

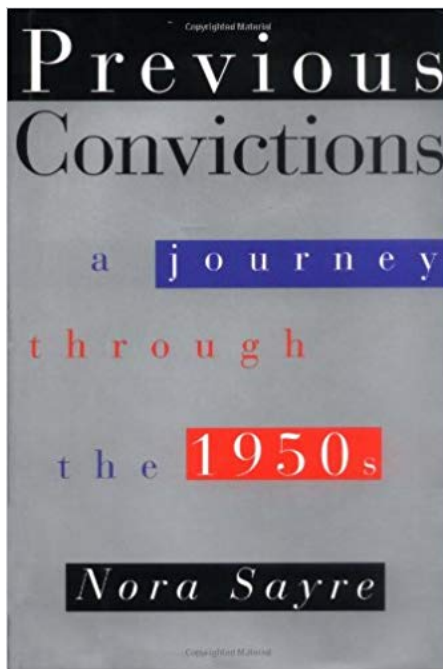
The Columbus Dispatch

November 12, 1995

Section: FEATURES - Accent & Arts

Edition: Home Final

Page: 06G



FOR MANY, '50S MEANT PARANOIA

Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch

Writing about the 1950s, Nora Sayre tells fascinating stories about the lives of people she knew and weaves those stories in with the doings of public figures and issues of the day.

Her *Previous Convictions: A Journey Through the 1950s* is a "memoir of mentalities" laced with richly detailed personal accounts and starkly revealed national events. Through both means, Sayre explores the hidden histories of the '50s.

Sayre spent a spring in the 1980s as writer-in-residence at Thurber House. She also wrote *Sixties Going on Seventies*, which was nominated for the National Book Award. Her current book is a montage of three generations. In the first section, Sayre examines people who came of age in the 1920s and who were middle-aged in the '50s. Sayre's

parents were both writers, and through them she met many of the New York writers who defined the time, including James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, John O'Hara and Edmund Wilson. Sayre reveals these writers' exuberance for life, as well as their anxieties about madness and depression. Her portraits capture their generation's hopes, fears and contradictions.

In the second section, Sayre explores her own generation, which came of age in the '50s. Much of the section is devoted to her accounts of attending Harvard and participating in experimental theater, while the country raged with anti-Communism.

She tells the frightening story of the "loyalty oath crisis" at the University of California at Berkeley, where professors were forced to sign political oaths in order to keep their jobs. Even The New York Times came under political scrutiny, and Sayre writes of a Senate subcommittee's attack on the paper and investigation into the political affiliations of its writers.

The third section focuses on radicals who came of age in the 1930s. Sayre says she originally intended to write about anti-Communism in this section, but after completing her research she decided to write about the American Communists themselves. She tells of their hopes and dreams for a future free from oppression and hunger.

American Communists worked to improve the lot of unemployed workers and to secure civil rights for blacks. Sayre explains what it was like to be a Communist in the '50s or to be a liberal accused of being a Communist. She describes the shock of American Communists when they learned the truth about Stalin's regime. Although realizing they had been deceived, most Communists remained proud of the work they had done for the party.

The last chapter, entitled "Voyage to Columbus," is about the spring Sayre spent writing and living in Thurber House. She writes of local landmarks and her family history in Columbus (her father was raised here), and of seeing the settings of stories told to her by both her father and Thurber. Like Thurber, Sayre gently pokes fun at the natives' eccentricities, but she comes to envy the feeling of stability she senses amongst Midwesterners.

Sayre also reveals Columbus' ugly anti-Communist history. She brings back to life the Ohio Un-American Activities Commission and its investigations, along with Ohio State University's cooperation with the commission. OSU dismissed employees based on political beliefs and banned lecturers on the basis of their presumed political stance. Previous Convictions adds to the understanding of the 1950s and the people who lived through it. Writing of a time when sales of lawn furniture tripled and most Americans celebrated an increase in luxury and leisure time, Sayre helps the reader see hidden histories and learn from the "achievements and illusions and mistakes" of generations past.

Columbus writer **Nancy McAllister** is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.