

The Humanities Come to Here, Kansas

Tom Averill

Folks, I go so far back with Marion Cott and the Kansas Committee for the Humanities that I still make that mistake: Oh, right, it's the Kansas Humanities Council now. Better a Council than a Committee, I think. About committees, I always heard the expression, "God so loved the world that he did NOT send a committee." Course he didn't send a Council either. But he did send Marion Cott. Without her, I doubt that Here, Kansas, where I'm Honorary Mayor, would have ever learned about the Humanities.

Here's how it happened that once upon a time so long ago. I was teetering down to the Co-op when Mabel Beemer waved. "Mayor Oleander. Did you hear? The humanitarians are coming to town."

"Who are the heck are they?" I asked. "Rotarians that act human?"

On the next block Elmer Peterson jumped out of the Here Pharmacy and Car Wash. "Did you hear?" he asked. "Somebody from some humane society in Topeka is lecturing. They got a Speaker's Bureau and they'll send somebody anywhere in the state to talk. And for nothing."

"Well," I said, "I've always heard talk was cheap."

"Especially if you're a chicken, cheep cheep," Elmer said to my back.

In front of the Co-op, William "Bill of Rights" Leidecker, Here's only radical, stood arguing with Hattie and Tommie Burns—they run the Here College of Beauty and Fiberglass Maintenance. Hattie was hot. "You're the only one in Here would invite a secular humanist to pollute our minds," she shrieked at old "Bill of Rights."

"They ain't secular humanists, Hattie, they're sexual humanists," said Tommie. "I read that same article as Hattie, in what I choose to call the *Chronicle of Lower Education*."

"Wherever did you two find the *Chronicle*?" I asked.

"Drove all the way to Near Here," Tommie said.

"Long drive just to titillate yourselves with the Humanities," I said.

"You watch your language," said Hattie. "Unless you're a Godless atheist like the one come to poison our minds tonight, not to mention the minds of our children."

"Who in Here has children?" asked Bill of Rights. "Let alone a mind to poison?"

I walked on into the Co-op, grabbed a nickel cup of coffee, and sat at my Honorary Mayor's table. "I think we ought to boycott them right out of Here," said Claude Anderson. "Bill didn't ask *me* about this humanities pogrom. Do you know what a pogrom is? It's where they get rid of you if you don't agree with them. And I've heard tell, with these folks, that there's plenty we might not agree with. And they'll be in Here, tonight!"

Folks, Here, Kansas, buzzed with talk all day, cheap and dear, confused and clear. Until six o'clock, when a little foreign car cruised real slow down Kansas Street, turned around, cruised back through, turned around again, then stopped in front of the Mini-mart. A normal-looking woman, who happened to be a humanist, climbed out and asked for directions. She looked a little tuckered out from the drive.

Half the town, about 18 folks, showed up for her lecture. We sat politely, swallowing our various misgivings and fears, and listened. That woman talked about women's history, which is what women seem best at these days, something about my grandmother being a lady but working like a dog. Didn't sound like a humane society to me.

At discussion time, Hattie stood up and said we didn't need Godless humanists telling us what to believe. Claude stood up and asked if there really was a pogrom and when the pogrom would start. Elmer Peterson held up his poodle and asked what this woman thought of it. "Bill of Rights" wondered if society would ever change. And then the humanist drove home.

Next day Bill asked me for evaluations. "I can't say what she said, but that's the first time we've had so much of Here in one place, at one time, since they closed Here High School and started bussing the kids to the Neither Here nor There Consolidated School. As Mayor, I'm

willing to call it a success."

"Good," said Bill, "we'll do it again. "They've got 'em a whole stable of humanists."

"How can they afford that?" I asked.

"Government money," said Bill.

"Then bless the Kansas Humanities Council and their programs," I said. "It's not often we get anything from the government that doesn't either screw us or make us spit. Why, for the next program, I might even drive to Wichita and get me a new battery for my hearing aid."

Folks, since then, Here, Kansas, and neighboring communities have been spoken to, sometimes sharply, sometimes not, by that so-called Bureau. We've been Chautauqua-ed under a big tent, and even though I know the Humanities is a big tent, I wish it wasn't such a blistering hot tent. And we've gone to our libraries to Talk About Literature in Kansas. And we've had our oral histories taken, which is better with a humanist than a dentist, that's sure.

Yep, we in Here, Kansas, have spent so much time becoming humanized with the humanities, that we invite you to visit us some day. Anyone who likes lively discussion, hard questions, new knowledge and inquisitive minds is welcome in the Co-op. We have a director's chair set up, too, an executive director's chair, with Marion Cott's name on it. Although she's retiring, well, we all know she's never been retiring. Else we wouldn't be here tonight, celebrating her years of bringing the Humanities to Here, and to all of us.