



“A Sinister Poison”: The Red Scare Comes to Bethel

The Bethel–Randolph Center incident is a story that features several colorful figures, including a Tibetan Buddhist dignitary, a local self-described “red hunter,” and two well-traveled and prolific writers: Far East expert Owen Lattimore and Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

By RICK WINSTON

Here’s a question that might stump many Vermont history buffs: who was Ordway Mabson Southard? A May 2001 obituary for this prolific poet and haiku specialist mentioned some of the places he and his wife Mary had lived: Alaska, Mexico, Alabama, Hawaii, and finally British Columbia—but not Vermont.¹

Yet it was here in the summer of 1950 that the Southards were the catalysts for an episode that landed Vermont in the national news. Only a passing obituary reference to their political activities (“Both were highly influenced by Marxist Socialist thought and participated in the Civil Rights Movement”) gives a clue to the events that led to headlines such as the one in the August 3 issue of the *Bradford Opinion*: “Reds Infest Bethel, Randolph Center, McCarthy Charges.”²

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The events of that summer illustrate that Vermont was not immune to the fear and suspicion that marked the period now known as “the McCarthy Era.” Just two years earlier, Luther MacNair, the dean of Lyndon State Teachers’ College, was forced to resign his post due to his support of Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace in the 1948 campaign. In September of 1950, Congressman Charles Plumley called for the investigation and removal of “Communists, fellow travelers, and sympathizers and their influence from the state’s schools and colleges.” Plumley also claimed that Vermont had been chosen as a testing ground for Communist infiltration and called for close scrutiny of the state’s textbooks.³

An increase in national anti-Communist fervor saw a similar rise in Vermont with the election of Governor Lee Emerson in 1950. Emerson called for a bill that would “prohibit the qualification of groups or organizations engaged in subversive activities as a political party”; the measure passed the house in April 1951 but the senate voted it down 28–0. In 1953, the University of Vermont Board of Trustees fired Professor Alex Novikoff after he refused to answer questions about his past Communist Party membership before a U.S. Senate committee.

However, there were also strong voices raised against McCarthyism. The well-respected author and historian Dorothy Canfield Fisher, writing in 1953, praised Vermonters’ measured defense of civil liberties and free speech, quoting an old-timer as saying that “anyone who tries to bore from within in Vermont is bound to strike granite.”⁴ In 1954, what became known as the “Army-McCarthy hearings” inspired Vermont Senator Ralph Flanders to introduce a resolution in the Senate, ultimately passed by a vote of 65–22, censuring U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy for “unbecoming conduct” and “obstructing the constitutional process of the Senate.”

The most public and persistent Vermont critics of the “Red Scare” were two newspapermen: Robert Mitchell, who had edited the *Rutland Herald* since 1941, and became its owner-publisher in 1948; and John Drysdale, who had published the *White River Valley Herald* and *Bradford Opinion* since 1945.

Looking back on that period in 1988, Mitchell recounted, “During the 1950–55 period, the *Herald* published more editorials attempting to debunk McCarthyism and the internal communist threat than were printed on any other subject. At that time it was automatic that anyone who openly opposed McCarthy or others who exploited fears of subversion was likely to be charged with succumbing to the communist taint himself.”⁵ In 1991, Drysdale was inducted into the Community Newspaper Hall of Fame; his citation noted his role in discrediting claims that the Randolph–Bethel area was a “hotbed of communism.”⁶

These two journalists were among the major figures involved in the Bethel–Randolph Center controversy, which also featured a Tibetan Buddhist dignitary, a local self-described “Red hunter,” and two well-traveled, prolific authors who, unlike Ordway Southard, were nationally prominent: the Far East expert Owen Lattimore, and the Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

The story begins with Stefansson, renowned veteran of several Arctic expeditions (the first in 1906) and author of several books about the Far North, who first came to Bethel in 1941. He was born in Winnipeg to Icelandic immigrant parents, and grew up in rural North Dakota. Stefansson took a course in anthropology while a student at Harvard Divinity School, and soon transferred to that department. A Harvard mentor, Professor Frederic Putnam, convinced him to master the field without the trappings of academia, and Stefansson soon started his travels without having completed his degree.

The Icelandic author Haldor Laxness described Stefansson as “a poetry-loving academic, who gets up from his writing desk, wipes the ink off his fingers and becomes an Eskimo, in order to expand the boundaries of science to include the nations of the Arctic.”⁷ During the 1920s and ’30s he was based in New York City and amassed an extensive research library, open to students of the Arctic. Stefansson had difficulty adjusting to the sweltering summers of New York, and on the advice of his secretary, who summered in Gaysville, started looking for property in Vermont. Shortly after his marriage to Evelyn Baird in 1941, he bought land known as the Dearing Place in what is known as the ‘Lymus area of Bethel.

During their time in Bethel, which often was as long as five months of the year, the couple was active in the life of town; Stefansson addressed various club meetings, and Evelyn sang in the church choir. After Stefansson learned that an adjoining property, known as the Stoddard Place, was to be logged, he convinced Charlie Andersen, the first mate on his expeditions, to buy it. But Andersen left after a few seasons and Stefansson bought the property. In 1947, he and Evelyn invited their good friends, Owen and Eleanor Lattimore, to stay for the summer, and during that time they made plans for the Stoddard place to become a summer center of Asiatic studies.

Owen Lattimore was born in Washington, D.C., in 1900 but shortly afterward his father moved the family to Shanghai, China, to take up a teaching position. By the time the younger Lattimore was in his twenties, he had traveled widely in China and was a fluent Chinese speaker. On his honeymoon in 1925, he and his wife Eleanor (who became his major collaborator) traveled across northern China and Mongolia, where

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Dearing Farm in the 'Lympus area of Bethel, home of Vilhjalmur and Evelyn Stefansson from 1941. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.



Vilhjalmur and Evelyn Stefansson on their porch at Dearing Farm. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

he formed a deep connection with the Mongol people and empathy for their struggles for autonomy. Among the close friends he and Eleanor made was a “Living Buddha” (somewhat akin to a cardinal of the Catholic Church) known as Dilowa Hutukhtu, who would play a role in Lattimore’s Vermont stay years later.

In 1937, Lattimore became a professor at Johns Hopkins University and by the start of the Second World War he was widely regarded as one of the world’s leading authorities on Central Asia. In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt chose him to be a personal emissary to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, a post he held until his appointment in 1942 to head the Pacific Operations of the Office of War Information. During this period he lectured, wrote, and edited *Pacific Affairs*, the influential magazine of the Institute for Pacific Relations.

Lattimore and Stefansson met at an annual meeting of the American Philosophical Society during Lattimore’s first year at Johns Hopkins, and quickly they and their wives became intimate friends. Stefansson’s wife Evelyn later recalled

the special kind of dialogue that Owen and “Stef” had when conditions were right . . . These two exceptional men, each expert in his chosen field and interested in everything that related to it directly or peripherally, would begin [a conversation]. In comparing Eskimo and Mongol ways, no detail was too small to be recited and followed by evaluation, comparison, and speculation. Both brought marvelous but different linguistic accomplishments to the discussion. Each could stir the other intellectually and bring out his best.⁸

In his memoir *Discovery*, Stefansson describes “admiring [Lattimore] for the scholar that he was and liking him for his companionable geniality and friendly openness.”⁹

By the time these four friends developed the idea of the summer center in Bethel, the postwar political landscape was undergoing a severe change, with an increasing fear of Communism and a suspicion of heretical ideas about foreign policy. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) started files on both Stefansson and Lattimore long before Senator McCarthy came on the scene; in Lattimore’s case, his support for the Maryland Civil Liberties Committee in 1941 was enough to get an FBI file started.¹⁰ As Ellen Schrecker, a leading historian of that era, has noted, “Had observers known in the 1950s what they have learned since the 1970s, when the Freedom of Information Act opened the Bureau’s files, ‘McCarthyism’ would probably be called ‘Hooverism,’” in reference to the long-time director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover.¹¹

In the 1940s, Stefansson, like many anthropologists, was already under suspicion by the FBI for the causes he supported; the fact that he

was about to undertake his long-planned *Encyclopedia Arctica* with the active assistance of Soviet experts on the Arctic only heightened his profile.¹² Stefansson's offer to the Boy Scouts of the use of his farm to learn about Arctic camping led to a sensational January 1948 article in the Hearst-controlled *New York Journal American*, in which he was identified as belonging to seventy-six different "Communist front" organizations (such as the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born and Committee for Fair Play for Puerto Rico). The Boy Scouts consequently rejected his offer, "for the protection of the Boy Scouts of America from possible public criticism."¹³

Lattimore's FBI file had been deactivated during the war, but by 1949, previously discredited witnesses were getting a second hearing from the agency, and the file was reopened. As turmoil in China increased, Lattimore began speaking publicly about his disenchantment with Chiang Kai-Shek, urging American policymakers to adjust to the possibility of an eventual victory by Mao Zedong's Communist insurgency, and arguing that Mao was not necessarily a pawn of Russian Communists. His strong opinions, forcibly expressed, made him powerful enemies, especially those on the right looking for scapegoats for the "loss" of China to the Communists.

In May 1949, both Lattimore and Stefansson appeared on a list of 102 speakers and entertainers judged by the American Legion's National Americanism Commission to be "unsuitable for Legion sponsorship."¹⁴ They were among only a handful of academics on a list that included Lena Horne, Paul Robeson, Lillian Hellman, Burl Ives, and Gene Kelly. Lattimore sent a letter to Stefansson asking, "What do you do about such newspaper stories, ignore them or write and demand to know on what grounds they make slurring remarks?"¹⁵ Unfortunately, there is no record of Stefansson's response.

That letter was one of many that spring between the two families as they considered the land purchase and the necessary renovations. Lattimore proposed bringing some Mongolian exiles and the Lattimores' son David enlisted some of his Harvard classmates to help with the renovations. The Lattimores wrote to Stefansson:

We don't at present see ourselves spending many summers in Vermont and would like to know what you think of the prospects of renting, or selling within a few years. If you think of the present sale value as being about \$1000 and we put \$1600 into fixing it up it would have to sell for about \$3000, wouldn't it, to cover taxes, agents fee, etc.?¹⁶

Stefansson replied,

The way local Vermonters now look at it . . . they put a lot of store by houses and barns, even if decrepit, and do not value hill land very



Owen Lattimore, noted Asia scholar and close friend of the Stefanssons, pictured here in the Dearing Farm kitchen. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

much, if recently cut over, as ours is. They value meadows a bit more and there are I think about 30 acres of meadow in the 60 or 80 acre patch of land west of the road. But it seems to me for purposes of sale to city slickers, a good sized piece of land to go along with the house is important. So I suggest we consider, for investment purposes, joint ownership of the buildings and of the land that is west of the road. . . .

The kudos of having been a Mongol citadel and having been built up by the Lattimores and a squad of Harvard sophomores should make the Stoddard place a conversation piece and easy to rent at a good figure whenever you do not want to use it for yourselves, family or friends . . . This letter is just thinking out loud. The main thing Ev and I want is that the deal shall go through. We want you at Dearing and the Mongols at Stoddard, and will do whatever to bring this about.¹⁷

The arrival of Lattimore's Mongolian friends was a source of excitement for the town of Bethel that summer. The group included his old friend, the "Living Buddha," Dilowa Hutukhtu. A front-page article in the *White River Valley Herald* announced, "Buddhist High Dignitary Here for Summer on Bethel Farm" and said, "The Dilowa was dressed in a long Chinese gown His bearing is very dignified and serene. He speaks no English except for a few simple phrases." An editorial on



Stefansson and Dilowa Hutukhtu. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

the following page noted, “The White River Valley is proud to welcome a Living Buddha. . . . We are sure that the dignified bearing of The Dilowa will be strengthened and fortified by his summer’s communion with the Green Mountains.”¹⁸ Long-time Bethel residents still remember the Dilowa’s sweet tooth and his fondness for treating local youngsters to ice cream.

The daughter of another Mongolian visitor, Urgunge Onon, recently recalled, “Both my parents remember their time in Vermont fondly. Because of Owen Lattimore’s great generosity, he took them (and me aged just 18 months) to Vermont to spend the summer in the old farmhouse. We were the first Mongolian family to go to Vermont.”¹⁹

Neither Stefansson nor Lattimore was aware of the FBI’s intense interest during the busy summer of 1949. The FBI took note of the Dilowa’s presence and went as far as arranging with the Bethel postmaster to intercept Lattimore’s mail. That was the best they could do, since the isolation of the Stoddard and Dearing farms presented no easy cover for first-hand reconnaissance. The enthusiastic agent assigned to the case, A. Cornelius from the Albany, New York, office, read mail, listened to phone recordings, and sent photographs of letters (some in Chinese and Mongol) to Washington for translation. Hundreds of letters to and from Lattimore ultimately wound up in bureau files.

Agent Cornelius also decided to read up on Buddhism, so that he could better understand what was taking place at the Stoddard farm. The theory he advanced was that Lattimore might be preparing the Dilowa to be the Communist figurehead in Tibet. In fact, Lattimore was working diligently with his network of contacts in Asia to save rare Tibetan cultural manuscripts from the Chinese Communists. As Lattimore had written that February to his friend Luther Evans of the Library of Congress, "Tibet is clearly doomed to come under the control of the Chinese Communists. There is, however, time for a planned salvage operation."²⁰

By late September, the Lattimores and their Mongolian friends were back in Baltimore. On September 18, Lattimore wrote to Stefansson, "We are already looking back nostalgically to the wonderful summer we had, and now Eleanor, as well as David and I, is looking forward to joining the deer hunting trip in November."²¹

During the winter of 1949–50, further developments chilled the political landscape, most significantly the conviction in January of Alger Hiss on perjury charges. Hiss had denied being part of a secret Communist group in the State Department, and his conviction emboldened embittered ex-Communist informants like Louis Budenz, political enemies of Lattimore such as the wealthy importer Alfred Kohlberg, and unscrupulous politicians such as Senator McCarthy. In February 1950, McCarthy made his first major headlines when, in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, he claimed to have the names of 205 Communists in the State Department.

Throughout February and March, McCarthy stayed in the headlines, promising to name the mastermind of this conspiracy. In March 1950, while Lattimore was on a United Nations-sponsored economic mission to Afghanistan, Senator McCarthy charged with great fanfare that Lattimore was in reality the highest-placed Soviet spy in the State Department. Despite McCarthy's haphazard methods (his charges took even the FBI by surprise), he had "a brilliant sense of timing and sure instinct for what an uncritical press and a disillusioned public would buy," according to Lattimore's biographer, Robert P. Newman.²²

Lattimore and his many supporters quickly dismissed McCarthy's charges as outlandish. Lattimore's telegram to the press, sent as he hastened home to face the charges, read in part, "McCarthy's off-record rantings moonshine . . . Delighted his whole case rests on me as this means he will fall flat on his face."²³ As Evelyn Stefansson Nef wrote in her memoir, "Could this be happening? In the United States? This felt like a Kafka novel in which unimaginable, terrifying nightmares occurred . . . Our scholarly friend Owen, the man who loved the Mongols

and their culture as much as ‘Stef’ loved the Inuit—if it had not been so scary, it might almost have been funny.”²⁴ McCarthy quickly backpedaled when it came time to address the full Senate, downgrading Lattimore to someone who had “tremendous power in the State Department as the architect of Far Eastern policy.”²⁵ But the damage had been done to Lattimore’s reputation.

It was easy to prove that Lattimore had never even been a State Department employee, and by July 1950, he was cleared of McCarthy’s charges by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but not before amassing significant legal fees (he was represented by future Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas).²⁶ It was sadly clear to the Lattimores that they would have to sell their half-share in Stefansson’s farm, and Stefansson agreed to help by placing an ad in his own name in the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

The only person who answered the ad was Ordway Southard, a former anthropology student at the University of Alaska and a long-time admirer of Stefansson. Southard had done some research in Stefansson’s New York library a few years earlier, and had helped move some books and furniture when Stefansson first came to Vermont. He saw the ad and quickly saw an opportunity to have further contact with one of his idols. On June 14, the sale was completed.

Stefansson wrote to Lattimore just after the sale that he had heard through the winter that Southard was a Communist, but “my clippings bureau was then sending me cuttings from the Hearst and Scripps-Howard press saying that *I* was a Communist . . . To me this sort of thing was Salem Witchcraft over again, and I perhaps leaned over backward not to be appear to be afflicted with what was increasingly worrying me as mob hysteria.” Stefansson astutely went on to warn Lattimore that selling the Stoddard farm to a “Communist” might be used against Lattimore. Lattimore did look into canceling the sale, but his attorney, Abe Fortas, advised him against it, because there was a valid contract.

Evelyn Stefansson did not trust Southard, and wrote in her memoir, “I was angry and hurt that I hadn’t prevailed in not wanting to sell to Southard, probably the only time in our long and happy marriage that I blamed ‘Stef’ and felt he should have listened to me.”²⁷ Evelyn’s fears were not just paranoia. What Southard did not tell Stefansson before the sale was that he and his wife Mary had been Communist Party organizers and were still Party members; while in Alabama organizing steel mill workers, Ordway M. Southard had run for governor on the Communist Party ticket in 1942, and Mary Southard ran for the state senate as a Communist that same year.

Stefansson described the ensuing confrontation with Southard in his memoir:

He had not intended to make a secret of his past, he told us. The point simply had not come up. We asked him if he had given a thought, ahead of time, to the possible consequences of his purchase. Well, yes, he had considered the matter, but the fact was, he said, none of us had done anything illegal. On this point, naturally, we had to agree. At the same time, Evelyn and I considered the situation, innocent though it was, most unfortunate for the Lattimores.²⁸

The FBI was not alone in watching the Lattimores and Stefanssons. The Southards' past might merely have been the "innocent situation" the Stefanssons imagined, if not for the attention of a local Bethel woman, Lucille Miller, who was known in the area for her extreme anti-Communist views. She claimed to have been a former "fellow traveler," but by the mid-1940s dedicated herself to exposing what she saw as left-wing cells that had formed in the Bethel–Randolph area. She wrote frequent letters to prominent conservative syndicated columnists Fulton Lewis, Jr. and Westbrook Pegler, and often sent ideas for investigative articles to the Hearst newspaper chain, especially the *Boston Evening Record*.

The influential Pegler quoted Miller in a July 1950 column titled, in one paper, "Vermont Yankees are Suckers for Commies": "The secret of Communist success here has been charm and money. They have bought their way into organizations. They have given farm jobs and contract jobs and washing and ironing work out to the people. They go out of their way to be sympathetic and understanding. I never thought the people would fall for it, but they have."²⁹ The article went on to attack Vermont author Dorothy Canfield Fisher and *Vermont Life* editor Arthur Wallace Peach. ("Baloney!" was the title of a *White River Valley Herald* editorial that week. "The Pegler story would be amusing if it were not a skillfully concocted poison.")³⁰

Special targets of Miller's were four summer residents of Randolph Center who had been on the front pages in 1948. Whittaker Chambers, a disillusioned ex-Communist, had named Lee Pressman, former lead counsel for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and Nathan Witt, former secretary general of the National Labor Relations Board, as part of a spy network that included Alger Hiss (who summered with his family in Peacham). Pressman and Witt's attorney (as well as the attorney for the Communist Party), John Abt, and Abt's sister Marion Bachrach, also owned summer residences in Randolph Center.

By July 1950, only Pressman still owned property in Vermont; but with Lattimore on the front pages, *Boston Evening Record* reporter

Thomas Riley finally took up Lucille Miller's invitation to see for himself what was happening in Bethel and Randolph Center. He promptly uncovered the Southards' past associations and rushed to press on July 27. Senator McCarthy charged that day on the Senate floor that Lattimore's property was "in the Hiss area of Vermont" and that the profit Lattimore made on the transaction (\$3,000 was the figure quoted) was going to the coffers of the Communist Party. Said McCarthy, "There is no secret that the way the Communist Party handles its payoffs and contributions is often by the transfer of property."³¹

When reached in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, Lattimore told the Associated Press, "Since I had to sell my property to meet expenses forced on me by McCarthy's scurrilous attacks, the property was sold to a stranger about whom I knew nothing and of whom I had never heard." The reporter then asked Lattimore about a comment by Senator Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa concerning the possible discovery of uranium oxide on the Vermont farm, increasing its potential value. "Lattimore laughed loudly and said, 'Just wait till I tell that one to my wife.'³²

Soon Stefansson's connection was news as well ("Link Explorer With Lattimore Land Deal" read the *Rutland Herald* headline of July 29).³³ Pegler's nationally syndicated column that week focused on the land transaction: "Not only did Lattimore buy an interest in Stefansson's dwelling in a backwoods Vermont spot where Abt, Hiss, Pressman, Witt, and Bachrach had settled, but less than three months later sold it to a buyer described as a prominent Communist."³⁴

Once reporters investigated the actual Bethel town records, McCarthy's story of a \$3,000 profit was easily demolished. Publishers Robert Mitchell of the *Rutland Herald* and John Drysdale of the *White River Valley Herald* and *Bradford Opinion* led the way, with Drysdale summarizing, "No 'excessive profit' indeed no profit at all, was made on the sale of the Stoddard farm. The Lattimores received only half the selling price (Mr. McCarthy take note!)."³⁵ Mitchell added in a *Rutland Herald* editorial, "One can only conclude that [McCarthy] deliberately withheld the information that Stefansson was the other half-owner of the Bethel farm and that he was to receive half of the sale price, because this would have weakened the accusations and insinuations against Lattimore."³⁶

Drysdale led off his editorial in early August with, "The quiet White River towns of Randolph and Bethel have had an introduction in the past week to the slander technique of a certain section of the American press and of Senator McCarthy. Those who will examine the McCarthy accusations . . . can see a perfect case history of the manner in which individuals can be smeared and slandered in attacks against which they

have no defense except the cool common sense of their neighbors.”³⁷ The more conservative *Burlington Free Press* weighed in, “Most hard-headed Vermonters will want to examine with care his present charges before getting into a lather over the situation.”³⁸

Even the *Burlington Daily News* and *St. Albans Messenger*, owned by William Loeb and perhaps the most conservative papers in Vermont, showed some skepticism. On July 29, both papers ran an exclusive interview with the journalist Dorothy Thompson, a syndicated columnist for the Hearst chain and a friend of the Stefanssons who lived in nearby Barnard. The headline read, “Noted Author Doubts Bethel Is Red Colony.” Thompson was quoted as saying she was “extremely skeptical” about McCarthy’s charges. “I see nothing strange in the transactions . . . I see nothing odd about two old friends buying a farm together and selling it when one of them needs the money.”³⁹

M. Dickey Drysdale, son of John Drysdale and publisher of the *White River Valley Herald* (now *The Herald of Randolph*) since 1975, recalls that his father persuaded Robert Mitchell of the *Rutland Herald*, to follow the story further, using the advantage of that paper’s statewide circulation.⁴⁰ Mitchell then took that step, enlisting the collaboration of John S. Hooper of the *Brattleboro Reformer* in commissioning an investigative report by a nationally known journalist, William Gilman. Gilman had worked for the *New York Times* and United Press International in China and had been a war correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance. He was also the author of *Our Hidden Front* (1944), about Alaska’s role in World War II, and *The Spy Trap* (1944), a study of prewar espionage cases.

The series of six articles ran from August 14–19, 1950. Mitchell explained in an editorial of August 12, “There has been so much loose talk and rumor locally, fanned by distorted reports from outside sources, that this newspaper hopes that a constructive service can be performed by presenting a factual report on the communist problem.”⁴¹

The first article was an overview of the situation headlined, “Red Stronghold in State Mostly Hotbed of Gossip and Rumor.” Gilman noted that, “Although Vermonters know Randolph Center is some 40 miles from Peacham and Bethel is around 50, the Hearst press has ringed all three towns into what it calls Vermont’s ‘Hiss area.’” He quoted a local farmer, Clifton Chadwick, as saying, “I wouldn’t brand anybody a Communist till I knew. It’s gotten so that my daughter’s ashamed to say she’s from Randolph Center.” Gilman complimented Drysdale for his editorials “appealing to common sense that have followed the best traditions of a fearless and unbiased press.”⁴²

The next day’s installment was headlined, “US-Born Communists

Are Difficult to Spot When They Settle in Vermont,” and was a profile of the Southards. “Ordway Southard,” said Gilman, “has a family background that’s as American as corn-on-the-cob . . . His equally Red wife, Mary, was Alabama-born, speaks with a cultivated Southern accent, and was graduated from Radcliffe College.” The Southards spoke openly to Gilman about their backgrounds, Ordway Southard’s anthropological interest in Siberia and in Stefansson’s work, and their purchase of the land. But Gilman added, “He spoke willingly at our first meeting . . . But when he learned that he was being investigated, he changed tactics [and] tried to provoke a brawl with this reporter.”⁴³

Stefansson himself was the subject of the next article, “Famous Arctic Explorer Sets the Record Straight on Sale of Bethel House,” with a full history of the various transactions over the years, followed by a profile of Lucille Miller on day four, “Reformed ‘Fellow Traveler’ Finds More Reds in Bethel Than the FBI Does in State.” In this article, Miller traced the Randolph Center “red cell” activity back to a free-thinking farmer, Closson Gilbert, who had gone away to Chicago to study for the ministry, come under the influence of social reformer Jane Addams, and returned to Vermont to promote leftist ideas. She was quoted as saying, “You have to go to Randolph Center and take your butterfly net . . . The place is crawling with Reds.”⁴⁴

“Randolph Center Residents Reply to Communist Charge” was the headline of the fifth article, in which Gilman interviewed targets of Lucille Miller. Most, like farmers Harry Cooley and Morris LaFrance, had landed on her list due to their public support of the left-leaning Henry Wallace in the presidential race of 1948. Gilman also noted that the town’s State School of Agriculture (now Vermont Technical College) was undergoing its own controversy, as college president George Webster was described as attempting to force the resignation of faculty member Philip Hodgdon, after Hodgdon had publicly asked Lucille Miller for proof of her charges.⁴⁵

The final article, “Vermonters Frown on Use of Violence to Rid State of Communists They Hate,” took a sampling of local opinion. “A vote would show close to 100 percent of local folks opposed to having real Communists around. But that also brings up the stubborn problem of protecting the man called ‘Communist’ when he isn’t one.”⁴⁶ The seven final paragraphs are given over to J. Edgar Hoover’s instructions—verbatim—on how to report suspicions to the FBI, ironic given what was revealed much later about the Bureau’s methods of hounding non-Communists such as Stefansson and Lattimore (Lattimore’s file would grow to 38,000 pages).⁴⁷

In the following two weeks, the *Reformer* and the *Herald* published

several letters to the editor about the controversy, most supportive of the investigative series. One person who signed anonymously as “Freedom Loving,” said, “In the last few weeks, we in Vermont have been unfortunate enough to see first hand how our freedom can be lost without a single Russian soldier standing over us.” Another letter, from W.W. Ballard of Norwich, began, “Thank you for having sponsored the Gilman articles about the Red menace in the heart of Vermont. . . . Your account of a state of mind in the affected communities deserves a good deal of thought because the same thing could happen anywhere in these nervous times.”⁴⁸

By the end of August, the controversy over the land sale had disappeared from local front pages and editorial columns. Evelyn Stefansson wrote to Eleanor Lattimore in early September that “everywhere we hear words of praise for Owen’s wonderful fight [against McCarthy’s charges].”⁴⁹

The Southards stayed on at the Stoddard farm, though the Stefanssons refused to speak to them after that summer’s events. They maintained a low profile until an incident in April 1952 put them back in the news; their pickup truck was vandalized with a hatchet in broad daylight. A local man, Thomas Petrocelli, was charged with public intoxication, breach of peace, and malicious destruction of property, and another Bethel resident, Wilfred Loura, was alleged to have struck Ray Brink, a Southard neighbor who was attempting to escort Mary Southard away from the scene.

In a letter to the *Rutland Herald* several days later, Lucille Miller asked to be charged as well by State’s Attorney Lewis Springer: “I take complete responsibility for this incident and all others like it because if it were not for my 1950 attack on this Communist colony, nobody would have known that the Southards were Communists.”⁵⁰

This letter was on Stefansson’s mind when the Lattimores proposed a visit that July, shortly after Dwight Eisenhower’s selection of Richard Nixon for his running mate. “Much as I want to see you,” Stefansson wrote, “I feel you must do your own judging on whether Mrs. Miller is likely to send in ‘information’ and how likely the Nixon wing of the Republicans is to pick up and use her imaginings in a further attack on you. . . . If you decide that coming here is no more dangerous than not coming, we can get up some presentable wakes here for the demise of American liberty.”⁵¹ There is no evidence of what the Lattimores decided.

Stefansson’s fears were well founded, for by 1952, Lattimore’s troubles had increased. Although he had been cleared by the Senate Judiciary Committee in July 1950, Lattimore’s defiant stance towards Senator McCarthy created new enemies; Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada,

chairman of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, took up McCarthy's charges against him and added new ones, aided by the FBI. Lattimore was forced to spend the next five years on leave from Johns Hopkins, fighting charges that he had lied to Congress. The charges were eventually dismissed in 1955. He went on to reclaim his reputation as a world-class scholar, as head of the Asian Studies Department at Leeds University, England, and was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. He lived to see Richard Nixon go to China, and revisited China and Mongolia before his death in 1988.

Although the Southards kept their property until 1964, they left Bethel shortly after the vandalism incident and continued their travels. During their stay in Hawaii, they became deeply involved in Asian culture and philosophy; "Ordway" and "Mary" became "O" and "Malia." It was as "O Mabson Southard" that he became well-known in the poetry world as both a haiku poet and an expert on the form.

Lucille Miller and her husband, Manuel, emboldened by letters of support she received from all over the country, started publishing a mimeographed broadside in 1952 called *Green Mountain Rifleman*. Their targets were Communists, Jews, and Vermonters such as Education Commissioner A. John Holden (although not Jewish himself, Holden was accused of "following the B'nai Brith line").⁵² The Millers made headlines again in 1955 when federal marshals stormed their house and arrested them both for urging young men to defy the authority of the government by refusing to register for the draft.

Shortly after his proposed *Encyclopedia Arctica* was scuttled by the Department of the Navy in 1949, Vilhjalmur Stefansson donated his entire collection of Arctic literature (running to over 20,000 volumes) to Dartmouth College. In 1951, he was offered a position there as director of a Polar Institute. Although he and Evelyn kept their Bethel property until his death in 1962, the "Southard Affair" left lingering bitterness, and the Stefanssons spent most of their time in Hanover. But they weren't yet through with being subjects of suspicion. In 1954, New Hampshire's headline-hunting Attorney General Louis Wyman accused them both, with little success, of being Communist sympathizers. Stefansson's memoir, published posthumously in 1974, had a chapter on the Lattimore episode that concluded with these words: "Even today, the nightmare [of those years] reappears, reminding us that the McCarthy type of persecution is a sinister poison that affects the innocent perhaps more than the guilty."⁵³

NOTES

¹Millikin University Haiku Writer Profile, 16 August 2001: old.millikin.edu/haiku/writer/profiles/OMabsonSouthard.html.

- ²Bradford Opinion, 3 August 1950, 1:1.
- ³Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont* (Barre, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 2004), 528.
- ⁴Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Tradition: The Biography of an Outlook on Life* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 392.
- ⁵Tyler Resch, *The Bob Mitchell Years* (Rutland, Vt.: The Rutland Herald, 1994), 184.
- ⁶*The Herald of Randolph*, 15 February 2001, 1:1.
- ⁷Haldor Laxness, *On the Cultural Situation* (1927), quoted in Gisli Pálsson, *Traveling Passions: The Hidden Life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth University Press, 2005), 267.
- ⁸Evelyn Stefansson Nef, introduction to Owen and Eleanor Lattimore, eds., *Silks, Spices, and Empire* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968), x. Evelyn Nef was a fascinating woman in her own right. Born Evelyn Schwartz in Brooklyn, she was a cabaret singer and puppeteer in Greenwich Village in the 1930s. She and Stefansson were both regulars at Romany Marie's, a popular Village gathering spot. After an early marriage to puppeteer Bil Baird ended in divorce, she was asked by Stefansson to be an assistant at his personal library. They soon fell in love and despite their age difference of over 30 years, married in 1941. After Stefansson's death in 1962, she moved to Washington, D.C., remarried, and, at age 60, became a psychotherapist. She died at age 96 in 2009.
- ⁹Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 369.
- ¹⁰Robert P. Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 52.
- ¹¹Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 209.
- ¹²David Price, *Threatening Anthropology* (Raleigh, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 287–291. Price's thesis, backed by extensive research, is that anthropologists, committed by the nature of their work to equality of the races, were more likely to be involved in anti-racist political groups than were other academics. Because the Communist Party was the most active organization fighting racism in the 1930s and 1940s, many other anti-racist groups were suspected by the FBI as being potentially subversive.
- ¹³Copy of Boy Scouts memo from "Mr. Goodman" to "Dr. Fretwell," in Lattimore papers, Rauner Special Collections, Dartmouth College.
- ¹⁴*The Baltimore Sun*, 10 May 1949.
- ¹⁵Lattimore to Stefansson, 18 April 1949, Lattimore papers.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Stefansson to Lattimore, 29 April 1949, Lattimore papers.
- ¹⁸*White River Valley Herald*, 14 July 1949, 1:1, 2.
- ¹⁹Sally (Onon) Bishop, E-mail to author, 25 August 2010.
- ²⁰Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China*, 190–192.
- ²¹Lattimore to Stefansson, 18 September 1949, Lattimore papers.
- ²²Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China*, 215.
- ²³Ibid., 218.
- ²⁴Evelyn Stefansson Nef, *Finding My Way* (Washington, D.C.: Francis Press, 2002), 169.
- ²⁵Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the 'Loss' of China*, 222.
- ²⁶Ibid., 302.
- ²⁷Nef, *Finding My Way*, 173.
- ²⁸Stefansson, *Discovery*, 371.
- ²⁹*Orlando Sentinel*, 28 July 1950.
- ³⁰*White River Valley Herald*, 10 August 1950.
- ³¹Associated Press, quoted in *Rutland Herald*, 28 July 1950, 1:1.
- ³²Associated Press, quoted in *Rutland Herald*, 28 July 1950, 1:3.
- ³³*Rutland Herald*, 29 July 1950, 1:1.
- ³⁴*Berkshire [Massachusetts] Eagle*, 30 July 1950, 1:4.
- ³⁵*White River Valley Herald*, 3 August 1950, 1:2.
- ³⁶*Rutland Herald*, 30 July 1950, 1:8.
- ³⁷*White River Valley Herald*, 10 August 1950.
- ³⁸*Burlington Free Press*, 29 July 1950, 1:6.
- ³⁹*Burlington Daily News*, 29 July 1950, 1:1.
- ⁴⁰Conversation with author, 15 December 2010.
- ⁴¹*Rutland Herald*, 12 August 1950, 1:8.
- ⁴²Ibid., 14 August 1950, 1:1, 3.
- ⁴³Ibid., 15 August 1950, 1:1, 3.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., 17 August 1950, 1:1, 3.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., 18 August 1950, 1:1, 2.

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⁴⁶ Ibid., 19 August 1950, 1:1, 3.

⁴⁷ Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China*, 53.

⁴⁸ "Freedom Loving" in *Brattleboro Reformer*, 21 August 1950, 1:4; W.W. Ballard in the *Rutland Herald*, 28 August 1950, 1:8.

⁴⁹ Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China*, 308.

⁵⁰ *Rutland Herald*, 14 April 1952, 1:8.

⁵¹ Stefansson to Lattimore, 14 July 1952, Lattimore papers.

⁵² Lucille Miller, *Green Mountain Rifleman*, 14 November 1953.

⁵³ Stefansson, *Discovery*, 374.