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Into the Aether:

The Life and Death of the Knoxville Metaphysical Library

By *Chris Caldwell**



Knoxville, Tennessee in the 1930s was a community of extremes. As international tensions rose in the preamble to a world war, East Tennessee was a region still recovering from the Great Depression. Recovery programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which claimed Knoxville as its headquarters, employed thousands across the region, but thousands more waited for the better lives, jobs, and electric power. For many Knoxvilleians, TVA was full of outsiders who, like other recent arrivals to the city, did not adhere to the predominantly traditional, mainline Protestant Christian values that were most common in the area. When best-selling travel writer John Gunther assessed Knoxville in the mid-1940s, and deemed it “an extremely puritanical town,” he was likely unaware of a decidedly un-puritanical enterprise at West Church Avenue in the three-story red-brick Cherokee Building.¹ Within that building was a unique collection of reading materials that continues to fascinate readers.

Prelude to a Collection

Born in Rutherford, New Jersey, entrepreneur and humanitarian Edward William Ogden (1870-1946) arrived in Knoxville by way of Chicago in 1897, and married Knoxville native Mary Wilson (1877-1954) in 1902 at age 32. Ogden led or established a number of businesses and community organizations over the course of his life, including Ogden Bros. book store, Knoxville Engraving Company, and the Knoxville Lithographing Company. He was, for a time, secretary and vice president of the *Knoxville Journal and*

* The author is rare books and humanities librarian at the Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

¹ John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York, 1947), 761.



Edward William Ogden and Mary Wilson Ogden volunteered with the Red Cross in France during World War I. In the mid-1930s they helped found the Knoxville Metaphysical Library. Knoxville Lithographing Company, Knox County in the World War, 1917, 1918, 1919 (Knoxville, 1919), 411.



Tribune Company, while for most of his professional life he was vice president of the Knoxville Morris Plan Bank which focused on a reasonable lending system for middle class workers.²

Early in his stint as publisher, he published *The Closed Door* (1913), Hannah J. Price's popular suffrage novel, predicating his lifelong interest in social justice issues.³ Ogden descended from English Nonconformists and Swiss Brethren, which may have also accounted for his love of humanity and modes of spiritual inquiry. Albert Chavannes (1836-1903), Ogden's uncle, was a noted utopian novelist and philosopher, a connection which likely also contributed to Ogden's openness to progressive ideas. Notably, Ogden co-founded and led the Knoxville chapter of the American Red Cross. With the onset of World War I, Edward and his wife Mary volunteered with the Red Cross in France.⁴ This experience strengthened their concern for human welfare. Their other humanitarian efforts include his involvement with a settlement house for women and the Tennessee Conference of Social Work, of which he was president.

With a growing interest in spiritual matters and friendly support from city elites, such as the McClung family whose influence has been significant in Knoxville from the early days of statehood to the present, Ogden quietly launched a free lending library. Opened sometime in 1938, the Knoxville Metaphysical Library (KML) was located in the downtown Cherokee Building. The first evidence of its presence in concept, if not by name, is noted in the press by pioneering local columnist Lucy Curtis Templeton in her June 11, 1939 *Knoxville News-Sentinel* column "Books, Old and New." She touted the collection saying:

² James Terry White and George Derby, *The National Cyclopædia of American Biography: Being the History of the United States as Illustrated in the Lives of the Founders, Builders, And Defenders of the Republic, And of the Men and Women Who Are Doing the Work and Moulding the Thought of the Present Time* (New York, 1949), 35:55.

³ Hannah J. Price, *The Closed Door* (Knoxville, 1913).

⁴ "E.W. Ogden, Voluntary Helper of Many for Years, Is Dead," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, January 3, 1946.

If you are interested in metaphysical literature you should know of a lending library in Knoxville where one may borrow books on this and kindred subjects absolutely free. It is in Room 40, Cherokee Building, West Church Avenue, and is conducted by a little group of altruists and idealists although they would demure at hearing themselves so described. All without a price except an interest in your own and your brother's welfare.⁵

It is worth noting the local library environment of the time. Just a few blocks away from the Cherokee Building, Knoxville's Lawson McGhee Library had been open to the public since 1886 and small branch libraries were opening across the city. Lawson McGhee's Free Colored Carnegie Branch Library, also a few blocks away, opened in 1918. Otherwise, there is no evidence of any other public lending libraries in the city, and certainly nothing as unusual as KML.

Metaphysical or Bahá'í Library?

Other than Templeton's announcement, there are only a handful of references in print to KML, and those appear as brief newspaper announcements. These references often lead with "All Invited" and mention a collection of 1,000 books with "unusual," "occult," "mystic," or "religious" titles. On the 2017 Knox Heritage Walking Map "Historic Downtown Knoxville," the KML is mentioned as one of the many tenants of the Cherokee Building. The organization designated the library a "Bahá'í amenity."⁶ This assumption is likely drawn from a 2006 *Metro Pulse* article by Jack Neely. Neely based his research on a variety of sources including conversations with University of Tennessee professor Wes Morgan, who speculated on the possibility of an Ogden-Bahá'í connection.⁷

Why Bahá'í and why Knoxville? A 1937 article in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* announced "Baha'i Tenets to be Revealed Here."⁸ This announcement corresponds to a late-1930s Bahá'í campaign across the continent, with a particular focus on the racially-divided southern states and Latin America.⁹ First introduced to the United States at Chicago's World Parliament of Religions in 1893, the Bahá'í faith is rooted in Iranian religious traditions

⁵ Lucy Curtis Templeton, "Books, Old and New," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, June 11, 1939.

⁶ "Cherokee Building (36)," Knox Heritage, Historic Downtown Knoxville Walking Tour, <http://knoxheritage.org/our-work/neighborhood-tours/historic-downtown-knoxville-walking-tour/cherokee-building/>.

⁷ Jack Neely, "Metaphysical Education," *Metro Pulse*, January 26, 2006.

⁸ "Baha'i Tenets to be Revealed Here," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, June 20, 1937.

⁹ Roger M. Dahl, "Three Teaching Methods Used during North America's First Seven-Year Plan" *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5 (1993): 1-16.

and has been called Bahá'í by name since 1863.¹⁰

As the movement was still fairly new to the United States in the early twentieth century, it is not surprising that the organization was absent from city directories of the era. The 1939 *Knoxville City Directory*, for example, listed many houses of worship, segregated, across 16 religious denominations, as well as nearly 40 non-denominational churches,



The Cherokee Building on West Church Avenue served as the first location of the Knoxville Metaphysical Library. Photograph by the author, September 2018.

with no mention of Bahá'í. However, a group focused on the faith was clearly formed, as there were several announcements in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* about Bahá'í talks at the Andrew Johnson Hotel and Bahá'í Home Group meetings to study "The New Age" on Thursdays in 1939.¹¹ Whether these events happened as part of a national campaign or were homegrown, evidence suggests that at least some in Knoxville's community of seekers were open to new religious experiences.

Recently an archivist at the National Bahá'í Archives confirmed that the structure of the Bahá'í church was adherent driven and not centralized. That detail of organization means that while some across the nation may have acquired and sold, or given away, Bahá'í texts, there was not a focused effort in the mid-twentieth century to create regional libraries or reading rooms.¹² There was, however, a centralized effort to gain adherents through touring lectures in the late 1930s where "[t]he teaching work also generated good Bahá'í book sales, as each Bahá'í lecture had a table with Bahá'í books to purchase."¹³

The National Bahá'í Archives has no record of the Ogdens as members or regional contacts.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Knoxville did have a Bahá'í presence. Some clues to the nature and extent of Knoxville's Bahá'í community are in the Knoxville Metaphysical Library's accession book held by the Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Tennessee. The book lists eleven titles under the November 12, 1941

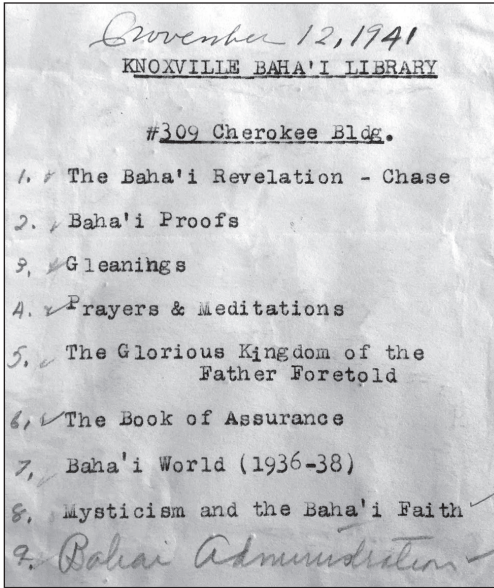
¹⁰ John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago, 1893), 2:1125-26.

¹¹ "Baha'i Meeting," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, June 4, 1939.

¹² Email from Lewis Walker to author, February 6, 2017, in author's possession.

¹³ Dahl, "Teaching Methods," 4.

¹⁴ Walker to author, February 6, 2017.



The Knoxville Metaphysical Library's accession book listed several Bahá'í books in the inventory. Accession Book, MS-0542, Ogden Metaphysical Library Catalog and Accession Book, Betsy B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

heading of "Knoxville Bahá'í Library, #309 Cherokee Building."¹⁵ This is over two years after the May 1939 newspaper announcement of the formation of the "Knoxville Bahá'í spiritual assembly" which named "Mrs. George Creech" (Arla Weller) as the group's treasurer. Though partially erased, her name is still visible on the endpaper of Shoghi

Effendi's *Bahá'í Administration* (1936) also held by the University of Tennessee Libraries. This volume bears the stamp of the KML. In the same handbook is a plate for the Knoxville Bahá'í Library on 2430 E. Fifth Avenue, though Knoxville city directories from 1936-1941 have no listing for such a library. Furthermore, a different person resided at the address each year, none of whom had a known affiliation with either the local Bahá'í movement or the Knoxville Metaphysical Library.

There is a strong possibility that the eleven Bahá'í titles appearing in the KML accession book indicated a type of sub-collection in the early days of the KML, and may have been donated by Arla Creech. Of those listed, only five remain at the University of Tennessee and only one contains Creech's name. The books may also have been a donation to the local reading group from a visiting lecturer on the robust Bahá'í lecture circuit, or ones that the Ogdens acquired when attending one of their numerous lectures. Regardless, any connection between KML and Bahá'í appears friendly, but tenuous. Ogden, and the patrons of the KML, were clearly interested in a more omnivorous approach to spirituality, with the obvious Bahá'í-related books in the collection only representing a very small percentage of the nearly 2,000 titles accessioned. Additionally, Ogden's library was seemingly involved with hosting its own roster of lecturers on non-Bahá'í topics, such "Scientific Spirituality," given by O.G. Beeler in 1940.¹⁶

¹⁵ Accession Book, MS-0542, Ogden Metaphysical Library Catalog and Accession Book, Betsy B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

¹⁶ "Dr. Beeler to Speak," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, November 16, 1940.

What the Accession Book and Circulation Cards Reveal

Much of the KML collection may have been built with purchases by the Ogdens, though the accession book contains records of numerous donors from significant families including McClung, Henry, Zatlukal, McNaughton, Huffman, Stone, Boudreau, LaForge, and Davis. During the 1940s, these and other donors gave dozens of titles to the KML.¹⁷ The Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives maintains the KML accession book and catalog cards (with possibly erratic circulation notations), along with correspondence regarding the fate of the collection in the 1960s. Only a small fraction of the KML books are currently accounted for, but the Creekmore Special Collections and Archives is currently conducting a census and recovery project with the hope to reunite some part of the original collection.

Many of the nearly 2,000 titles of the complete collection were acquired after 1942 and seem to have been kept together as a whole as late as 1969. Aside from the 11-item list of Bahá'í books from 1941, the titles and topics are varied. The accession book provides a handful of categories aside from metaphysical ones such as "French Stories," which includes provocative titles such as *Sex Searchlights* (1929), *Why Priests Should Wed* (1927), *History of Prostitution* (1931), and *Pleasure Guide to Paris* (1927). Other categories include: "Books of New

Date June 1, 1946		ACCESSION SHEET		
NO.	AUTHOR	TITLE	VOL.	PUBL.
01	Holliday, C.	Abraham Lincoln in Heaven		
02	Colcord, D.	Abe Lincoln the Master Salesman		
03	King, B.	Abolishing Death		
04	Jones, E.S.	Abundant Living		
05	White, S.	Across the Unknown		
06	Ramacharaka	Advanced course in Yogi II Philosophy		
07	Kent, R.	After This		
08	Bland, O.	Adventures of Modern Occultist		
09	Works Pub.Co.	Alcoholics Anonymous		
10	Allen, J.	All these things aided		
11		Albertus Magnus		
12	Foulks, F.	All things made new		
13	Lewis, R.	Along Civilization trails		
14	Simpson, H.	Altars of earth		
15	Maxwell, S.	America must choose Plenocracy		
16	Heline, T.	America's destiny		
17	Robinson, W.	America's sex marriage & divorce problems		
18	Abertus	An American master		
19	Heindel, M.	Ancient & modern Initiation		
20	Colville, W.	Ancient Mystery & modern revelation		
21	Besant, A.	Ancient wisdom		
22	White, S.	Anchors to windward		
23	Theosophical Student	Angel & the demon, vol.1		
24	"	" " " " " " , vol.2		
25	Besant, A.	Ancient wisdom		

A majority of the 2,000 books in the Knoxville Metaphysical Library's collection were acquired after 1942. This alphabetical accession list from 1946 indicates a variety of topics. Accession Book, MS-0542, Ogdens Metaphysical Library Catalog and Accession Book, Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

¹⁷ Accession Book, Ogdens Catalog and Accession Book, Creekmore UT.

York,” “Travel Books,” “Astrological Books,” and “Crime Books.” “Books for Sale” included multiple translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* (n.d.) and titles by early self-help philosopher James Allen. Overwhelmingly, though, most of the library’s holdings are listed without category, like the Rosicrucian Fellowship’s *Salads and Vegetarian Menus* (1942). Popular nineteenth century fiction included titles from Edgar Allan Poe, C.S. Lewis, and occultist Helena Blavatsky. All existed alongside books on socialism and regionally published outliers such as the Edward Ogden-published *Knox County in the World War, 1917, 1918, 1919* (1919). The topics covered in the KML collection were wide-ranging and included both the popular and arcane.¹⁸

There are no extant registration cards for the KML. Membership registration of any kind did not seem to be a requirement for borrowing or use privileges. The Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives has two boxes of catalog cards with borrowers’ signatures on the reverse, which offer a snapshot of reading habits of some of Knoxville’s more adventurous readers. These cards bear further inspection to determine the number of unique names and if book donors were also library users. Many of the titles appear to have never circulated, but many circulated ten or more times with just a few of the most popular books being:

- Stewart White, *Across the Unknown* (1939)
- Basil King, *Abolishing Death* (1919)
- J.E. Esslemont, *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* (1923)
- Frank B. Whitney, *Beginning Again* (1938)
- Wil L. Garver, *Brother of the Third Degree* (1894)
- Richard Erikson, *Consciousness and the Fourth Dimension* (1923)
- Violet Tweedale, *Cosmic Christ* (1930)
- Edward C. Randall, *Dead Have Never Died* (1917)
- Dion Fortune, *Esoteric Orders and Their Work* (1928)
- Max Heindel, *Teachings of an Initiate* (1927)

The passing of time was not kind to the KML as a gathering place or a collection. After Edward W. Ogden’s death on January 3, 1946, the library was in flux for several years, with its multiple locations and managers/librarians such as Clara S. Huffman sometimes noted in city directories.¹⁹ Without a stable location, the metaphysical library often remained boxed and tucked away in available spaces. One inventory record in the accession book listed “Books Packed in Suit Box Under Lounge” as a location.²⁰

¹⁸ Knoxville Lithographing Company, *Knox County in the World War, 1917, 1918, 1919* (Knoxville, 1919).

¹⁹ Email from Wes Morgan to author, October 10, 2014, in author’s possession.

²⁰ Accession Book, Ogden Catalog and Accession Book, Creekmore UT.

After the Founder is Gone

In December 1951, Mary Ogden, along with unidentified members of her “Libraries Board,” sought a permanent home for KML. She made the appeal to Knoxville’s Unitarian House, the newly established meeting place of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church. Mary Ogden credited the KML readers and financial kindness of the McClung family for having kept the library alive after her husband’s death. At the time of the offer, she stated that her only stipulation for transfer of the collection was “that they be kept together and that there never be a charge for reading them.”²¹

On December 20, 1951, the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church (TVUC) graciously accepted the offer as a “library starter,” and promised a dedication ceremony in January of the following year.²² While their progressive, inclusive approach to religious matters made the Unitarians natural stewards for the large quantity of esoteric books, the arrangement was fraught with challenges, especially the lack of a permanent facility for the TVUC in Knoxville. Correspondence from July 1952 indicated that, in consultation with the Lawson McGhee Public Library, the Ogden Library would benefit, as would the Unitarians’ own small library, from proper cataloging, possibly by a University of Tennessee librarian as it “is not usable by the casual reader.”²³ A manuscript note dated August 5, 1952, stated the matter will be referred to a “Dr. Henry” for guidance.

The Ogdens stipulated that the collection stay intact and be freely available. Presumably for reasons of storage logistics and possibly the wane in popularity of early twentieth century iterations of spiritual inquiry, the Unitarians turned the collection over to the University of Tennessee Libraries in the early 1960s.²⁴ There is no evidence that the TVUC was ever able to make the books available to the community.

Following the transfer there is little information about access to the collection and its location. The next clue comes from a December 1962 letter from Unitarian-Universalist and UT history professor, LeRoy Graf to the UT Libraries. His letter made the assumption that “those parts of the Ogden Library which were serviceable have been incorporated into our collection.”²⁵ Graf’s interest in the collection continued and he seems to have become a consultant of sorts on the use and provenance. On January 20, 1969 he received a letter from the UT Libraries questioning ownership, seeking advice on memorial bookplate design, and thanking the professor for his help with “a rather sticky problem.”²⁶ Whether the “sticky problem” was

²¹ Mary Ogden to Dr. Cloud, December 5, 1951; “Ogden Memorial Library,” all in box 4, folder 30, AR-63 Tennessee University Library Papers, Creekmore UT.

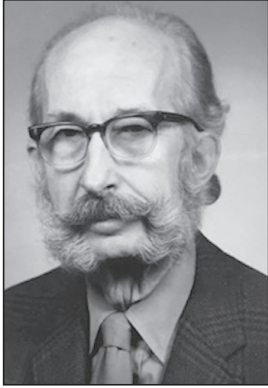
²² Harry Wiersema to Mary Ogden, December 20, 1951, Library Papers, Creekmore UT.

²³ Petie [Mrs. W.J. Moulder] to John [Voorhees], July 31, 1952, Library Papers, Creekmore UT.

²⁴ Leroy P. Graf to Ruth Ringo, December 22, 1962, Library Papers, Creekmore UT.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Olive Branch to LeRoy P. Graf, January 20, 1969, Library Papers, Creekmore UT.



Leroy P. Graf was an active member of the University of Tennessee history department from 1945-1985, as well as a prolific scholar and activist. During the 1960s he took an interest in the collection from the Knoxville Metaphysical Library. Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

related to the collection is not known. In September 1969, Graf wrote to Ruth Ringo, associate director of the UT Libraries, to confirm that in consultation with the Unitarians, they are “under no obligation to preserve as a separate entity Mr. Ogden’s collection.” Graf reflected:

Recently I have had occasion to talk to one of my graduate students who is interested in this sort of thing, and he suggests that a number of the books which may seem to be rather unscholarly and insubstantial are, in fact, rather rare and valuable books reflecting a particular kind of mentality and psychology. I cannot speak personally on this matter, but it does make me wonder whether we should be hasty about disposing of any part of the collection. In the absence of an expert in this rather recondite field, we might very well take steps to accession the entire library.²⁷

An update from the library on memorial bookplate progress followed in October 1969, and there the paper trail ends. Any KML books accessioned into UT Libraries can sometimes be identified by a donor plate or KML stamp, though the provenance is not apparent from any existing cataloging metadata. Thorough reverse searching is necessary to fully understand the state of the dispersed collection. A meticulous investigation of the KML accession book, catalog cards, and the library catalog, along with visual inspections title-by-title are methods that would likely reveal any KML items hidden in the collection. Such results would better establish how much of the library remains in the UT Libraries holdings. Efforts are under way by the Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives to identify and recover the earliest portions of the original collection.

Many of the titles that were part of the KML library were somewhat common books for the time. Thus, those books were not necessarily rare or valuable in today’s market. For example, a recent search of the antiquarian book market revealed an item stamped “Knoxville Metaphysical Library” for sale in North Carolina: Max Heindel’s *Teachings of an Initiate*, which circulated ten times at the KML in the 1937-1944 period according to the circulation record. It was available in 2016 for \$15.00.²⁸ The association or

²⁷ LeRoy P. Graf to Ruth Ringo, September 10, 1969, Library Papers, Creekmore UT.

²⁸ “*Teachings of an Initiate* First Edition by Heindel, Max,” September 19, 2016, AbeBooks.com.

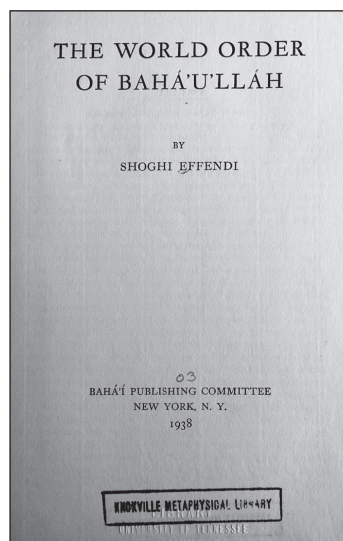
provenance that connects the missing titles to the KML is the real value that librarians at the Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives are trying to re-establish.

Reuniting Historical Libraries

Numerous questions remain about the life of the KML. Edward W. Ogden's obituary does not mention the library by name or any church affiliation, while Mary Ogden's obituary mentions her years of community service.²⁹ Are there discernible reading patterns indicated in the KML's circulation records similar to national trends for the era? Did any of the books contain significant readers' or ownership marks? Was there concern in the local metaphysical "community" that some items in the collection were decidedly less spirit-focused than others? What guest speakers did the KML host during its existence? How did the KML inform the lives of its users? Did similar free libraries of esoteric material appear in other Appalachian cities?

As noted, KML circulation records and book lists can be found at the Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives. In addition, there are several books in the circulating collection with KML bookplates, reminders of their former association. These options to view titles from the KML library result in questions about the value of reuniting such a collection. What insights into local history would a reassembly reveal? What is the university library's role in documenting the past and revealing the complexity and diversity of beliefs between the wars?

There is much to be learned from the history of small, shared libraries, and much to be lost when such collections disappear or are dispersed. In this regard, the afterlife of the KML, in what few remnants remain, provides tantalizing clues to the intellectual lives of a group of people in a growing Appalachian city. To a casual observer, Knoxville might appear to have been a "puritanical" town, but the KML points to a diversity of thought that mirrors the cultural and social diversity found in the interwar years. In the decades that followed, the holdings of Knoxville Metaphysical Library scattered, but current efforts to reconstruct this collection indicate the intellectual and cultural significance of a small reading room once tucked away in the Cherokee Building in downtown Knoxville.



Title page of Shoghi Effendi's Bahá'í Administration (1936) which bears the Knoxville Metaphysical Library stamp. Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

²⁹ "Mrs. E.W. Ogden, Pioneer in Knox Welfare Work, Dies," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, December 16, 1954.