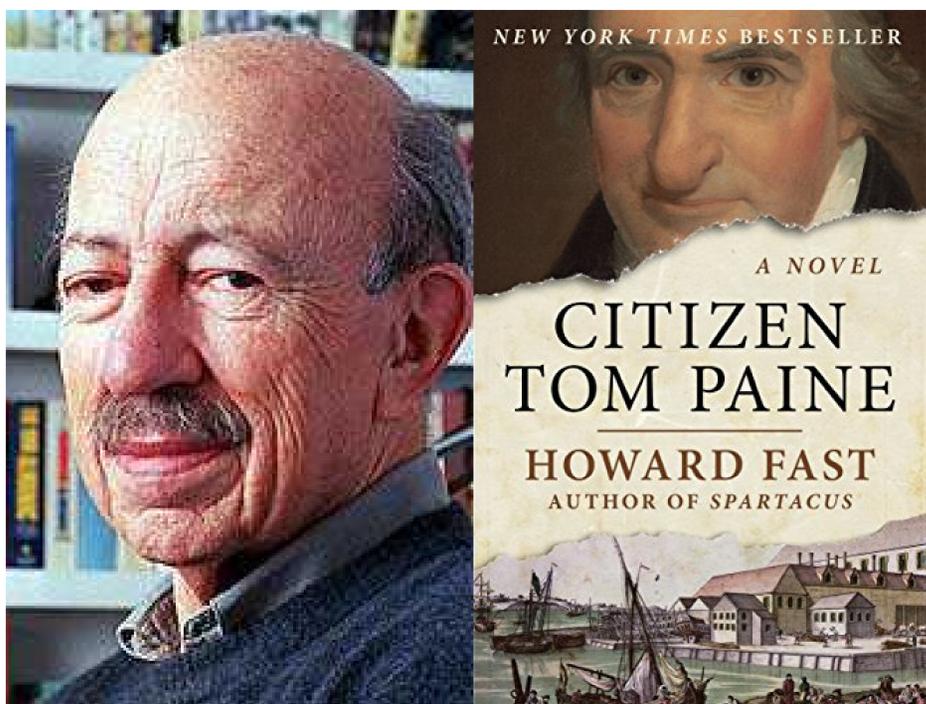


SCARSDALE'S BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Scarsdale is known for its high quality public schools; a legacy that goes back to the Quakers who lived here in the 18th and 19th centuries. Maintaining a high level of education has not always been easy. From 1949-1954, as McCarthyism gripped the nation, the Scarsdale school board faced accusations from a group of residents who believed that communists had infiltrated the Scarsdale schools. A group of Scarsdale residents calling themselves the Committee of Ten, and later the Citizens' Committee, campaigned for investigations into alleged Communist influence in the Scarsdale Schools, and advocated banning certain books from the school libraries.

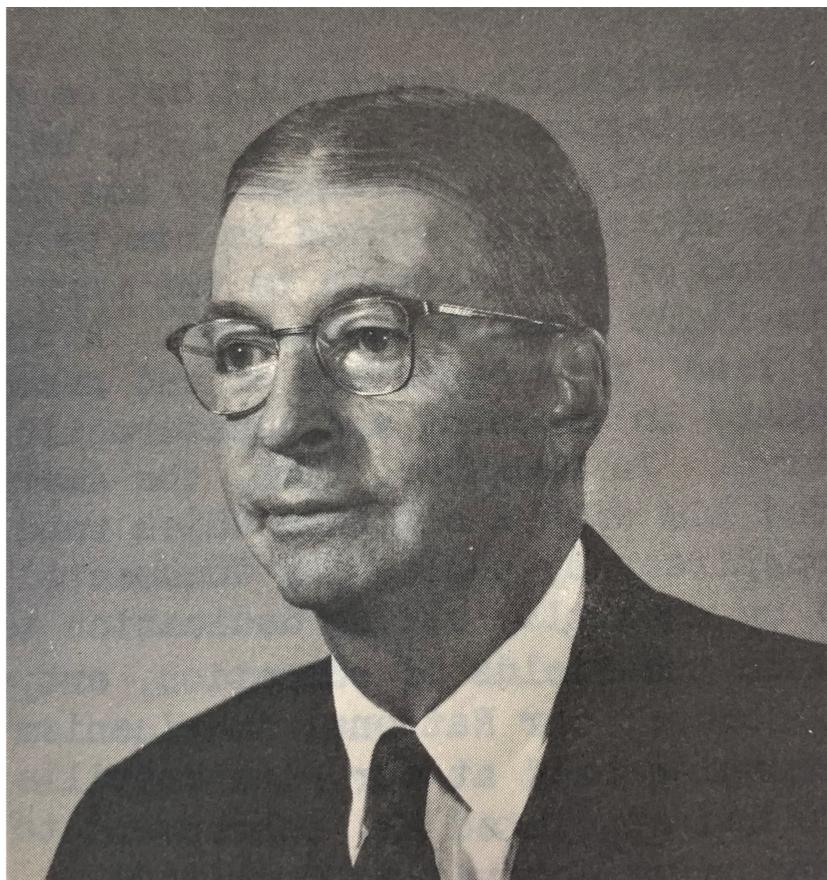


Howard Fast next to the cover of his book "Citizen Tom Paine." From Wikipedia.

Otto Dohrenwend was born in 1899 and graduated from Columbia University in 1917 at the age of 18. During WWI he enlisted and was assigned to Officers' Training School, receiving his commission after the War ended. After 11 years as a banker he became a general partner of Baker, Weeks & Co., a Wall Street investment firm. He moved to Scarsdale circa 1935, where he joined the local chapter of the American Legion and attended the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church.

He became concerned about communist infiltration in 1947 while serving on a U. S. Federal Grand Jury. During the period 1949-1954 he helped organize, and served as Chairman of, the Committee of Ten (later the Scarsdale Citizens' Committee). The group began to dissipate in 1954 when Mr. Dohrenwend was invited to become a member of the American Legion's Westchester County Committee on Un-American Activities, on which he served until 1962.

In 1949, the Committee, led by Otto Dohrenwend, focused on nine books by Howard Fast in the High School library. In particular the group objected to the use of Fast's "Citizen Tom Paine" as part of the curriculum. Fast joined the Communist Party USA in 1943, and in 1950 was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and was given a three month sentence for contempt of congress.



Otto Dohrenwend, from "The Westchester Spotlight," May, 1965.

SCARSDALE'S BATTLE OF THE BOOKS



Rev. William C. Kernan - Scarsdale Inquirer, 3-7-1941

At the first fall meeting of the Scarsdale School Board in September, 1949, Dohrenwend publicly voiced his concerns for the first time. He questioned the Board, along with Superintendent Archibald Shaw, about policies regarding textbook and library book selection at the High School. At the following meeting in October, Dohrenwend was accompanied by Rev. William C. Kernan, an assistant Pastor at the Church of St. James the Less. Kernan and Dohrenwend again questioned the inclusion of books by "Communist and fascist apologists" in the High School library. Two days later, Kernan spoke to the Scarsdale Post 52, American Legion, which adopted a resolution to ban books by "leftists" from the local schools. The issue received regional attention on October 8th, 1949, when the New York Herald Tribune published an article titled "Scarsdale Group Asks Schools To Bar Leftist Writers' Books".



Robert S. Gordon, President of the Town Club in 1949
- From the Platform Tennis Hall of Fame

The day after the story in the Herald Tribune, Robert Gordon, president of the Town Club, gathered a small group in order to craft a response to accusations by Dohrenwend and company. The statement, signed by 81 "prominent" citizens and published in the October 14th, 1949 issue of the Scarsdale Inquirer, argued that "a state that fears to permit the expression of views alternative to those held by the majority is a state that does not trust itself."

Group of Citizens Writes Open Letter to School Bd. On School Book Controversy

Confidence in the Scarsdale school system and a warning of the dangers inherent in censorship of textbooks and school library books are contained in an open letter to the Scarsdale Board of Education released for publication this morning by a group of 81 prominent residents. The letter reads as follows:

"We, a group of interested citizens, wish to state our

position on the issues which have been raised by those who would ban books from the public schools because of the political leanings of the authors.

"We do not minimize the dangers of Communist and Fascist indoctrination, but we want to meet these dangers in the American way.

"We live in a democratic state. We are the inheritors of a tradition that has encouraged a dynamic development in our intellectual as well as our material life. That tradition has been based on a tolerance that has not feared to permit independent thought. A state that fears to permit the expression of views alternative to those held by the majority is a state that does not trust itself.

SCARSDALE'S BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

The following meeting of the school board in November was packed with over 250 people. The Board hoped that a six-page report by an ad-hoc committee to address the book situation would settle the issue. However the report, which recommended keeping the existing method of selecting books, did little to satisfy the Committee of Ten. While the next two board meetings were relatively quiet, the battle continued to rage in the letters column of the Scarsdale Inquirer. Under continued pressure at the February, 1950 meeting, the board ordered a close study of "Citizen Tom Paine" by the heads of the English and Social Studies departments, as well as the school librarian. This committee of three concluded that the book, despite some "deplorable" language, had historic and literary value and should be kept in the school library.



Superintendent Archibald Shaw from Scarsdale Inquirer 6-4-1957

The report was approved by Superintendent Shaw and the board at the April meeting, which was attended by over 300 people. The school board election on May 2nd saw 1,090 residents crowd into the high school gym to cast their votes, compared to only 58 the year before. The three incumbents up for re-election, Chauncey A. Newlin, George Rutherford, and G. Stanley McAllister, received respectively 1,081, 1,085, and 1,084 votes. Kernan, Dohrenwend, and Treacy each received one write-in vote. The result was a clear repudiation of the Committee of Ten, but the group refused to give up their cause.



George Rutherford from Scarsdale Inquirer 3-14-1963



Chauncey Newlin from Scarsdale Inquirer 8-21-1969

SCARSDALE'S BATTLE OF THE BOOKS



June 19th, 1950 special Board of Education meeting from Scarsdale Inquirer 6-23-1950. Otto Dohrenwend, lower left, addresses the crowd.

To address the continuing controversy, the school board agreed to a special meeting to determine whether the evidenced warranted a full-scale investigation of communist influence in the school. The meeting was held on June 19th, 1950.

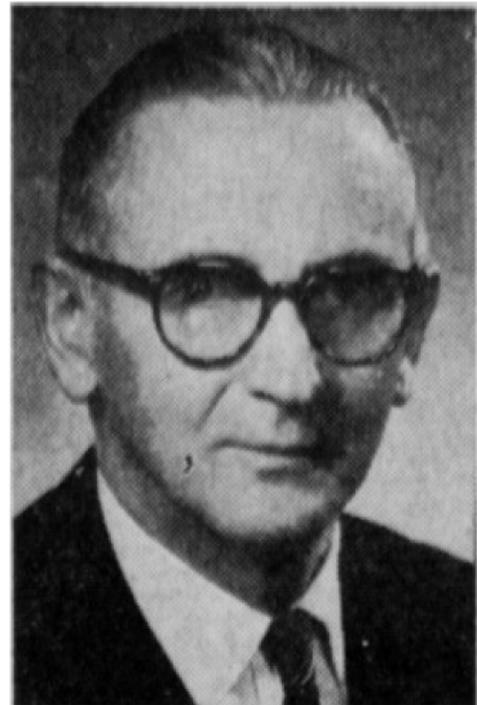
Nearly 1,400 residents attended to hear the testimony of members of the Committee of 10, including Dohrenwend, Kernan, Edward O. McConahay, F. Lawrence Chandler, Andrew P. McLaughlin, I. Herbert Schaumber, Edward A. Wetzel, Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Fitzpatrick, and Dr. August W. Brustat. They specifically called out four textbooks used in the schools: "World History" by Boak, Slosson, and Anderson; "Story of America" by Ralph V. Harlow; "Our World Today"; and "American Democracy Today and Tomorrow" by Goslin, Goslin, and Storen. After the members of the Committee spoke, Superintendent Archibald B. Shaw addressed the crowd. Attempting to establish trust in the district's teachers, he emphasized the process of teacher selection and described their duties, differences, and common concern for the children of Scarsdale. He concluded "We have competent teachers, loyal teachers, decent, wholesome teachers. In their hands our children, our American way, both are safe." He received a long standing ovation. At the following board meeting on July 5th, the board voted 7-0 against conducting an investigation. New board president Mr. McAllister said: "In the two years or more since this subject has been under discussion, no one has presented any evidence to indicate that our teachers, by use of books or pamphlets or otherwise, have been inculcating subversive ideas in our school children."

SCARSDALE'S BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Despite their defeat at the July 5th, 1950 board meeting, the anti-communists, now calling themselves the Citizens' Committee, continued to raise concerns both inside the community as well as beyond its borders. At the October meeting the school board announced an end to further discussion of the issue of communist influence in the schools. There would be no more speeches or accusations by the Citizens' Committee at the school board meetings, but the group managed to keep the issue alive in other ways. They regularly sent letters to the Scarsdale Inquirer and also sometimes paid for advertisements. They mailed "advisory circulars" to every household in Scarsdale, and spoke to groups both in and outside the community. The group received sympathetic coverage in periodicals such as the American Mercury and the Catholic World. In April 1951, Rabbi Benjamin Schultz, the coordinator of the Joint Committee Against Communism in New York, called on Governor Thomas E. Dewey to investigate the Scarsdale schools, though nothing came of his request.



Amelie Rothschild, 1955



Malcolm C. Spence from Scarsdale
Inquirer, 2-1-1968

On March 27, 1952, the Citizens' Committee held a large public meeting at the Edgewood School. Otto Dohrenwend challenged to a debate the two members of the school board who faced re-election: Malcolm C. Spence and Amelie Rothschild (Amelie was the mother of beloved Scarsdale teacher Eric Rothschild). The two refused the invitation, but it was clear that the Citizens' Committee was attempting to rally their supporters to reject the traditional candidates. Between the March meeting and the election on May 6, there was a flurry of activity in support of Spence and Rothschild. The Town Club announced its decision to study the Citizens' Committee and paid for the mailing of several pro-school board statements to every household. A petition that approved the job the schools were doing, signed by nearly 3,000 people, appeared as a two-page advertisement in the Scarsdale Inquirer. In the end, 1,352 out of 1,392 votes went for Rothschild and Spence. The liberal magazine "The Nation" declared that Scarsdale had "lifted the siege against the schools."

SCARSDALE'S BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

The Citizens' Committee held a second (and final) public meeting on December 5th, 1952, at which Mr. Dohrenwend suggested increasing the number of school board trustees from six to nine; a suggestion that was not taken up by the school system. The Town Club released its promised "Report of the Education and School Budget Committee of the Town Club on Allegations of 'Communist Infiltration' in the Scarsdale Schools" on April 16th, 1953. The report concluded that "there is not now, nor has there been during the immediately preceding years any organized Communist infiltration of our schools." The Citizens' Committee continued to release circulars and in 1954 published a series of newsletters called "The Scarsdale Citizen." They objected to the poems of Langston Hughes, as well as the performance of a musical play titled "The Lonesome Train" at the Edgewood School by the sixth-graders. August W. Brustat published an article in the March, 1954 issue of "National Republic" titled "The Truth about the Scarsdale Story," in which he argued that Scarsdale was "an especially prized plum" for the Marxists. The debate continued in the Scarsdale Inquirer letters to the editor, until finally the newspaper decided to print no more letters on the subject after August, 1954. Three months later, the Senate voted to condemn Joseph McCarthy.



Rev. August W. Brustat from findagrave.com, uploaded by Cheryl Maibusch.

A Binder of primary source documents is available on the nearby shelf, or view them online here:



The loud minority of the Citizens' Committee was finally muted to a dull murmur, though members such as Dohrenwend never backed off their contentions. He was heavily involved with "The Westchester Spotlight," a publication of the Westchester County Committee on Un-American Activities of the American Legion. The issue of December, 1960, called out the Scarsdale Inquirer's coverage of the Castro regime, and criticized the Scarsdale Congregational Church for hosting a number of "pro-communist" speakers. While Dohrenwend and others continued held the bit, the public moved on as McCarthyism faded. Scarsdale's Battle of the Books fizzled out after 1954, no longer the subject of national news.