

The Life of Anne Braden, Part One: Finding Her Way to the Movement

By Lynn Burnett

Anne Braden is one of the greatest examples we have of a White Southerner, steeped in the culture of segregation, breaking free from that culture and becoming a powerful voice for Black liberation. Born in 1924 and raised in a well-off family in Alabama, Anne questioned segregation as a child and again while in college, before finally making a clean break with White supremacy as a journalist in the mid-1940s. When the civil rights movement broke out a decade later, Anne was one of the few figures that White Southerners could look to as an example of how to liberate themselves from their own oppressive culture and beliefs, and to work for racial justice. Her life, however, has lessons for us all: for we all benefit from understanding how White people can break free from the grip of racism, stand in solidarity with people of all colors, and come together to build a better world.

Childhood: the First Stage of Questioning

Like many Southerners, Anne Braden grew up in a deeply religious household. As a child, she was moved by Christian teachings of universal brotherhood and sisterhood and of loving one's neighbor. In her church hung an image of Jesus, surrounded by all the children of the world, of all colors, learning his teachings together. The image stood out to the young Anne because in her experience, children of different colors did not learn together or go to church together. The world that she lived in didn't seem to match up with Jesus's teachings.

Nor did segregation match up with Anne's sense of fairness as a child. When Anne's clothes were worn out, her family passed them down to a little Black girl who was bigger than Anne... so the clothes were not only worn out but were too tight. Growing up in a paternalistic culture, the fact that little Black kids were often given the discarded clothes of little White kids was viewed by the adults in Anne's life as an act of compassion and generosity. But the young Anne viewed it as unfair. She imagined being the little Black girl, and she knew she wouldn't be happy to have to wear those tight, worn-out clothes. However, when Anne asked questions about the poverty she saw amongst African Americans, the adults in her life told her that Black people were a "simpler race" with fewer needs, and were "happy with the way things were." Anne, however, could never fully believe this.

Anne would later insist that she was not an exceptional child for questioning segregation. Rather, this process of questioning was a normal part of growing up in the White South. However, in the decades before the civil rights movement forced the conversation, White Southerners rarely discussed segregation: it was simply an accepted fact of life. Those who did dare to question it found themselves marginalized and isolated, or even forced out of the region under threat of violence and economic retaliation. Anne didn't become aware that people questioned segregation at all until she went to college... an opportunity many White

Southerners, and especially White Southern women, did not have. In the White South, with its culture of silence around racial disparity, there were few opportunities for children to explore their concerns about fairness and justice. As they grew up, they usually acclimated into the culture of White supremacy they were raised in. Anne Braden often emphasized that the same would have happened to her had other events in her life not unfolded.

College: Laying the Foundations for an Anti-Racist Consciousness

When Anne was a teenager, she began to worry that she was unpopular and unattractive. She realized that boys were often attracted to girls who made them feel like THEY were the smart ones, and so she began to downplay her intelligence. Indeed, she quickly became popular after making this decision. When the time came to go to college, she still had boys on her mind, and so rejected the idea of going to a women's college. However, World War II had begun while she was in high school. In 1940 Congress initiated a peacetime draft, and Anne realized that given the likelihood of the U.S. entering the war, that few men would be on campus. She changed her mind and made a decision that would alter the course of her life: she decided to go to a women's college after all.

In an environment where she didn't feel the need to downplay her intelligence, Anne was able to find herself. Instead of rejecting her love of learning, she embraced it, later writing that "I don't think I knew the excitement of an idea until I got to college." She studied literature and journalism and became the editor in chief of the college newspaper, writing about her great passion for moral ideals and the tremendous struggles against fascism and for democracy happening overseas. Anne won many awards for her work and graduated from Stratford Women's College as valedictorian.

It was at Stratford that Anne discovered her first female mentors... women who served as role models and who helped Anne expand her vision of her own possibilities as a woman. Anne had grown up in a society where the roles of women were profoundly limited, and where life was even further restricted by notions of individualism that reduced the purpose of life to personal success. The female professors Anne was drawn to, however, emphasized that life was just as much about building stronger communities, and ultimately a better world. Personal happiness was found not through individualistic pursuits, but through contributing to the world and building meaningful connections with others. It was a vision that resonated with Anne, and reminded her of the Christian teachings she felt so compelled by.

Anne had been five years old when the Great Depression began, and although her own father held a steady job and their family was economically secure, she had strong memories of endless streams of beggars getting off the trains going door-to-door begging. She was also aware, as a child, that African Americans rode these trains as well, but never dared to beg in White neighborhoods. As a teenager, she

understood the rising threats of fascism overseas; of global destabilization; and finally of world war. The notion of a life devoted to something larger than ones own self spoke to Anne's religious sensibilities, but it seemed especially important given the dire times Anne was living through. She was drawn to these professors, and they took her under their wings. One of them began inviting Anne to intellectual gatherings, where Anne was introduced to the professor's sister, Harriet Fitzgerald. Harriet became the first person Anne Braden met who did not merely disagree with segregation, but took an active stance against it.

Harriet had a female lover in New York, and may have had romantic feelings for Anne as well. She made a special effort to help Anne cultivate herself as an intellectual – introducing her to the works of influential thinkers of the era, including Freud and Marx – and sought to help Anne overcome the prejudices she was raised with. Although Anne did not share Harriet's romantic desires for women, she was able to experience a deep emotional support from Harriet that made all of her previous experiences with men seem superficial. Anne described their connection as a kind of intense intellectual excitement she had not yet experienced, later expressing that “before I met Harriet, I never knew that kind of excitement was possible between two human beings. Later I told her that I didn't think I would have ever been able to have the kind of relationship I had with Carl [her future husband] had it not been for her. Never after that have I felt any sexual interest in someone who did not excite me intellectually.”

Anne had a major racial awakening when she went to visit Harriet in New York. Harriet – hoping to help Anne break free from her segregationist upbringing – arranged for her to have dinner with a Black woman from the South, under the pretense that they had similar intellectual interests. Anne later wrote: “I went to the meeting with some misgivings. Never in my life had I eaten with a Negro.” Anne later realized that the woman was well aware of how she would have felt as a White woman from the South, and was consciously trying to put Anne at ease. The Black woman was, essentially, working with Harriet to help Anne process, work through, and eventually break free from her White supremacist upbringing.

The two women soon fell into deep conversation... and once they did, Anne ceased to think about the fact that she was White and her conversationalist was Black. They were simply two people having an excellent conversation. Suddenly, in the middle of the conversation, Anne became aware of the fact that she had forgotten about race entirely. A shockwave rippled through her: there was no actual “race problem!” It was an illusion. She later wrote that at this moment, “some heavy shackles seemed to fall from my feet.” The chains that prevented her from being able to embody the spiritual visions she was drawn to as a child – of loving one's neighbor as oneself; as striving for universal sisterhood and brotherhood – were starting to break.

By this time, Anne had transferred to Randolph-Macon Women's College – a larger school, where she would be even more intellectually challenged. Here, she studied

dance, became aware of the deep connections between her physical, mental, and spiritual health, and fell in love with the Russian authors Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. She began running with an “artsy” crowd, and amongst this crowd – many of whom consciously thought of themselves as outsiders – it was common to oppose segregation. Anne’s conversation in New York, combined with her participation in this crowd, led her, for the first time, to develop a conscious stance against segregation. A third and final element in the development of that consciousness during her college years was World War II: as Anne later wrote, “We were aware that in fighting Hitler, we were fighting a racist ideology, though I don’t think we used that word ‘racist.’ It didn’t escape people I knew that those ideas about racial superiority were akin to what we had here in the South.”

By the time Anne graduated from college in 1945 – shortly before the end of the war – she had developed an anti-racist consciousness. However, she had not yet *acted* on that consciousness, nor did she know how to. She had yet to meet people who were engaged in actual struggle, and was not even aware that major struggles against racial oppression were sparking up all over the South. All of this would soon change.

Journalism: Coming Face-to-Face With Brutal Realities

Following her graduation, Anne returned home to live with her parents and became a full time reporter examining local political issues. When fascism was finally defeated overseas, a sense of euphoria swept through her: democratic ideals had won the day! Authoritarianism had been defeated! However, as Black GI’s returned from the war, they made it clear that they had not fought and died overseas fighting Hitler’s racist authoritarianism, only to return home and be subjected to the racist authoritarianism of Jim Crow. They would not rest until democracy was extended to their people as well. Lynchings skyrocketed as Black men in uniform fought for the basic rights to democracy for Black Americans. As a reporter who had to chronicle these events, Anne’s euphoria about the success of democracy quickly faded.

She sank into depression. Without her college community and her easy access to professors and mentors, Anne didn’t know where to turn. Her concerns could not easily – or even safely – be discussed. Like many White Southerners who were troubled by segregation, Anne felt alone. Not yet aware of the communities and organizations that embodied her newly found anti-racist values, she turned inwards. Without community, she threw herself into work and into writing... but also into isolation.

It did not help that she was back home. As African Americans increasingly stood up for their rights after the war, many White Southerners reacted by taking increasingly stronger stances for keeping things the way they were. Anne’s father was one of those people. Both of her parents were deeply disturbed by Anne’s newfound anti-racist perspectives, and her father expressed that he regretted ever sending her to college. During one of their many arguments, Anne expressed that

she supported a federal anti-lynching law. Her father exploded: “We ought to have a good lynching every once and a while to keep the nigger in his place!” Although he later regretted saying it, the outburst shook Anne to her core. She had always seen her father as a gentle and loving man, and she felt confident that he would never actually join a lynch mob. Still, here was an otherwise good-hearted man who had justified murder in his own heart and mind. It was one of the key moments in Anne’s life that caused her to think of White supremacy as something that distorted the souls of White people; that caused them to act against the spiritual and ethical values they believed in, and that made it impossible for them to live out truly ethical or spiritual lives. White supremacy, for Anne, became something that White people needed to free *themselves* from.

Anne escaped the tensions of her home by taking a job in Birmingham in the summer of 1946, reporting on the events at the courthouse. Bull Connor – who would later go down in history for ordering fire-hoses and attack dogs to be turned on civil rights protestors in 1963 – was the police commissioner. Well known for his brutality, Connor’s police forces had recently murdered five Black veterans who had dared to stand up for their rights after returning from war. Anne witnessed Black veterans lined up at the courthouse, trying to register to vote. The same men came week after week, without success. She wanted to write an article about these voter registration attempts, but the newspaper didn’t consider it worth reporting on.

As Anne covered the events at the courthouse, she was forced to realize that there was not one legal system, but two. There, she saw that if a Black man killed a White man, the outcome for the Black man – no matter what the circumstances, such as clear cases of self-defense – would be execution. On the other hand, she saw that if a White man killed a Black man, the judge would almost always rule that the killing had been justified. She saw that if a White man raped a Black woman, the case was simply dismissed: it was not even worth discussion. But if a Black man so much as looked at a White woman in an “improper” way, it was usually ruled as “assault with intent to rape.” Braden reported on one case in which a Black man was charged with “assault with intent to rape,” when he had looked at a White woman in an “insulting way” from *across the street*. It would be nearly a decade until the case of Emmett Till – murdered for whistling at a White woman in the summer of 1955 – brought such injustices before the eyes of the nation, and helped to ignite the civil rights movement.

One day, a deputy at the courthouse began flirting with Anne. Hoping to impress her, he opened a cabinet drawer and pulled out the skull of a Black man who – he hinted, with a proud gleam in his eye – he had helped kill. He told her that the murder would, of course, never be solved. Anne later wrote: “I looked at the skull. It became larger before my eyes. It filled the room and the world. It became a symbol of the death that gripped the South.” The death – the murder – that her own, loving father supported. Anne was filled with horror and rushed out of the room. The violence against Black people in the Deep South was so casual it was usually not even deemed worthy of reporting or discussing, but now Anne found herself facing

it fully. It was too much for her. After eight months of facing brutal truths in Birmingham, she took another newspaper job in the Upper South: in Louisville, Kentucky, where she had been born before moving to the Deep South as a baby. It would be in Louisville that she encountered civil rights activists for the first time, and met people who helped pull her into the movement.

Carl Braden

When Anne first arrived in Louisville, she felt a great sense of relief at the absence of brutality that she perceived. Unlike the constant, casual violence of the Deep South, there had been no outright racial violence in Louisville for a long time. The buses were not segregated. African Americans could vote, which meant that there were politicians who actually represented Black interests. Unlike in the Deep South, Black issues were not made invisible to the White community, but were actually reported on. There were even White people who openly opposed racial oppression. However, most spaces were still segregated, including parks, hotels, restaurants, theatres, hospitals, and schools. And as was true throughout the country, African Americans were restricted to living in impoverished neighborhoods, and suffered from rampant job discrimination. However, the mere fact that there was *any* degree of desegregation and *any* degree of Black political power was what initially jumped out at Anne.

On her first day of work at the *Louisville Times* – March 31, 1947 – Anne was introduced to her new colleagues... including the man who would become her future husband, Carl Braden. Unlike Anne, who had been born into a very comfortable upper-middle-class life, Carl had been born into a struggling working-class family. His father had been a railroad worker who worked such long hours he almost never saw his family. A union man, he lost his job when Carl was eight years old for participating in a failed strike demanding better working conditions. For months afterwards, the family ate almost nothing but beans. One of Carl's dominant childhood experiences was of hunger – in the deep, psychological sense of not knowing when you would be able to get food to relieve it. For Carl, hunger meant growing up early. He became deeply aware of injustice... of the fact that many people, like his family, worked hard and still had nothing, and yet were harshly judged as poor White trash by families exactly like Anne's. Carl joined gangs and learned to fight when he was very young. Like so many others, he also learned to drink and smoke to alleviate the pain of having ones dignity ripped away. He would continue to drink, smoke, and fight until World War II, when he decided to swear off it all to better commit himself to his work as a journalist and labor organizer.

Carl had been a very thoughtful child – a voracious reader who spent hours listening to the conversations of his large extended family, who often gathered around the kitchen table for discussion. Carl's father was an agnostic socialist who had named his son after Karl Marx; whereas his mother and her extended family were all devout Catholics. Carl's father was not anti-religious, but believed that matters of the afterlife and questions about God were beyond the human capacity to

understand. He stayed quiet when conversations turned towards religion, but often mentioned at the end of religious conversations that Jesus's teachings seemed right in alignment with socialism to him. The young Carl agreed with his father. They were all talking about loving thy neighbor, about the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind that his future wife Anne had also been drawn to as a child. Carl's heroes, growing up, were Christian saints on the one hand, and socialist leaders on the other. To him, they seemed to hold the same ideals.

When Carl was not out roaming around with his gang getting into fights, he was at home absorbed in books. His parents had only gone to elementary school, and they pushed their children to do well in school so they could have a better life than them. Carl went to a Catholic school, and when he was thirteen the nuns encouraged him to put his intellectual abilities in the service of God and to begin studying to become a priest. Carl accepted this as an honor that would help him fulfill his young desire to live a life of social responsibility. However, by the time he was sixteen, he found himself rebelling against the church, and soon dropped out of school entirely. He had not turned against the church's teachings, however, but was rather rebelling against the structures of authority within his church, school, family, and ultimately, society. Looking for work as a young, rebellious, working-class intellectual, Carl gravitated towards journalism, just as Anne would later do. He was given the task of reporting on the police department, where he witnessed incredible corruption and brutality. Eight years older than his future wife Anne, Carl was soon reporting on the Great Depression, including the intense labor struggles of local impoverished coal miners... all while still a teenager. The combination of his upbringing and the things he witnessed as a reporter led him to become a devoted labor organizer.

Interracial Organizing and the Commitment to Activism

When Anne was first introduced to Carl, he was covering labor issues for the newspaper, while she was covering education. However, from time to time, Anne would help Carl on his labor reporting. When she showed interest in the subject, he began giving her books to read on socialism and the history of labor organizing. She was soon attending union meetings with him. Anne had been raised to believe that people like her family were well off because they were smart, disciplined, and hard working, and that if people were poor it meant they had made bad decisions or were lazy. Anne had long doubted these class prejudices, and understanding the history of labor organizing – and getting to know the organizers themselves – destroyed them completely. She came to see the working class as another exploited group suffering from negative stereotypes, who, like African American freedom fighters, were dignified, intelligent, and fighting hard for the right to live a decent life. Carl helped Anne commit herself to ending class oppression, and she helped him commit himself to the battle against White supremacy.

One of the unions that Carl introduced her to - The United Farm Equipment Workers – was interracial: it demanded equal treatment for Blacks and for Whites within the union, as well as in wages and working conditions on the job. It was one of the first

places Anne was exposed to where Blacks and Whites were equal in the way they *spoke* to one another. In the South, it was dangerous for African Americans to speak openly and honestly with Whites, especially when it came to criticizing racist attitudes. The United Farm Equipment Workers union was the first place where Anne experienced African Americans speaking frankly to Whites. It was the first place where African Americans would call her out, correct her, and point out any racist assumptions or behaviors she had. She later expressed that she must have been “like a bull in a china shop” during this period, when she was navigating interracial and Black spaces for the first time. She had had almost no experience interacting with African Americans, and did not even know how to correctly pronounce “Negro...” because everyone around her had always said “nigger.”

Anne came into contact with civil rights organizations during this same period. As a reporter covering education, she investigated the efforts of the local NAACP to desegregate Kentucky’s colleges, and used this as an opportunity to begin building relationships with the NAACP. The increase in civil rights militancy as Black veterans returned from war had doubled the number of NAACP chapters in Kentucky, and Anne soon found herself attending civil rights meetings. Once again, she found herself in spaces where Black people would not automatically defer to her and stay silent when they disagreed with her, which, up until this period, had been her entire life experience as a White person. It was a dramatic experience for Anne, forcing her to realize that all of her previous interactions with Black people had been false and inauthentic: they had never felt safely able to show her, as a White person, their true thoughts and feelings. Anne came to value these interracial organizing spaces as crucial spaces of authenticity and honesty. But, most importantly for her, she felt they were spaces where Black people would treat *her* as a human being... instead of showing her only the façade of deference.

As Anne moved beyond mere interactions with Black people in these organizing spaces, and began developing actual friendships, she felt her commitment to racial justice deepen. She also felt increasingly alienated from the world she had grown up in, from her family, and from her previous friends. She later described this year – 1947 – as a painful period of “turning myself inside out” and being pulled “up by the roots.” She began looking at her previous values as a type of prison that she still had yet to fully escape. By 1948, she had discarded many old beliefs and attitudes, but she was not yet sure what they would be replaced with. One of the answers came through re-evaluating her work. Anne now questioned whether journalism was the greatest service she could offer. Deciding it was not, she quit her job and threw herself into a life of organizing and of activism.

The Case of Andrew Wade

Anne and Carl quickly came to feel that they were meant to be together, and married in the spring of 1948. Anne was twenty-four years old. She later wrote that “we were joining our lives to bring about a better world.” Being together made them both much stronger and more effective: Carl used to say about their dynamic that

“one and one made more than two.” The two of them stepped away from the newspaper together, deciding that they wanted to be fully engaged in social issues, rather than just writing about them. Throughout the late forties and early fifties, they dedicated themselves to a number of causes. They created a Labor Information Center, and taught publication skills to union members. They organized against the growing nuclear arms race, and gathered support for W.E.B. Du Bois – the founder of the NAACP and one of the greatest Black intellectuals of all time – when he was put on trial as a “subversive” for opposing the escalation of the Cold War. Anne played a major role in the Interracial Hospital Movement, which developed after a Black man who had been in a car accident died because a segregated hospital refused to serve him. It was the first civil rights campaign in which Anne played a major organizing role, and it succeeded at desegregating Kentucky’s hospitals.

Anne also began working with the radical Civil Rights Congress, travelling and speaking about racial inequities in the justice system and the ways that Black men were often sent to death for false accusations, while White men regularly got away with the murder and rape of Black people. For these activities, she was briefly incarcerated for the first time, at the age of twenty-six. Her arrest led her to realize that her racial convictions placed her “at odds with a power structure from which she had always previously benefitted,” to use the words of historian Catherine Fosl. Anne also received an important piece of advice which would give direction to the rest of her life: after reporting to the founder of the Civil Rights Congress – William Patterson – about her activities speaking at Black churches and writing in Black newspapers, Patterson told her that it was White people whose minds needed to be changed, not Blacks. She contemplated his advice. Working to organize White people to understand and oppose racism eventually became her life’s work.

Anne Braden was thrown into infamy, however, before she had a chance to embrace the work she would one day be most remembered for. In March of 1954, a Black World War II veteran named Andrew Wade approached the Bradens for help. Wade had been trying to purchase a home outside of the segregated Black communities of Louisville – he simply wanted a nicer, larger home for his growing family than was available in Black neighborhoods. Wade had a successful business, and came close to closing a deal on a few houses... but as soon as he met the real estate agents and they saw that he was Black, he was rejected. Wade asked some of his White friends if they would be willing to purchase the house under their name, and then transfer it to him. They refused. Wade then approached the Bradens. He did not know them personally, but they had developed a reputation for supporting Black causes by that time. They did not hesitate to support him.

The Bradens understood that the move would cause controversy, but they also believed the plan would work. Louisville was segregated and unequal, but it wasn’t violent. Compared to the Deep South, race relations were very quiet. As for Andrew Wade, he expected that his White neighbors would be angry at first, but would eventually come to know and respect him and his family. The intensity of the events that transpired took them all by surprise.

The house that Andrew Wade selected had recently been built by a man named James Rone. Rone was not a large-scale builder, but a working man with calloused hands in his mid forties, who had acquired some land with the dream of building a small community. He was building up other houses on a street he had proudly named after himself – Rone Court – including one for his son Buster. Building up this little community out in the countryside was his big dream, and Anne felt guilty for not telling him they were purchasing a home for a Black family. Anne valued honesty and trustworthiness very deeply, and was troubled by purposefully deceiving someone. Reflecting later on her feelings, she realized that while buying into White supremacy made it impossible for White people to live out their own ethical and spiritual values, White supremacy also made it impossible for her, as a committed antiracist, to be perfectly ethical. She could not simultaneously deal honorably with Andrew Wade and James Rone at the same time.

When the Black Wade family moved in instead of the White Braden family, James Rone panicked. He called his friends, and Andrew Wade watched from his new house as car after car arrived at the Rones. There were soon twenty cars, and a crowd of people milling around James Rone’s home. They did not, however, approach the Wade’s house. At around midnight the crowd instead headed over to the Bradens.

Carl answered the door, and James Rone asked if he had sold the house to “coloreds.” Carl said that he had. Rone explained that there weren’t any Black people out there. The Braden’s sale must have been a mistake. Carl responded that color shouldn’t matter; that Black people, like all people, should have the right to move wherever they could afford to move. Someone in the crowd then yelled, “But I’ve saved up for years to buy the house I own out there!” They were concerned that if Black people moved into the neighborhood, the value of their homes would dramatically decline. Carl replied that Andrew Wade had also spent years saving so that he could buy a decent home. Perhaps they should realize that they all wanted the same thing. At that point a large man stepped up to Carl and asked him if he had any children. Carl said “Yes,” and the man replied, “Well, you’d better watch out.” Carl, who had spent much of his life fighting, felt his muscles tense up. He told them that they needed to leave. They did.

Reflecting on these events in her memoir of this moment – *The Wall Between* – Anne did not feel that James Rone had purposefully sent a mob to threaten them. She believed that he had panicked at the thought that all of his property would decline in value; panicked at the thought that White people who associated with Black people would be looked down on and that he would lose the standing he so desired to have; panicked when all the racial prejudices he had inherited washed over him and caused him to be fearful of blackness. One moment, he had felt safe and secure, felt that all of his long-sought ambitions were finally coming true... and the next moment he felt the world crashing around him. He had panicked and called his friends, just trying to figure out what to do, but once word got out, it was beyond his

control. It wasn't him who had stepped forward and threatened their children. Anne wrote: "The crowd at Rone's house became almost transformed into a mob because these people did not know what else to do with their frustration, because acting as a unit and together gave them back some of the sense of security they had lost." In the following days she called the local pastors, trying to gain support. They said they would lose their congregations if they supported integrated neighborhoods. Anne wrote that even the pastors "were guided by what he thought his neighbor thought, by what he thought his neighbor expected of him," rather than by what they truly believed in and thought was right.

Anne called James Rone the following day to try to resolve the tensions. She asked him to just give Andrew Wade and his family a chance. They were all good people. Surely they could all get along. Rone replied that he was in a difficult situation, emphasizing that "Everybody out here is blaming me." His response helped Anne understand that Rone had to prove to his friends and neighbors that he was not part of this; that he did not support a Black family moving into the neighborhood. And each person that joined the mob, likewise, felt that they needed to prove the same thing to their friends and neighbors. Anne wondered, "How much so-called prejudice is maintained from generation to generation because every man must prove to his neighbor that he thinks as he thinks his neighbor thinks?" It was "a vicious circle of social pressure." Indeed, a few years later – after it had all died down – some White families came forward and said that they would not have minded the Wades living there at all: but they were afraid of being socially ostracized, and so maintained their silence.

The Braden's were soon receiving a continuous stream of death threats: the phone rang every five or ten minutes; and because the Bradens were worried about the Wades, they felt compelled to pick up each and every call. Anne, however, noticed a pattern in the threatening voices, and realized that it was likely only half a dozen people calling on rotations, hoping that if each of them only called once an hour, their voice would not be recognized. This decreased her stress, but then a call came in saying that "something" would happen today. And then: in six hours. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. The calls kept coming. Fifteen minutes. Carl was unfazed, staying focused on his reading in the living room. He said that if they were really going to be attacked they wouldn't be warned. Anne later reflected that Carl had long ago learned to shrug off physical threats. But it was her first time confronting them. She took the kids and left the house in case a bomb had been planted.

Meanwhile, James Rone and his son Buster went to talk with Andrew Wade, trying to convince him to sell the house back to them. Andrew said: "I'm not trying to force myself and my family on you. You don't have to be my friend or ever come on my property if you don't want to. But how can you say I don't have a right to live in the same neighborhood as you? Try to put yourself in my place for a minute. I'm an American citizen. I fought for my country. I'm a person, like you. I want a decent house to live in. Will you say that in a democracy I can't have a decent house to live in, that I can't live where I want to, just because my skin is a different color than

yours? We can all get along in the same world. That's what democracy means." He turned to Buster and said that perhaps he was too young to have fought for his country or to have seriously contemplated democracy. But did he understand?

Buster Rone nodded and shook Andrew Wades hand. He helped burn a cross in front of his house the next day. Andrew ran out with a gun and yelled, "You are burning your own American flag!" He requested that police watch the house for the rest of the night, but none came. In the middle of the night, bullets blasted through the front of the house. Andrew threw his wife Charlotte to the floor and watched as a car sped away. The next morning, Anne asked him if he would stay. Andrew said: "A principle is at stake. You don't just run away from something like this." Journalists contacted the Bradens, asking why they had bought a house for a Black family in a White neighborhood. The Bradens responded: "We feel that every man has a right to live where he wants to, regardless of the color of his skin. This is the test of democracy. Either you practice what you preach, or you shut up about believing in democracy." The story became front-page news in Kentucky.

A mere week later, the Supreme Court passed the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling – on May 17, 1954 – outlawing segregated schools and signaling the beginning of the end to segregation everywhere. *Brown* led to massive resistance throughout the White South. White Southerners who had always assumed the stability of White supremacy now realized they were going to have to stand up and fight for it. Many White folks in Kentucky – unable to directly attack the Supreme Court or the federal government – took their anger out on the Bradens, condemning them as "traitors to their race." At best, the Braden's were accused of "wanting to stir up trouble." They knew that purchasing a house for a Black family in a White neighborhood would create problems, so that must have been their intention. At worst, the Bradens were accused of being Communist-inspired subversives who were trying to exploit racial tensions in order to tear American society apart. They were hell-bent on trying to start a "race war." That accusation, as crazy as it sounds today, would later have major ramifications.

Meanwhile, the Wades met the solid wall of economic resistance that Whites came to use throughout the South in order to cripple anyone who failed to conform to White supremacist traditions. Andrew Wade suddenly found that all of his loans were cut off. His business was boycotted. Not even the newspaperman or the milkman would deliver to his home. A police guard had been put on the Wade house after shots had been fired into it, but when no other acts of violence occurred, they were soon pulled off. Cars filled with angry Whites shouting threats constantly drove by the house. Understanding that there was a very real threat of violence, an organization called the Wade Defense Committee was formed. Armed supporters of Andrew Wade moved in to stay on the lookout and protect the home.

After the shots had been fired into the Wade home, Anne and Carl decided to have their young children sleep in the hallway at night, where they were least likely to be hit by bullets if the same happened to their house. The threats on the phone kept

pouring in, and as the weeks wore on, Anne found herself completely torn down. She often couldn't fall asleep until dawn, and later reflected that she eventually descended into a state in which she had no energy to have any emotions whatsoever – no energy for fear, no energy for courage. As the threats poured in, she simply reacted in a cold, calculated way geared towards survival. Andrew Wade urged Anne to carry a gun to protect herself, but she refused. She felt that if she ever shot and killed somebody that she would never be able to live with herself, even if it had been done in self-defense. However, one day while Carl was driving with the kids, a car blocked the road in front of him, while another pulled up from behind to prevent him from reversing. He was told, once again, that something was going to happen to his kids if he didn't resolve the situation with the Wades. It forced Anne to reflect more seriously on the nature of self-defense: even if she would rather die than kill someone, she couldn't justify risking the lives of her children. Andrew Wade, who had built up a small arsenal in his home, immediately supplied her with the weapon.

And then, suddenly, things died down. A week passed without the Bradens or the Wades receiving any threats. Both families began to feel that the whole nightmare might be over. It was Saturday, June 26, 1954 – six weeks after the house had first been purchased – that Anne felt relaxed enough to go to sleep before midnight. On that same evening, Andrew Wade, feeling that the threat had subsided, took his family out to have fun for the first time since they had moved onto Rone Court.

The children of Andrew and Charlotte Wade had been staying with Andrew's parents during this time because of the potential threat of violence. Despite feeling that things were starting to calm down, the Wade parents dropped the children off with their grandparents before returning home. As the Wade's turned onto their street, they noticed that not a single light in any house was on. It was perfectly dark. Entering their home, Andrew asked the members of the Wade Defense Committee who had been keeping watch if there had been any unusual activity. They said that just a few minutes earlier, they had seen some strange flashing lights coming from a few different directions... as if people in different locations had been using flashlights to communicate with one another. As they began discussing what this might have meant, a bomb detonated underneath the home.

The explosion ripped through the two bedrooms where the children would have been sleeping if they had not been with their grandparents that night. Miraculously, everyone had stepped out onto the porch to discuss the meaning of the flashing lights, and no one was injured. Despite the thunderous explosion, none of their neighbors came out to see what had happened. The bombing had clearly been expected.

Andrew rushed to call Anne and warn her that her home might also be attacked that night. Waking up from one of the first times she had been able to fall asleep at night for weeks and weeks, she rushed outside and noticed that the streetlight, which had been on when she went to bed, had been broken. Carl's job had him working late that night, so Anne was home alone with the children. She looked under the porch

and searched everywhere where a bomb could have been planted. When Carl returned home, they spent the rest of the night sitting up armed on the porch. Nothing happened. Anne, however, had been pregnant during this time. The stress of the bombing was the straw that broke the camel's back and caused her to miscarry, leaving her with a profound sense of sadness.

With their house now in ruins, the Wade home was no longer habitable. For Andrew, however, it was still a symbol. He vowed to remain – even if he had to sleep in a tent, he said – and many in the Black community urged him to stand his ground. In the first days after they purchased their home, the local Black newspaper had interviewed Andrew. Predicting the difficult path ahead, he had said, “We intend to live here or die here.” He was buying this home both for the sake of having a decent home for his own family, but also to help break a barrier for other African Americans. The news had taken the local Black community by storm: here was a Black family that had found a way to escape the Black ghettos of Louisville. Here were White folks who were ready to fight for Black people. It gave them hope.

However, after the bombing, there were also many in the Black community who urged Andrew to place his family first and leave the house behind, in order to be with his wife and children in a safe space. He told them, “A man owes his children many things... I owe mine a freer world.” But the fact was that Andrew had been losing Black support ever since the extent of the White backlash had become apparent. Louisville had a reputation as a racially progressive city – in terms of the South – and many local Blacks originally expected the Wades to receive more support from progressive Whites. When the expectations of such support proved to be an illusion, many Blacks felt that Andrew Wade had trapped himself in a lost cause that was pointless to support. Black leadership backed off as well, not wanting to damage their ties with White political and economic power.

As for Andrew's wife, Charlotte Wade, she loved her husband, but she had never shared his optimistic view that they could succeed. Andrew wanted to take civil rights issues head on, believing that they could be changed. But Charlotte's experiences in life had taught her that segregation was undefeatable. White people were dangerous and to be avoided. She could never even fully trust the Bradens. Charlotte preferred to retreat into the safety of an all-Black world, in order to avoid potential trouble. Anne viewed this as a perfectly understandable human reaction on Charlotte's part. But she also felt that such a retreat – as compared to Andrew's stance of opposition – was part of what allowed White Southerners to succumb to the racist myth that Black people were “content” with their “natural” position in the order of things. And yet, even though it was Andrew who was the confrontational militant and it was Charlotte who retreated, Anne Braden wrote that Charlotte's eyes burned more fiercely with indignation: for at least her husband had hope. For her, the injustice was permanent... and her anger, therefore, even more intense.

Over the next few years, Andrew rebuilt the house. Even after the bombing, he believed that all the tensions would eventually die down. As the rebuilding neared

completion, he went and talked with all the neighbors. They expressed regret at what had happened, but none was willing to say so publicly. Charlotte had warned Andrew that she would never move back in, but he hoped that over time she would change her mind. She didn't. She told him that she would never be able to sleep comfortably at that house ever again; that she would forever worry that a bomb could detonate underneath them at any moment. They returned to living in an all-Black community.

The Trial: Thrown into Infamy

Shortly after the bombing, Anne appeared in court to serve as a witness in the investigation that was taking place. When she was called to the stand, she expected to be questioned about the threats to her family. Did she know who made them? Did she have any insights into who might have been involved in the bombing? Anne, however, was not asked these questions. Instead, she was grilled on her political beliefs. Had she been a member of any "subversive" organizations? Did she associate with Communists? What kind of literature did she read? Anne found herself at the center of a highly publicized, anti-Communist witch-hunt during one of the most politically repressive periods in U.S. history: McCarthyism.

During the period of McCarthyism, right-wing forces exploited the growing tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States that developed in the wake of the Second World War. They used those tensions to whip the American public into a state of fear: Communism, they said, would spread rapidly across the globe unless severe measures were taken. They warned that Communists had already infiltrated deep into American society, and were working with the Soviet Union to undermine the United States from the inside. After using this wildly unsubstantiated myth to whip the public into a state of fear, these forces then used that fear as an excuse to destroy causes they opposed – including civil rights and organized labor – under the pretense that such causes were Communistic. It was easy to manufacture the connection because Communists were, indeed, major supporters of racial justice and labor rights. Because Communists were highly involved in those causes, anyone devoted to those causes would have worked around and known Communists themselves. In the period of McCarthyism, anyone who was around Communists was framed as a Communist sympathizer, which was then equated with being an enemy of the state. This is what was now happening to Anne and Carl Braden.

It was especially easy for White Southerners to believe that civil rights activities were Communist inspired, because from their perspective, attacks on segregation *were* subversive. Civil rights activists were trying to undermine society as they knew it, and as they believed it should be. Wasn't that exactly what Communists were allegedly trying to do? Additionally, before the civil rights movement, most White Southerners assumed that Black people were happy with the way things were. This assumption, as Anne had painfully discovered, was born out of the fact that in a violent White supremacist culture, it was dangerous for African Americans to communicate their true thoughts and feelings to the White people they interacted

with. This belief led many White Southerners to assume that “outside agitators” – rather than African Americans – were the true forces behind civil rights actions. Such beliefs now played out as Anne sat in the courtroom: it was assumed that Anne and Carl Braden had manipulated Andrew Wade into buying a house in a White neighborhood.

It was in this context that prosecutor Scott Hamilton stepped forward at the trial, and explained to the jury that there were two theories about the bombing. One theory was that people who resented Blacks moving into a White neighborhood had set the bomb. The second theory was that the bombing had been part of the Braden’s Communist plot, and that they had set it themselves in order to inflame racial tensions. The prosecutor plunged into an effort to prove this second theory. All evidence that opposed it was ignored. Andrew Wade and the Wade Defense Committee had taken detailed notes about the threats they had faced, but when they provided a list of potential suspects, it was dismissed. When Buster Rone admitted to being one of the people who had burned the cross in front of Wade’s home, his actions were viewed as irrelevant rather than being viewed as a clear sign of hostility. Even the fact that one of Rone’s friends worked in an explosives factory was ignored by the jury. Anne and Carl soon found themselves charged with sedition. That charge – essentially a charge of attempting to overthrow the government – carried a prison sentence of twenty-one years. Bail was set at \$10,000 each... a phenomenal amount of money for 1954.

Anne later reflected: “I had challenged a whole settled world, a way of life, and this world had struck back. What had I expected?” She now realized that she had participated in so-called “subversive activities” from a place of privilege: “I thought I had examined the values of the world in which I grew up, and found many of them wanting and established new values.” However, “my nerves and reflexes still expected the protections and immunities that went with the place in society to which I had been born.” Unlike African Americans, she had grown up trusting the police; grown up believing that the law would protect her. The fact that those expectations were still embedded in her meant that when she began organizing for labor rights and racial justice, that she did so, to some extent, naively. She did not feel that her participation had been courageous: she felt like she had just not understood the risks.

Anne assumed that it would be impossible to pay her \$10,000 bond. She suspected that her parents were capable of posting it, but due to their serious disagreements about segregation, Anne did not expect them to post bond, nor did she feel she had any right to ask them for their support. Within a week, however, her father had bailed her out. Anne warned him that she would never change her position; but her father bailed her out because he loved her regardless.

When Anne and Carl had been arrested, Anne’s parents had taken the children. Anne was fine with her parents keeping the children for a little while, but not for long. She understood that she and Carl might be locked away for many years, and

worried that her children would adjust into the culture of White supremacy if they stayed with her parents during that time. She struggled to raise the issue, however, because she knew it would be very painful for her parents to hear that she didn't trust them to raise the children. They had already suffered so much after Anne's arrest: friends and neighbors had come to their home to support them as if there had been a death in the family. They sympathized with her parents the same way they would if a child had gone insane, or had fallen into a life of criminality despite the best efforts of the parents. Anne also wrote that her parents, although not fully conscious of it, probably understood deep down that "they were a part of this world that had turned savagely on the daughter they loved and sought to destroy her." Her parents had their own difficult burden to bear.

Anne's father took it upon himself to raise the issue of what would happen to the kids. "Anne," he said hesitantly, "I hope just one thing. No matter what happens – if you can't raise these children yourself – I hope you will let us have them." Anne sat silently. Her father went straight to the point: "I know you don't want us to have them." He explained that he had gone to talk to their pastor about the dilemma. "I told him, 'Anne Gambrell [her middle name] doesn't want us to have her children because she is afraid I will give them my prejudices.' And I told him – and I had tears in my eyes when I said it – 'I will promise her this: I will never, never give her children my prejudices!'" Anne and her father were both crying. It was the first time he had ever admitted his own racism. However, Anne later wrote that "no matter how much he meant what he said, no matter how hard he tried, a child living with him would soak up his prejudices." She couldn't allow that to happen.

Anne now devoted all of her energy to raising Carl's bail, but she had become infamous, and struggled to find support. After their arrest, authorities had raided the Braden's home. They had a large personal library that contained a wide range of political and philosophical literature, including socialist and Communist texts. Their library also contained books by Russian authors such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, who Anne had studied in college. This literature was confiscated and paraded before the public as proof that Communists had infiltrated Kentucky, leading intellectuals and students of philosophy or political science throughout the state to hurriedly take such literature off their own shelves and sink it in the nearest river. The Bradens had been warned by their friends that such a raid was surely immanent, and that they should purge such literature from their home. Anne had defiantly told them, "I'm not going to let anyone make me start burning books." As always, the Braden's stood their ground, but they were now considered dangerous people to associate with. Many who were sympathetic worried that if they donated money, that they would be viewed as supporting subversive causes, and could be attacked themselves.

Anne's own friends worried that it would be dangerous for them to associate with her too closely at this particular time, and some even wrote to her asking her to keep her distance until things died down. Within the Black community, many were initially silent about the Braden case as well, because they feared that taking on the

burden of being red-baited as subversives – in addition to the stresses they already faced – would cripple their own struggle for freedom. However, although not many Black people publicly stood up for them, behind the scenes, Black trust in the Bradens grew as Black communities and Black freedom fighters observed what the Bradens were being forced to endure.

Despite the lack of support, Carl had friends who felt they owed him more than they could ever repay. They put their house up for bond, and he was released. Within days, however, he, Anne, and the White members of the Wade Defense Committee were arrested for the separate crime of bombing the Wade house. Carl's trial was first: he was sentenced to fifteen years and immediately thrown in jail. For weeks afterward, Anne lived in a haze as she awaited her own trial. She would later have almost no memory of these weeks: she was so overwhelmed and traumatized that everything melted into a dark blur. She couldn't fight anymore. She felt that she couldn't win anyway. Segregation was too big to defeat. The struggle was meaningless. Anne's lawyer urged her to appeal Carl's case, so that higher, more sympathetic courts could examine it, but Anne, in her state of despair, told him there was no point. But there was a point, he assured her: what had been done to the Bradens was what happened in police states, not in democracies, and the higher courts wouldn't stand for it. If the Bradens didn't challenge it, her lawyer emphasized, what had just happened to them would happen to others. They had a duty to prevent that.

She pulled herself together and agreed to appeal. Once it was clear that higher courts were going to review the Bradens' case, Anne found her own trial postponed until the higher court rulings revealed which way the case would go. Feeling a glimmer of hope again, she rose from her dark place of despair, and began to organize to free Carl. Anne travelled endlessly – sometimes accompanied by Andrew Wade – meeting with sympathetic communities and organizations throughout the country and sharing their story. She began to develop the enormous antiracist network that was so pivotal for her future work.

As Anne Braden travelled, the energy of history seemed to swirl around her. Emmett Till was murdered, and the brutal images of his mutilated body led to international outcry. African Americans mobilized, pressing for school desegregation in the wake of *Brown*. The White Citizen's Council arose in response to the Supreme Court ruling to desegregate schools; quickly growing in power and attempting to destroy what would soon blossom into a full-fledged revolution for racial justice. White Southerners who sympathized with civil rights were attacked and silenced with an ever-increasing level of viciousness. The NAACP was condemned as a Communist organization and was crushed throughout the South. Rosa Parks would soon make her famous stand in Montgomery, and the eloquence of Martin Luther King would soon inspire the nation. And Anne Braden... she found herself pulled deep into the swirling vortex of events that would, within a decade, wield a deathblow to Jim Crow.

Bibliography

Braden, Anne. *The Wall Between: with a New Epilogue*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999. First published 1958.

Fosl, Catherine. *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Schrecker, Ellen. *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998.