

Florida Town Tries to Forget Race Incident

By HENDRIX CHANDLER
MADISON, Fla., April 20 (AP)—Like a child who has been burned by a forbidden firecracker that exploded unexpectedly, Madison is reluctant to talk about the racial controversy which rocked it a few months back.

"It's water over the dam," said a prominent Madison attorney. "As far as most people here are concerned the matter is forgotten."

Dr. Deborah Coggins, the attractive former tricity health officer who saw a storm break over her head when she had a business luncheon with a Negro nurse, is as averse as most people here to relish the events.

The 32-year-old Dr. Coggins said she felt no bitterness over being fired from her \$675-a-month health officer job, and hoped there was no resentment toward her.

Opened Private Practice

Last Jan. 1, she set up offices with her doctor husband in private practice here. And she has been so busy helping to attend to the physical ailments of the town she has had little time to dwell on the past. She and her husband Dr. Wilmer J. Coggins constitute half of the force of four physicians serving this county seat town of 5,000 persons.

"I'm very happy in my work," she said, fingering a stethoscope during an interview between appointments.

"You don't do the good for a large number of people as in public health work, but I believe that here I do more individual good, and you get more of the personal touch through getting to know the whole family."

'Fools', 'Cowards'

It was a composed Dr. Coggins in her trim white uniform, unlike the fired-up young physician who stormed up to the Madison County Commission last October. She called them "fools" and "cowards" for refusing to tell her whether she was being fired because of the luncheon with the Negro.

At the time of her dismissal, the blonde Dr. Coggins was Florida's only woman health officer. She said she had planned to go into private practice when the need for a tricity health officer developed last May and she suddenly found herself thrust in that position.

"I had no particular ambitions in the public health field although I certainly enjoyed the work and see the great need," she said.

"My husband needed me in his practice so I probably would have quit in time, anyhow."

She's No Raddest

Dr. Coggins repeated that she had no idea of breaching Southern social custom when she arranged the luncheon conference with a Negro midwife consultant for the State Board of Health in the private dining room of a restaurant here last Aug. 22.

"But I don't believe I would do it again in the same manner," she says now.

Out of the great uproar which focused national attention on her, Dr. Coggins says she can perhaps see some lasting good.

Does Draw No Color Line

"I believe it may have stirred some respect for the individual whether he be white or colored," she said.

"Let's call it human dignity. In the medical profession we draw no color distinction when we treat human ailments."

There is a feeling here that a chain of events blew the matter out of focus and magnified the situation. A member of the Madison County Commission which dismissed her, Grover Cone of Greenville, said:

"I consider Dr. Coggins a very fine woman and an able doctor. No member of the commission has anything but the highest respect for her."

Everyone Wants to Forget

Cone said he believed the situation could have been smoothed over "if a couple of fellows had used their heads at the very start. The thing kept getting bigger and bigger and pretty soon it was out of control."

T. C. Merchant Jr., editor of the weekly Madison Enterprise Recorder, who defended Dr. Coggins, said he had experienced a "negligible amount" of economic retaliation as a result, but that he—like everyone else—wanted to forget the thing.

Merchant told the Madison County Commission the day of her firing Dr. Coggins had been "subjected to the most vicious assortment of lies, misrepresentations and slander that I have had occasion to witness in this community."

Race Relations Called Good

Merchant said that on the whole racial relations in Madison were good, and there had been no incidents growing out of the differences which split the town sharply. Now, he said, "the wounds are about healed."

Dr. Coggins' job as health officer was taken over several weeks ago by Dr. H. H. Ring, a quiet-spoken man with a north Florida background who is being kept busy rebuilding the health organization.

Because of her work at the office and hospital, and attending to the needs of her three small children, Dr. Coggins said there is little time for other activities. She used to be active in women's club and civic work before she took the public health job. A woman of diverse interests and many hobbies, she plays golf, is a good swimmer and makes hooked rugs.

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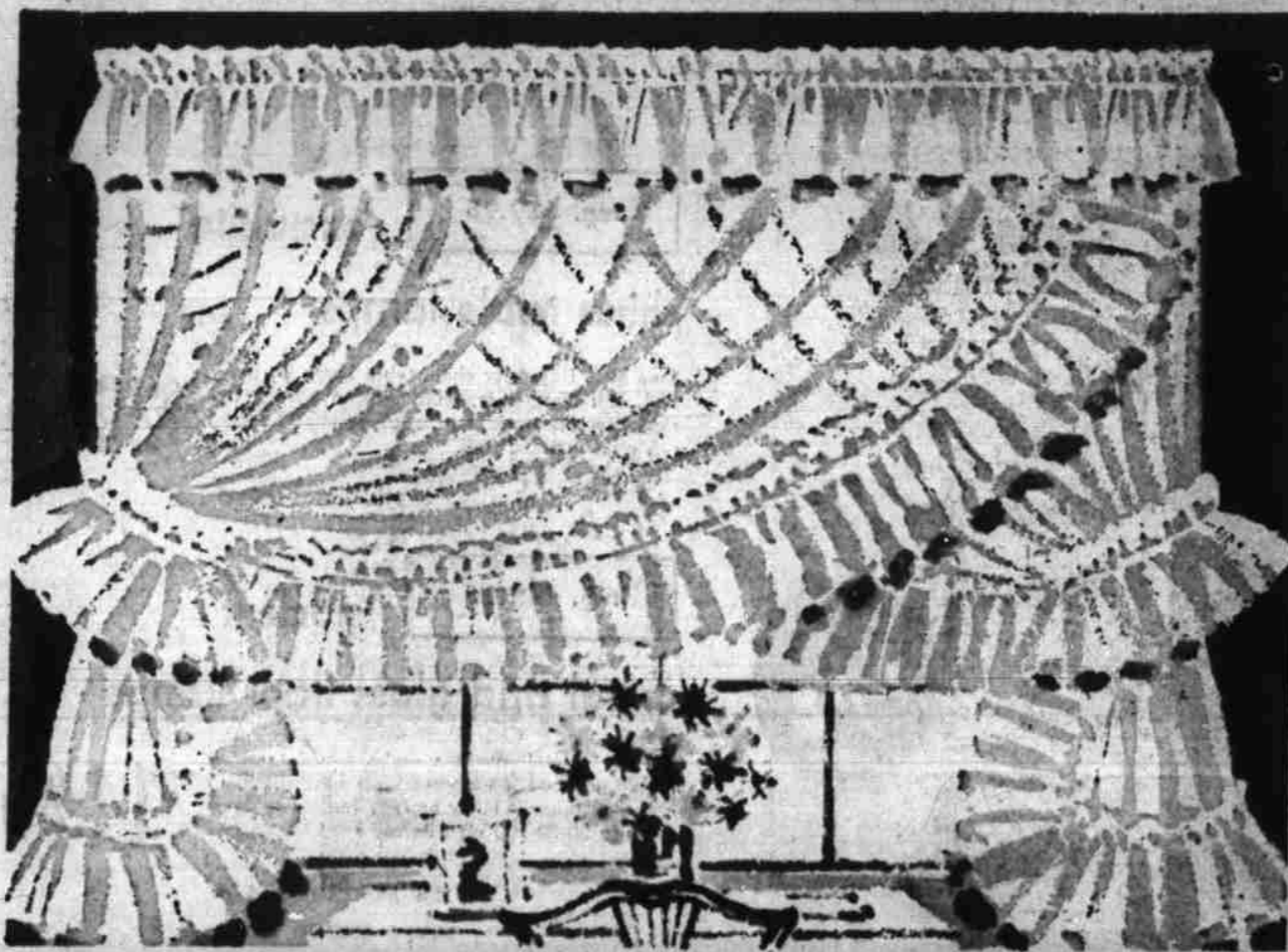
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