

Race Issue Up For Test In Danville

BY GERALD TETLEY

DANVILLE, Va., June 11—Danville's public library referendum will be held next Tuesday, bringing to this city the first public test of strength on the race issue.

Also on that day five candidates from a field of 12 will be elected to the City Council. Normally that would be an active political affair, but this year the library issue dominates local thinking.

The public library, which is housed in the Sutherlin Mansion where the Confederate cabinet held its final meeting in flight from Richmond after Appomattox, has been closed as has the Negro branch since a federal judge issued an order at the instigation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People requiring Danville to open the establishment to both races.

Ordered Out

When a group of young Negro students entered the library in April and demanded access to facilities, they were ordered out and the library was closed. Attorneys for the Negro organization then went to court and secured the directive. The City Council then ordered both the white and Negro libraries closed.

This brought to Danville the first race issue since the Supreme Court's desegregation decision and the referendum has become an almost epochal event since it is the first legal difference on racialism since 1892 when the coalition between the Readjusters, carpetbaggers and Negroes threatened to result in the election of Negro police, Council members and other office holders. The ensuing sanguinary clash sent the carpetbaggers packing and race relations have remained unblemished since.

There is some similarity between the present situation and that of yesteryear. There is, in Danville, a liberal thinking element which believes that an integrated library is better than no library at all and 300 have petitioned the Council to accept integration. But 30 or more civic leaders have also asked the Council to close rather than integrate the library. This clash of opinion caused the Council to call for the referendum, stipulating, however, that its result would be advisory and not binding.

Teaming Up

The liberals, teaming up with the Negroes who want library facilities restored, constitute a bloc voting to open the library while the referendum poses five different alternatives which conceivably might squander the vote of the taxpayers.

The voting machines have been set up for the five-package proposal: close the library; open the library to all; operate the library privately through a foundation; dispense books by bookmobile, and operate the library on a modified plan. The latter is explained that all tables and chairs would be removed from the library and books dispensed over the counter.

In the meantime, the segregationist group has secured a charter for the operation of the library through a foundation. But its method of operation is somewhat nebulous, as is the cost. The operational cost runs variously by estimate from \$35,000 to \$100,000.

Site Available

The old A. D. Keen mansion is available for the private library and the foundation would seek to take over the city library books. However, this might be complicated since the books would have to be sold at auction as city property and the NAACP might attack from a new angle.

There is little open talk about the issue but it is quietly discussed nearly everywhere. Some defeatism has been encountered—those who say that "it's coming, anyway; we might as well go along with it."

But the traditionalists who are largely nonvocal find it hard to accept defeat at the hands of an alien organization which, they say, has injected itself into the community life to disrupt long friendships and to raise vexatious issues between the two races which have co-existed harmoniously for 75 years.

The Council election has been quiet. A variety of issues are involved: better pay for city workers, abandonment of the slum clearance project, lower utility rates, more industries, with one candidate saying the city ought to buy compact cars to operate municipal affairs at a great saving of gasoline money.

Voting hours will be from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.