



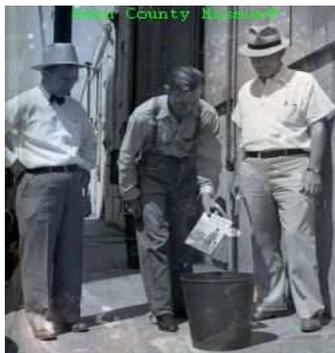
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Kern County And The First Amendment - 1939

By Gilbert Gia
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In 1939 Martha Hampton, seventy-seven years-old and a member of the Kern County Retired Teachers' Club, drew the group into the fray over the county's ban on the *Grapes of Wrath*.

Europe headed for war as Americans rallied in defense of Constitutional freedoms, and Steinbeck's new book about the Dust Bowl emigrants became a best seller in Oklahoma. Soon, Hollywood was making a movie, but the book itself had been censored in Camden, New Jersey; East St. Louis, Illinois; Buffalo, New York; and Kansas City, Missouri. The Kern County Board of Supervisors was about to join the list of censors.



The above photo from the August 24, 1939 *Bakersfield Californian* shows a burning the *Grapes of Wrath*: on the left is W.B. Camp, president of the Associated Farmers of Kern County, on the right L.E. Plymale, Shafter grower, and between them in overalls dropping *Grapes of Wrath* into a burning trash can is Clell Pruett, a migrant farm worker from southeast Missouri. The same day, on a vote of four to one (Supervisor Ralph Lavin dissenting), the Kern County Board of Supervisors banned *Grapes of Wrath* from Kern County libraries and schools.

The county ruling emboldened out-of-state government. On August 28th, Associated Farmers of Kern County wired the Kansas City Board of Education to congratulate and thank them for banning the book. Said W.B. Camp, "We hope their action will be the forerunner of a widespread denouncement against the book before schools open and our boys and girls find such filthy material on the shelves of our public libraries."

The public was uneasy and did not sit by quietly. Individual resolve against the censorship came from Kern County Librarian Gretchen Knief who'd returned from vacation to learn that the county's four dozen copies of *Grapes of Wrath* had been permanently banned from circulation. Fresno's county librarian had already declared that she "did not feel called upon to censor the reading of some patrons." To Knief's credit she unilaterally shipped Kern County's copies to other libraries in California.¹ Despite mounting public protest against the Supervisors, the ban remained in effect for a year and a half.²

The local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union protested the ban as a violation of the First Amendment, and in Delano, Reverend Clarence R. Wagner changed the topic of his

¹ "While Knief protested in personal correspondence to the supervisors, publicly she remained silent, yet she defied the spirit of the order by making copies of the books available to other libraries in California..." ("Forbidden fruit: the banning of the grapes of wrath in the kern county free library," *Libraries and Culture*, v38, No 4, pp 351-377. U of Texas Press)

² Mediavilla, Cindy. "A Look Back at...The Grapes of Wrath," *California Libraries*, Feb 2002

Sunday sermon and spoke in defense of the book. Rev. Wager was not posturing from an informational deficit; he was chairman of a Quaker-Methodist group that had built a recreation hall at nearby Shafter migratory camp, and Wagner knew that John Steinbeck had Federal sociologist Eric Thompson with him when the author interviewed migrant groups in Kern county.

Also in defense of the Bill of Rights was Martha Hampton, the 77 year-old retired Shafter teacher and principal who brought the topic before the Retired Teachers' Club. At the September 1939 meeting she volunteered to review the controversial book. The club's secretary noted that "Mrs. Hampton has lived in Shafter district and is well-qualified to discuss the problem." Hampton's teaching background made her intimately acquainted with the difficult lives of Dust Bowl emigrants. In *Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck wrote, "In the camps the word would come whispering, "There's work at Shafter." And the cars would be loaded in the night, the highways crowded -- a gold rush for work. At Shafter the people would pile up, five times too many to do the work. A gold rush for work. They stole away in the night, frantic for work."



At the November meeting the speaker was Mrs. Hampton's daughter Mrs. Blanche Cowbraugh, a long-time teacher at Fresno High School. A *Bakersfield Californian* clipping glued

into the secretary's minutes book explained that Mrs. Cowbraugh analyzed the book from the standpoint of a painting by Jean-François Millet. His work, called *The Man With the Hoe* (*L'homme à la houe*, 1860-1861), portrays a laborer burdened by his work but receiving little rest or reward. Middle-class Parisians reviled the painting as brutish and frightening, but it rightly reflected the working conditions of French peasants. Art buyers interpreted the painting as a protest against lives of unremitting exertion, although the artist denied it. Kern County farmers saw the same threatening message in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and they feared economic consequences.

The newspaper clipping spoke favorably of Cowbraugh's presentation. The club's secretary did not record Mrs. Cowbraugh's speech, but Cowbraugh could have referred to an 1898 poem by Edwin Markham called *Man With the Hoe*. Markham based it on Millet's painting. The first stanza reads

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Solid and stunned,
A brother to the ox?

The minutes said Mrs. Cowbraugh talk on Steinbeck's book "made an apt parallel between the two families [Joad and Wilson], both pathetically trying to eke out an existence from the bare soil. She urged those who read the migrant story to use a sympathetic approach, which, she said, was the key to understanding all art. In her pleasing voice, she presented a fine picture of 'Ma Joad.' "

The minutes indicate that Retired Teachers opposed the ban. The entry of November 9, 1939 noted Mrs. Cowbraugh's "able and interesting speech," and in another entry, KCRTC member Katherine Jaynes spoke favorably of "our Mrs. Cowbraugh," adding that she "is always a welcome visitor in our meetings."

A penciled annotation on the newspaper clipping shows that KCRTC past-president Harriet F. Buss authored the newspaper review. Harriet Buss herself wasn't a stranger to segregation and discrimination. In September 1910 Miss Buss was a respected teacher at Bryant School and taught English at First Congregational Mission School in Bakersfield's Chinatown. At the beginning of the school year she was assigned to teach at the newly-opened "Oriental School."

By February 1942 America had been at war two months, and Mrs. Hampton had taken up other causes in addition to her church work and activities with the Business and Professional Woman's Club. KCRTC heard Hampton speak again and the minutes noted, "Mrs. Martha Hampton of Shafter spoke on her defense work, activity in telling stories to children at the Federal Migratory Camp, and her interest in starting US Saving Stamp books." The 80-year-old's last speech before the club was in March 1942 when "Mrs. Martha Hampton presented a review of an article 'Do Let Us Be Useful' and reiterated her views on our duty to our county during these hectic days."

In early in August 1942 the *Shafter Press* wrote that she was in failing health but felt well-enough to visit Bakersfield with her daughter. Mrs. Martha Hampton no doubt wanted to continue her work for social justice, but there wasn't time. She passed away a week later. At the KCRTC meeting in September the secretary wrote, "Mrs. Hampton will long be remembered by those who knew her and came under her influence." <>