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Academic freedom and the '50s at UNL

By Rich Tillson

Academic freedom is a tenuous concept. It has been used, abused, ignored, flaunted, temporarily renounced and selectively followed. It has occasionally fallen to political extremism or circumstances, but often has held up under such pressures.

Although the University of Nebraska has not been famous for academic freedom disputes, there are at least three cases scattered through the last decades.

In the 1950s, the Communist scare had the nation by the throat. Writers, musicians, teachers and intellectuals came under scrutiny by the Joe McCarthy organization for expressing liberal views. The fear of "commie sympathizers" was ironically strong in the land of Big Red.

One tool used by the McCarthyites was blacklisting. People were placed on secret lists branding them "unAmerican" and not to be fired or rehired in their field. Third Dimension was unable to find blatant examples of blacklisting, but the experiences of one UNL professor indicate a kind of organized harassment.

Harassment

Albin T. Anderson, history professor, said his experiences could not be labeled blacklisting and that any assertions he made "could not be documented in writing."

In 1948, when Anderson had been at UNL 18 months, he was approached by students who wanted him to run for a U.S. Senate seat in the primary election against fellow Democrat Terry Carpenter. The students and Anderson were unhappy with what they considered a Democratic machine choice of Carpenter, and with the incumbent, Kenneth Wherry—a right wing Republican.

"My conception of Wherry was not very high," Anderson said. After checking out the situation with UNL Chancellor Ruben Gustafson and the editor of the Lincoln Star, Anderson agreed to run.

When he was nominated for endorsement at a Democratic pre-primary meeting, "Many people were upset about the young people upsetting the applecart," Anderson said. Carpenter won the endorsement.

"I was identified in some circles as a

liberal-radical, Russian history teacher," Anderson said, "and Chancellor Gustafson also came under fire for liberalism."

Despite Carpenter's endorsement, Anderson ran again in the primary and again was defeated.

After the primary, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate Frank Sorrell allegedly told some people that if elected, he would get rid of Gustafson and Anderson, Anderson said.

Fortunately for the professor, Republican Val Peterson was elected governor.

Mistaken identity

"There was, however, a lingering bitterness about me on the part of some extreme conservatives, and this thing raised its ugly head again in the McCarthy era," Anderson said. "The story is rather confused, since it involves a case of mistaken identity."

At the time, there was another Anderson (Eugene N.) in the History Dept. who offered a course in current history. One required text included an essay by Owen Lattimore, an expert in Mongolian affairs who had been identified by Senator Joe McCarthy as a Communist working in the State Dept.

"Some of the political enemies I had made thought that it was me teaching the course, and spread the word that this instructor at the university was using textbooks as covers for Communist propaganda. Eugene Anderson got a few midnight crank calls, and his boy in junior high school was singled out as the "son of a commie".

Apparently the politicians finally got their Andersons straight, and things quieted down.

"It was one of the less dramatic irrational sideshows of the McCarthy era," according to Anderson.

He got a few unfriendly letters, but was never in great danger, he said. "It never really hurt me."

Anderson said that through it all he received tremendous support from his colleagues, students and the administration.

"I have found the academic freedom here to be of a very high order," he said.

Anderson said that while he has always been involved in and moderately concerned about politics, he never again considered running for office.

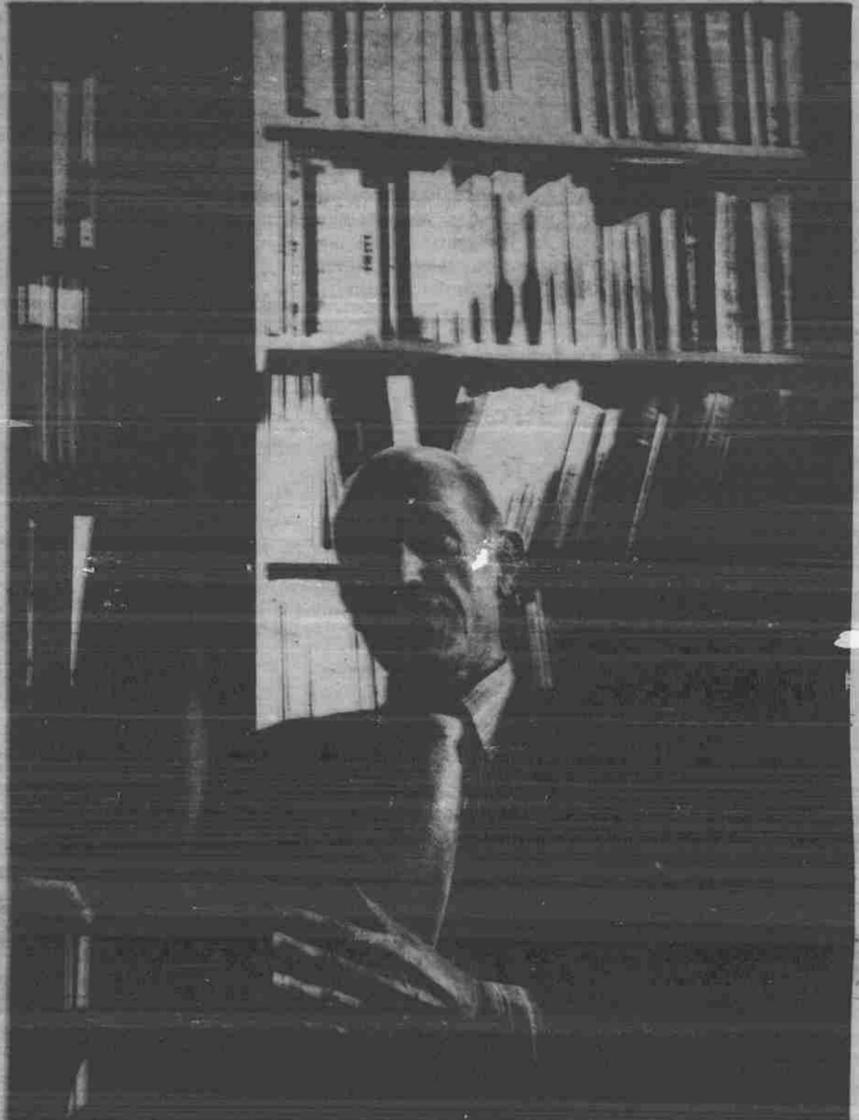


Photo by Scott Sobotka

Albin T. Anderson: being a Russian history professor did not always make one popular.

"I was like a fish out of water. It just ate me up too much."

Pauline Anderson, his wife, ran unsuccessfully for Congress in the November election.

Liberal ag professor

The case of C. Clyde Mitchell, as told in the *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska, 1920-1969* by R. McLaran Sawyer, shows some inconsistency in the past university stand on academic freedom.

In 1935, Mitchell, then the chairman of the Department of Agricultural Economics, was a controversial figure in discussions and disagreements on national farm policies concerning governmental control and national planning.

Mitchell's views expressed in writings and speeches were praised by some more liberal thinkers, but were strongly opposed by most of the conservative farming and agricultural business community.

Although a few regents also disagreed with his views, the Board of Regents Continued on p.2

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Photo courtesy of National Outdoor Leadership School