



The Libraries of Llano County, Texas

The End of Civility, Legality, the Rights of the Young to Learn and Mature, and the Public Itself

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Historically, Texas often claims its greatness by size. Over several centuries, that has been a mixed bag. But the state's radical political shift to the right threatens whatever is good in that legacy. In small but extreme right wing–dominated counties like Llano (eighty miles northwest of Austin in the Hill Country), when it comes to basic public facilities like libraries, the presence of books on the shelves, full access to both print and online materials, and professional staffing are under attack. The censorship and stripping of resources underway flouts the civil and legal rights of tax-paying residents, especially young readers. Constituting an illegal right-wing takeover of a public good, actions undermining the public library services in the county are an active danger to the local and the larger community.

With the extralegal interference of the county judge (Ron Cunningham), an ideological extreme, self-appointed minority wrecks a revolution in this small community. It may be summarized under the heading of unconstitutional *censorship* and illegitimate *political takeover*, with a focus on children and adolescents in particular and the larger community more generally. Not only do they usurp state and national legal powers exceeding the scope of their authority, they also violate the rights of the young, rights for which Americans fought for more than a century, including the right to mature socially, culturally, intellectually,

and psychologically. Attempting to obstruct young peoples' growth endangers the future of their communities and American democracy.

Today's censors, or in the popular vernacular, *book banners*, are unprecedented. For more than a millennium, all major campaigns against specific texts involved reading the texts that critics sought to restrict. They did not focus on materials for particular age groups. And they did not single out authors or main characters who are female, racial and ethnic minorities, or differently gendered and abled.



Today's book banners are radically different. They are "the new illiterates." They fear the world around them, including their own young and certainly all "others." Not only do they wish to ban books and reading, they want to ban everything else with which they disagree, from the right of young people to grow up and think for themselves to masks, suicide prevention, basic health education, social and emotional learning resources in schools, constitutionally guaranteed free speech, abortion, gun safety, voting rights, transgender rights, and much more.

Strikingly, the Llano County citizens standing tall in protest and resistance are based in the inclusive community Friends of the Llano County Library Foundation. This is not a caucus of liberals or progressives, but a unifying community core, galvanized into action by the illegitimate actions of the self-appointed radical Right.

Not surprisingly, the radicals' ignorance of law and procedures, mutual respect, and common decency, leaves an expansive paper highway rather than a secretive trail. Available through **Texas Public Information Act** requests, their communications are marked by contradictory collisions of conspiratorial, self-appointed power grabbing in ignorance of laws and procedures, and a devaluing of the contents of the books and online access services they demand to censure and ban. Ranking high among these matters is ignorance of the First Amendment and the Doctrine of the Separation of Powers of state and religion, and a lack of respect for law and tradition; and disregard for due process, democracy, and fellow humans. Their unabashed and unashamed emails are at once extraordinary *and* self-incriminating.

The right-wing coup proceeded in steps beginning in fall 2021 (the year that book banning erupted with Texas in the driver's seat) with complaints by Bonnie Wallace and Rochelle Wells to Library Director Amber Milum about one well-known children's book, *I Need a New Butt*, that was *never even on the library shelves*. Milum expected more complaints and preemptively informed interfering County Commissioner Jerry Don Moss that other often-targeted titles were also absent from shelves. Leila Green Little, a third-generation county resident, mother of two young children, active library patron, and member of the Friends of the Llano Library warned the County Commissioners against censorship in early November.

Little followed her November oral presentation with a formal letter in mid-December. Her major concern was external pressure on the library to end its subscription to the national top-ranked Overdrive platform for accessing materials beyond the library's own contents. The radical Right campaigned to replace it with far more limited, less flexible, more expensive, but more controllable Biblionix. In a companion oral presentation, she remarked that four books had been removed without following the library's own written procedures, an action that reflects the frequent and alarming pattern elsewhere, but often reversed on challenge.

In the New Year, the commissioners, led by Judge Ron Cunningham, and the self-appointed autocrats forced a temporary closing of the library's three branches to "weed out" supposedly objectionable books in violation of established formal procedures. No regard or respect was paid to the tax-payers and those who depend on the library. Cunningham asserted that his group's whims superseded both the professional librarians and library users. The radical revolution was completed with removal of the sitting board and their replacement with a new hand-picked board with greater authority, all with no regard to law, authority, or precedent.

Milum voiced her fears about purchasing any new book, while the radical Right and the lead commissioner acted out over the spelling of "god" with a lower-case "g" on a poster. One of the takeover's leaders, Bonnie Wallace, in a February 3, 2022, email about the new board, challenged policy, practice, and democratic norms: "We are confused on whether we are required to operate under the Open Meetings Act. If we are, then verbiage needs to be added everywhere required to include info about posting, etc." They communicated with county leaders via private email accounts and arranged private meetings. Inappropriate religious references fill public communications.

The final step came in early March when a full-time professional librarian was terminated with no notice for "insubordination": "Your negative behavior was insubordinate and disruptive." No details accompanied the formal notice. The act of following her job description and serving her community "disrupted" the dismantling of the library, putting a target on her back.

That is where things stand. There is no longer a "public" or a "library" in Llano County. How will the Revolution of 2021–2022 end?