Goldie Brausch, or C. A. Lewis, or the old farmer



Elizabeth Green