

Anne Braden - Biography

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Anne McCarty Braden (July 28, 1924 – March 6, 2006) was an American advocate of racial equality. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, and raised in rigidly segregated Anniston, Alabama, Braden grew up in a white middle-class family that accepted southern racial mores wholeheartedly. A devout Episcopalian, Braden was bothered by racial segregation, but never questioned it until her college years at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia. After working on newspapers in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, she returned to Kentucky as a young adult to write for the Louisville Times. There, she met and in 1948 married fellow newspaperman Carl Braden, a left-wing trade unionist. She became a supporter of the civil rights movement at a time when it was unpopular among southern whites.

In 1948, Anne and Carl Braden immersed themselves in Henry Wallace's run on the Progressive Party for the presidency. Soon after Wallace's defeat, they left mainstream journalism to apply their writing talents to the interracial left wing of the labor movement through the FE (Farm and Equipment Workers) Union, representing Louisville's International Harvester employees.

Even as the postwar labor movement splintered and grew less militant, civil rights causes heated up. In 1950, Anne Braden spearheaded a hospital desegregation drive in Kentucky. She endured her first arrest in 1951 when she led a delegation of southern white women organized by the Civil Rights Congress to Mississippi to protest the execution of Willie McGee, an African American man convicted of the rape of a white woman.

In 1954, the Wades, an African American family who knew the Bradens through association, approached them with a proposal that would drastically alter all lives involved. Like so many other Americans after World War II, Andrew Wade wanted to buy a house in a suburban neighborhood. Because of Jim Crow housing practices, the Wades had been unsuccessful for months in their quest to purchase a home on their own. The Bradens, who never wavered in their support for African American civil rights, agreed to purchase the home for the Wades. On May 15, 1954 Andrew Wade and his wife Charlotte spent their first night in their new home in the Louisville suburb of Shively, Kentucky. Upon discovering that blacks had moved in, white neighbors burned a cross in front of the house, shot out windows, and condemned the Bradens for buying it on the Wades' behalf. Their fears may have been stoked in part by the timing of the move which came only two days before the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark condemnation of school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, KS.

Six weeks later, amid constant community tensions, the Wades' new house was dynamited one evening while they were out. On October 1954, Anne and Carl Braden and five other whites were charged with sedition. After a sensationalized trial, Carl

Braden—the perceived ringleader—was convicted of sedition and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. As Anne and the other defendants awaited a similar fate, Carl served eight months, but out on \$40,000 bond when a U.S. Supreme Court decision invalidated state sedition laws because of their capricious use. All charges were dropped and the Wades moved back to Louisville.

Blacklisted from local employment, the Bradens took jobs as field organizers for the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a small, New Orleans-based civil rights organization whose mission was to solicit white southern support for the beleaguered southern civil rights movement. In the years before southern civil rights violations made national news, the Bradens developed their own media. Both through SCEF's monthly newspaper, *The Southern Patriot*, and through numerous pamphlets and press releases publicizing major civil rights campaigns.

In 1958 Anne wrote *The Wall Between*, a memoir of their sedition case. One of the few books of its time to unpack the psychology of white southern racism from within, it was praised by human rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Eleanor Roosevelt, and became a runner-up for the National Book Award. Although their radical politics marginalized them among many of their own generation, the Bradens were reclaimed by young student activists of the 1960s. They were among the civil rights movement's most dedicated white allies.

After Carl's death in 1975, Anne Braden remained among the nation's most outspoken white anti-racist activists. She instigated the formation of a new regional multi-racial organization, the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC), which initiated battles against environmental racism. She became an instrumental voice in the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition of the 1980s and in the two Jesse Jackson presidential campaigns, as well as organizing across racial divides in the new environmental, women's, and anti-nuclear movements that sprang up in that decade.

From the 1980s into the 2000s she wrote for *Southern Exposure*, *Southern Changes*, and the *National Guardian* and *Fellowship*. Anne Braden died on March 6, 2006. The Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research was established at the University of Louisville in November, 2006 and was officially opened on April 4, 2007. The institute focuses on social justice globally, but concentrates on the southern United States and the Louisville area. Over her nearly six decades of activism, her life touched almost every modern U.S. social movement, and her message to them all was the centrality of racism and the responsibility of whites to combat it.