

THE AMAZING GRACE



OF SISSY FARENTHOLD

POPULISM IN TEXAS

TEN THOUSAND people had jammed into Houston's Astrodome to see her. They had waited patiently through the entertainment—clapping, cheering, singing along—but always holding something back—waiting. And when she finally came onto the stage, the place exploded. “Sissy, Sissy, Sissy, Sissy,” they chanted, shouting above their own applause and foot-stamping. The ovation kept growing louder.

Fixed by the spotlight, a handsome, dark-haired woman in a white dress stood alone on the stage. Frances “Sissy” Farenthold seemed embarrassed at first. But soon she grew tall under the ovation. She smiled, raised her hand and looked out at them—the kids and the senior citizens, the lawyers and the steelworkers—the people who had made her their champion.

She was elite Southern womanhood, graduate of Vassar, wife of a Belgian nobleman. She was mother of four, housewife, champion of the shopping-cart set. She was the “father’s

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child” of one of the state’s leading lawyers and toughest political kingmakers: a lawyer herself. And now she was the leader of a new populist movement in the Lone Star state.

The sudden rise of Sissy Farenthold can be traced from January, 1971, when the Fort Worth office of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filed a stock manipulation suit against Houston financier Frank Sharp. As a public service, the SEC gratuitously exposed a bribery scheme it had uncovered during the course of its investigation. The complaint alleged that Sharp had made certain Texas officeholders considerably richer in order to obtain passage of two banking bills that would have helped his empire. A side effect would have been to remove all Texas state banks from Federal regulation. Among beneficiaries of Sharp’s benevolence were Governor Preston Smith, Speaker of the Texas House Gus Mutscher, House Appropriations Chairman Bill Heatly, and various Mutscher aides and henchmen. Thrown in for good measure: Elmer Baum, Smith’s campaign chairman and head of the Texas Democratic Party.

State Representative Farenthold and her colleagues in the Texas House demanded an investigation of the charges. Speaker Gus Mutscher held more than two-thirds of the House membership

in his hand and for two months he managed to keep the scandal buried in committee. But on March 15, 1971, the dissidents forced a dramatic floor vote on the question of the investigation. Although they received only 30 votes out of 150, it was hardly a defeat. They had broken the pact of silence, aroused the Texas press, and begun to awaken a lethargic Texas citizenry to the evils of private government. The group acquired a name, courtesy of an unknown lobbyist who looked at the voting board and grumbled, “Those dirty bastards! Those thirty dirty bastards!” The Dirty Thirty was born.

Over the next few weeks, the Texas House of Representatives developed into a public forum. True, the Dirty Thirty were clobbered on the voting board. True, the private bills still coasted into law. But the Dirty Thirty seized every opportunity to publicize corruption, and stitch by stitch unraveled the carpet and exposed the trash that had been swept under it.

After the session ended in June, 1971, the tide appeared to turn. Mutscher’s House redistricting plan—designed to eliminate the Dirty Thirty—was ruled unconstitutional by the courts. Mutscher and his henchmen were indicted and later convicted of bribery (their appeals are pending). Lane Denton, a leader of the Dirty

by Harvey Katz

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Thirty, formed a campaign organization that would later bring close to 70 reform candidates into the House.

Meanwhile, the 1972 gubernatorial campaign was shaping up as a contest between Ben Barnes, President of the Texas Senate and heir-apparent to the Johnson-Connally machine, conservative land-owner Dolph Briscoe, and Preston Smith. Of these, Barnes and Smith had been implicated in the Sharp scandal. The latter was named as a beneficiary of Frank Sharp's deals; the former had presided over the Senate which passed Frank Sharp's banking bills. As for Briscoe, he was a Connally crony from the 1960s and the wealthiest landowner in Texas.

Clearly, none of the candidates was much interested in public government, and so Sissy Farenthold decided to enter the race herself. Her friends said they admired her courage, but few believed it would amount to more than a symbolic candidacy. She had little money. Her organization was rag-tag. She had campaign chairmen in only 30 out of 250 counties.

Her initial and principal target was Ben Barnes. Beautifully groomed and dressed, tutored by experts in public speaking, politics, social charm, and empire building, he could seduce the ladies, the press and the public with equal style. He could accept handouts from lobbyists and break election promises with abandon, and still he retained the adoration of two million voters. In Texas he was openly touted as Presidential timber. In this race he was the man to beat. Farenthold stalked Ben Barnes relentlessly. Try as he might to bury the Sharp scandal, she kept it alive and burning. Preston Smith soon fell by the wayside. "I heard the footsteps of Farenthold," he said. During the last few weeks of the campaign, there were signs that Barnes was hearing those very same footsteps himself.

It had soon become apparent that the only establishment candidate with no ties to the Sharp scandal—Dolph Briscoe—was reaping the major benefit from the Farenthold attack and emerging as the front-runner. Still, if Briscoe failed to win a majority, he would be forced into a run-off, and Barnes, it was felt, would crush him. But the Connally heir never got the chance. Much

to the pundits' astonishment, on election day, May 6, Farenthold—not Barnes—placed second to Briscoe. It figured as one of the major election upsets in Texas history.

An upset, but not a turning point.

DOLPH BRISCOE NOW looked like a shoo-in in the run-off election. He had come away from the primary with 44 percent of the vote total to Farenthold's 26 percent. The Barnes-Smith vote was mostly conservative and Farenthold carried a definite liberal label. She had denounced the Texas Rangers for busting too many Chicano heads. She had come out strongly for reducing the possession of marijuana to a misdemeanor (you can get up to life imprisonment in Texas). She had insisted that, despite her own Catholic religious beliefs, abortion is a matter for a woman's conscience, not the Texas Legislature. Briscoe, in contrast, had avoided taking stands. Moreover, he had a bulging campaign chest, and the lobbyists, with Farenthold's promises of public government ringing in their ears, were flocking to him with open check-books.

Even so, Farenthold was not about to give up. She stumped the entire state. She rode for hours in car caravans under a blazing sun. She was at factory gates by 7 a.m. to greet the morning shift. She spoke at airports and from the back of pick-up trucks.

"Mr. Briscoe is a secret candidate," she would say. "He is a candidate who thumbs his nose at the people while holding hands with the same lobbyists who brought shame to this state last year. Well, I believe that the people of Texas are sick and tired of it all. We want our government back!"

When Briscoe refused to meet her in a televised debate, he gave her an issue. "Why does he keep running away from me?" she asked her TV interviewers. Early in the run-off campaign she promised to track him down and debate him on street corners if necessary. The "street corner" turned out to be the lobby of a hotel where Briscoe was speaking. Television cameras recorded the scene: Sissy Farenthold standing firmly in the doorway; Briscoe emerging, finding nowhere

else to go. "I believe that voters throughout Texas want us to debate," she said. "I have to catch a plane," he said.

During the first two weeks of the month-long runoff campaign, Briscoe did not even bother to mention the name of his opponent. Early in the third week, he referred to her for the first time and called her a radical. During the fourth week, pro-Briscoe hate literature hit the streets of Texas. One leaflet contained a photograph of Farenthold speaking to a group of youths who looked remarkably like hippies. It said she favored legalized marijuana, revolution and free love. A San Antonio radio commercial accused her of being a "baby-killer" because of her abortion views—the sound of a heart-beat in the background.

Late on the evening of June 6, Sissy Farenthold stood on the steps of her Austin campaign headquarters, surrounded by media equipment, and looked out at the crowd. The results were in: she would get almost 900,000 votes, but it would amount to only 45 percent of the total. It was her first political loss and there were tears in her eyes from the disappointment.

But there were substantial accomplishments as well. In a month's time, Farenthold had increased her 30 county organizations to over 230, and she had picked up 19 percent of the vote to Briscoe's 11 percent. In a year's time, she had risen from a state representative, known to few outside her district, to a viable statewide candidate, and a figure of national prominence, seriously considered for the Democratic Vice-Presidential nomination.

Most important, her candidacy had fostered the growth of a new political coalition in Texas. It was disparate in make-up—blacks, browns, women, kids, Wallacites. The common bond was disenfranchisement, alienation; the program, honest, progressive government. The Farenthold campaign had demonstrated the potential clout of New Populism in a state where the Old Politics was virtually a way of life.

"This journey has not ended," said Sissy Farenthold in Austin on June 6. And on the Pedernales, even Lyndon Johnson must have taken note. ■

phone phreak

RAPING THE BOARD” is the name of the game. With the proper equipment, it seems, a handful of people could busy-out all the long distance circuits in the entire world and set Ma Bell on her earplug.

With such wetdreams of revenge on the phone company, phone phreaks from around the nation gathered on July 29 in the basement ballroom of New York’s Hotel Diplomat. They were commemorating the completion of the first transcontinental telephone line between New York and San Francisco, on July 29, 1914, and they were doing it with a colloquium on blue boxes, black boxes, toll free loops, phone credit cards, the Agnew, the Milhous, the Answeroo, and all the various gadgets which could yet turn ATT into a public service. This was the First International Phone Phreak Convention, sponsored by the Youth International Party Line. Originally scheduled in Miami during the Democratic Convention, it was postponed and moved to New York where, Yippies said, the laws against phreaking are “full of loopholes.” As it turned out, telephone history was made.

The Convention opened with a 20-minute film in black and white, soundtrack added. The first ten minutes featured a free-form story of how one guy got to hate the phone company. He expressed his hatred by eating telephone equipment. There was also a short scene of a girl playing with herself. It was unclear what this segment had to do with phones, but it was interesting anyway.

The second half of the film showed three different techniques of pay phone phreaking. An eleven-year-old boy wants to call home but doesn’t want to use up his dime. So he goes to his local candy store and steals a package of gum. He puts one stick in his mouth as he carefully flattens out the foil

wrapper. He rubs it against the side of the pay phone until it is smooth and flat. Then he places it into a crack on the side of the phone and puts a penny into the nickle slot. That sets him a dial tone and he places the call. “This procedure works best on the old black pay phones,” says the soundtrack, “but with a little extra care it can work on the new green phones.”

Enters a lady in her thirties, who carries with her a portable, battery-operated cassette recorder with a recording of the dings and dongs a pay phone makes when you put your coins into it. Each *ding* is five cents and each *dong* is a quarter. So when the operator asks her for a dime, the lady turns on the recorder and gives her a “ding-ding.” The operator hears the tones and places the calls. The same trick is used for larger sums, for example, a long distance call costing \$1.15—“dong-dong-dong-dong-ding-ding-ding.”

Finally, a senior citizen phone phreak calls from a pay phone without any equipment other than a dime. She locates two phones next to one another. Then she picks up one of them and uses the dime to call the operator to place the call. The operator returns the dime, tells her how much money is required, and the old lady deposits it, putting the same dime repeatedly into the other telephone. Somehow that phone dings to the operator’s satisfaction, but because it wasn’t actually in use, it returns the dime immediately.

When the film ended, the crowd cheered, and the host for the rest of the activities, a certain Al Bell, took the podium. That’s not his real name, but that’s what it said on the New York Telephone badge he was wearing. Al passed out mimeographed sheets containing instructions on how to build a Black Box. This device, sometimes called a *Mute*, allows a person to re-

ceive free long-distance calls. The caller, using no equipment, does not get charged for the call. Next to the speaker’s stand was a large cardboard-box model of the device which Bell pointed to as he explained the construction and operation of the device. “It’s simpler than the one described in the June RAMPARTS,” he said, “but it uses the same principle.”

Following this primary lesson, three workshops commenced. In one, participants learned how to construct an “Answeroo,” a telephone answering service that costs under ten dollars to build. Phone phreaks have used it to set up automatic conference lines so that many phreaks can talk together at the same time for free.

In a second group, the basics of the blue box were explained. The latter “is similar to a Touch-Tone phone, except that it uses different frequencies.” With such a device a phreak can place a free call anywhere in the world. The leader of this workshop showed charts of several different circuits used in Blue Boxes, but he cautioned that their construction requires a basic knowledge of electronics. He recommended a book, *Basic Telephone Switching Systems* by David Talley, and reported that a company called Signetics had information on tone oscillators that are easy to build. Al Bell reminded the workshop these boxes are not to be used for illegal purposes; he said that he uses his for audio testing.

Thereupon two blind phone phreaks arrived. Al Bell greeted them, and they talked and laughed. One of them whistled a high-pitched note used in the Blue Box. The others joined in, and together they whistled the tones for several phone numbers in San Jose, London, and Moscow.

Meanwhile, Abbie Hoffman was holding forth in a legality workshop. He appealed for funds to help defend

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