

The Anti-Communist Hysteria and the Academy: The Luella Mundel Affair

The American Legion post in Fairmont, West Virginia, a hillside town seventy-five miles southwest of Pittsburgh, held an Americanism rally a year ago last March. Among those present was Dr. Luella Mundel, chairman of the Art Department of the state teachers' college in Fairmont. During the question period after the speeches Dr. Mundel asked several pointed questions and expressed resentment at the implication that college faculties are loaded with Communists. She thereby started a chain of events which included her own dismissal and that of the college president who defended her, six faculty resignations, a bitter split in the Legion post and a twice-tried lawsuit. Charging that Mrs. Thelma Loudin, a townswoman and member of the State Board of Education, had called her a "poor security risk" and an "atheist," Dr. Mundel sued for slander. The second trial ended on July 16, when a jury of Mrs. Loudin's neighbors agreed with her attorney, United States Senator Matthew Mansfield Neely, that the defendant had only done her duty.

The testimony at this second trial bristled with contradictions which must be laid either to extraordinary misunderstandings or to perjury. The witnesses agreed on very little. It seems certain, however, that Fairmont State College has long suffered from a feud between Dr. George Hand, its president, and Mrs. Loudin, the local representative of the Board of Education, and

that the Mundel case was a victory for Mrs. Loudin. Until last year, Dr. Mundel took little interest in this fight. She did not know Mrs. Loudin, and apart from her duties as a department head, she saw Dr. Hand rarely. As her performance at the Legion rally indicated, she was no diplomat. She was inclined to be sharp in personal conversation, and even Hand thought she used poor judgment at times. Yet it is clear that she was devoted to her work. She thought politics dull; she was a registered Democrat, but she didn't even bother to vote in 1948. After her dismissal she joined the American Civil Liberties Union, but at the time of the Americanism rally she belonged only to a few professional organizations.

Five weeks after that event Dr. Hand and the Board of Education held their annual budget meeting in Charleston. Ordinarily Dr. Mundel's name would not have been introduced, but Mrs. Loudin, who had talked with the Legion commander, brought it up. What happened is a matter of dispute. At the second trial Mrs. Loudin, supported by other board members, testified that she asked Dr. Hand if he thought Dr. Mundel was a good security risk, amended this to exclude any suggestion of communism, and then authorized him to investigate her abilities as a teacher. Dr. Hand says that Mrs. Loudin flatly labeled his Art Chairman a poor security risk and that he requested and was granted permission to investigate her as he saw fit.

In any event, he asked the FBI to check her. The FBI did and reported nothing against her. Dr. Hand then interviewed students and faculty about her teaching abilities. Comments were favorable with one notable exception; a discontented subordinate of Dr. Mundel's attacked her in a letter to Mrs. Loudin. At the July meeting of the board, Dr. Hand, disregarding this criticism, presented a report recommending that Dr. Mundel be retained with a raise in pay. The board said that this was not at all the kind of report it wanted and reversed him on all counts. Dr. Hand says Mrs. Loudin suggested Dr. Mundel was an atheist at this meeting, but Mrs. Loudin denies it; indeed, she and the rest of the board testified in court that they decided not to accept Hand's report because he had himself made unfavorable comments about the art teacher. Mrs. Loudin was asked on the stand to explain why the president should make such remarks about a person he was supporting. She replied that it was "strangely unaccountable"-which it was.

Dr. Mundel learned of her dismissal through the United Press, which reported she had been fired "for the good of the college." (No malice was intended, a board member blandly explained a year later; "everything we try to do is for the good of the school.") She wrote the board asking for a hearing, and her request was supported by a petition signed by 125 students. The request was denied, and the petition was not acknowledged.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Loudin had given the subordinate's denunciatory letter to a local newspaper, which published it on August 15. According to sworn testimony, she informed a faculty member who contemplated a pro-Mundel petition that anyone who questioned the board "would do well to move along and move while the moving was good," and told a local woman that Dr. Mundel belonged to a "dangerous clique at

the college." Mrs. Loudin, also under oath, denied having made these statements.

Claiming that she was unable to find a job owing to the circumstances of her dismissal, Dr. Mundel filed suit in September 1951. The case came up in the Marion County Court at Christmas, and the trial was a wild one. Senator Neely, a spellbinder of the Bryan School, demanded a return to the "old fashioned Americanism of our forefathers" and relentlessly cross-examined Dr. Mundel about her religious faith until she fled from the courtroom in tears. This indirectly brought an end to the trial; for the following Sunday Fairmont's Episcopal minister told his congregation the trial was a "farce" comparable to the Inquisition. His remarks were published in the next morning's newspaper, and Neely demanded, and got a mistrial. After it was granted, twenty-four Fairmont ministers issued a statement rebuking the Episcopalian.

In the six months that elapsed before the second trial, Hand was summarily bounced, as was his college librarian, who had been conducting a fund raising campaign for Dr. Mundel. Six faculty members resigned. Circumstances were therefore greatly altered when the court began to choose a jury on July 7 last-a date which prevented any decent newspaper coverage since all eyes were on Chicago. Officers of the local Legion provided Senator Neely with \$2,500 from the post treasury for Mrs. Loudin's defense.

The plaintiff's testimony was much as it had been in December, Dr. Mundel herself, frail and bespectacled, sat as she had then, looking quietly into her lap while Senator Neely denounced her as an enemy of the people. The Senator answered defenders of academic freedom by comparing Dr. Mundel-or Mrs. P.H.D. Mundel, as he called her-to an incompetent milkmaid. A farmer has a right to fire a maid who can't milk, he said, and the Board of Education

was therefore justified in firing the plaintiff. Mrs. Loudin firmly denied every charge against her, and her colleagues paraded to the stand to support the thesis that Hand was responsible for the whole mess. It turned out that she had little need of their support, for Judge J. Harper Meredith ruled that her statements as board member were privileged, unless, of course, they were malicious. In his closing address Senator Neely said the question was whether schools should be operated by men and women of goodwill or by "agnostics, Socialists and screwballs." The jury deliberated less than two hours and announced for the defendant.

On the Sunday after the trial two of Dr. Mundel's supporters hurriedly summoned police to her apartment. She had not answered their urgent knocking, and a strong odor was seeping into the hall. Forcing an entrance, the policemen found

her in a gas-filled bathroom; the window was tightly shut and the door caulked. No charges were brought, but after a night with friends, she was accused of attacking her hostess with a letter opener. This time she was held in the Fairmont jail on charges of lunacy and assault, under constant supervision until her sister arrived to take her home to Iowa. She has since been reported missing there.

The scars on Fairmont's civic pride remain. Morale at the college is shattered; the Legion membership is in an uproar over the \$2,500; and the case has brought considerable unfavorable notice to Fairmont. Before the second trial a local columnist suggested that the city hire a press agent to counteract the impression it was a hot-bed of bigotry-to which Dr. Mundel, then still good-humored, replied that perhaps the best way to avoid giving such an impression would be to be unbigoted.