At Least Pappy Won Elections

By ED SUMMERS

No state has had politicians quite like Texas has had them; and we have had them both as a blessing and as a curse. One of the earliest and most eloquent was Sam Houston, who preferred an Indian blanket to more conventional dress and delivered his orations in small towns while standing shirtless in the summer heat. Sam's reputed plot in his last days to overthrow the Confederate state government was never attempted, but others of equal audacity have, some of them very successfully.

Then There's Pappy

On a par with Houston but on the other side of the scales in an insurance man who presently lives in Fort Worth. This gentleman, now past seventy and fortunately politically sterile for the moment, is W. Lee (Pappy) O'Daniel — twice (1933-1941) elected governor and twice (1941-1948) elected United States Senator.

Pappy was a hillbilly disk jockey — flour salesman in Fort Worth in 1938 when somebody suggested he run for governor. He asked his listeners to "advise" him what he should do — and got fifty thousand post cards urging him to run. His platform was the Ten Commandments, and his speeches he promised to oppose sales taxes forever and give every person over 65 a pension of $30 per month. The average pension then was $16 per month.

No Runoff

Pappy was elected without a runoff, and the first bills he sent to the legislature contained a "transactions tax" that everyone but Pappy said was a sales tax. Needless to say, the bill was opposed. In fact, it was defeated, and thundering that the "professional politicians" were "out to get" the old folks, Pappy reduced pensions to about $10 per month.

When election time arrived again, the top issue was the sales tax, which Pappy swore with a straight face had been almost imposed on the state by the professional politicians and had been defeated only because of his heroic efforts to combat it. Pappy was opposed mainly by Ma Ferguson, whose campaign was run by her husband Jim.

Bad Choice

The choice given the voters was such that the Dallas Morning News cried, "surely we have not been so bad that we actually deserve the Fergusons again!" Nevertheless, it does enhance one's opinion of the Texas electorate to discover that Pappy got a fifty-five per cent majority of the votes cast.

In the spring of 1941, Senator Sam Sheppard died in Washington. Pappy badly wanted the job of U. S. Senator for himself. The chief obstacle was former Vice President Cactus Jack Garner, who had just retired to his home at Uvalde. Congress was in session, but Pappy delayed making an interim appointment until San Jacinto day, when he announced he had appointed eighty-seven-year-old Andrew Jackson Houston, only living son of Sam, as U. S. Senator.

Som's Boy Died

The appointment of this senile gentleman, who was the only Texan Pappy could be reasonably sure he would not have to face in the special election, earned Pappy enough good will to assure him of victory. Sam's boy died in Washington two months after his appointment, and Pappy beat Martin Dies and Lyndon Johnson — the latter with the first of many endorsements by Speaker Rayburn — by a close but comfortable margin.

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PAPPY...

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Once again the hillbilly band, religious platitudes, and promises of lower taxes and pensions had worked for Pappy. A serious but unsuccessful attempt was made to get him to run on his Senate record in the regular 1942 Senatorial election. Pappy, at one point in the campaign said, "There ain't gonna be no gasoline rationing; we ain't gonna lose the war; and there ain't gonna be no runoff!"

Galvanized Chant

This moved J. Frank Dobie to comment: "... and while the nation forges, strives, arms, goes down in ships, goes over the waters to fight and die, the mighty scene brings from Mr. O'Daniel only a galvanized chant: 'There ain't gonna be no gas rationing. There ain't gonna be no runoff...'" James V. Allred, running against Pappy, commented—that O'Daniel:

"Pledged to support the President's war program, but broke that pledge twenty-six hours after reaching Washington by voting to disband the Army.

"Says we will win this war quickly under fine leadership in Washington, but charges Washington is the only insane asylum run by its own inmates.

"Asks you to let him serve in Washington six more years, but now says he would go crazy if he had to stay there six more months."

Won Mighty Victory

Needless to say, Pappy won a mighty victory. He stayed in Washington until 1948, and there is a story that he earned the distinction of being the only man in history whom the Senate honored by walking out in a body when he rose to speak.

Texas was rid of Pappy until 1956, when the aging ex-Senator announced his candidacy for governor. Like a phantom from a lost era, Pappy put on his white suit and hat, picked up his Bible, rehired his hillbilly band, cranked up the old fire engine and headed out into the blistering July sun. He claimed to have a "secret plan" to reduce everybody's income tax by some large amount, and a plan to pump water 3000 feet uphill from the Mississippi to the dry plains of West Texas.

Magic Failed

This time the magic failed and Pappy was defeated, for the first time ever in public life. In the Senatorial election in 1957 he ran as an independent in favor of a form of segregation that would have embarrassed Daniel F. Malan. Once again he was defeated. Last summer he again ran for governor, with similar results.

But the ghost of O'Daniel has not yet been laid to rest. Nobody can guarantee that Texans will not in some suicidal moment call for the Fort Worth flour salesman again. If they do, he will come.