Woodrow Wilson Bean: One in a Million

By Arturo Aceves, Jr., Jacklynn Gutierrez, Joshua Gutierrez, Crystal Leon and Christopher Russell

Bean was born August 28, 1917, in the small Texas ranching town of Esperanza, located southwest of Sierra Blanca. His earliest memories of El Paso date back to the early 1920s, when he and his mother would make the trip into town. “I vividly recall a lot of horses on the streets,” Bean told Wilma Cleveland in a 1968 Institute of Oral History interview for the University of Texas at El Paso. “I thought they were fine people,” Bean told Grace Hartger in a 1976 article in El Paso Today. “It was a wonderful place to grow up.” According to Gary Sharrer in an El Paso Times article dated May 11, 1985, Bean said it was at the Masonic orphanage where he “learned compassion, honesty and idealism and my basic belief in God … that never leaves you.”

Bean told Hartger that he had made up his mind at the age of ten to become a politician because he loved people and felt politics was a very rewarding career. “I like to see things built and I just love the hub-bub of the streets,” he stated. “You can sit back and say, ‘Doggone, you didn’t do anything,’ but you can say, ‘Well done, you did a little something.’”

After leaving the home, Bean attempted his first stint in college at Texas A&M University. He stayed only one year before dropping out to become the next Red Baron by enlisting in the Army Air Corps in 1939 as a cadet. The Red Baron he was not, and after crashing a couple of planes, Bean returned to civilian life and enrolled at Southern Methodist University where he graduated with a major in government and politics.

It was while Bean was enrolled at SMU that he first got involved with politics by assisting two fraternity brothers in getting elected: one as student president, the other as editor. Bean told Cleveland that the reason he did so well in the election was because he “wasn’t here to mess things up.”

Back in the legislature, Bean was again appointed to the Appropriations Committee and started allocating funds for the further development of UTEP. In 1947, Bean also was instrumental in opening an agricultural experimental station in El Paso’s Lower Valley, now a branch of Texas A&M University, which aided ranchers in developing cattle.

In order to build the highway, it was necessary to cut 150 feet right through the mountain, the deepest cut the Texas Highway Department had ever made up to that time. “The mountains was another triumph of Bean’s time in office,” Bean told Cleveland.

“Woodrow Bean” in front of it, and the road through the rugged high desert mountains on the East side. Even if El Paso only gets a flurry of the white stuff in winter, snow

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is usually deep enough to enjoy at the top of Transmountain Road, a mile high in elevation.

In the early 1960s, while Bean was a front-runner in a U.S. Congressional race, he found himself in some legal hot water for failing to file his federal income tax from 1956 to 1960. Bean was convicted on five misdemeanor counts, sentenced to 500 hours of community service, and paid $1,000 fine. Jail time was suspended. He was forced to resign from his seat as county judge in 1962 and also resigned from the El Paso Bar Association.

One would think that this was the end of Bean’s political career, but that wasn’t the case. Bean was elected to the Electoral College in the late 1960s, and in 1972, he became chairman of the El Paso County Housing Authority. It was during his time with the Housing Authority that Bean attributed his greatest political coup when he was able to acquire $50 million of impounded money from President Nixon, which Bean used to triple the amount of public housing in El Paso, from 2,000 to 6,000 units.

In a 1985 El Paso Times story on Bean, Scharrer wrote that Bean knew Texan Anne Armstrong, a special assistant to Nixon, and had backed a bill that benefited her family many years before. Armstrong was able to help her fellow Texan when no other state housing agency received such funds. Politics? You bet. In 1974, Gov. Briscoe appointed Bean chairman of a special advisory council for the state Housing Authority.

Harter wrote that Bean was always “on.” He craved publicity, good or bad. El Paso Herald-Post writer Richard Estrada wrote that Bean often said, “I don’t care what they print about me as long as they spell my name right.” When he was a reporter for the Herald-Post, Joe Old recalled a conversation with Bean’s good friend Malcolm McGregor, who accounted for Bean’s constant filing for office by saying that it was “glandular.” When the filing deadline came around, Bean didn’t seem to have control and his glands took over.

The career politician was elected to an important office again in 1974, this time to the State Board of Education.

He advocated higher teacher pay and smaller class size. He wanted El Paso’s children to go to school together because they lived in the same neighborhoods, a major reason for his push for public housing. On July 14, 1985, Bean told the El Paso Times that he considered this election to be his greatest victory. “That’s when I found out that people weren’t mad at the judge anymore,” he stated. “I knew they had forgiven and forgotten.”

Bean ran for public office three more times but lost, despite his belief that he had been “forgiven.” In 1975, Bean ran for mayor of El Paso only to lose in a close runoff with Don Henderson. In 1976, he ran for railroad commissioner unsuccessfully. Then in 1982, Bean ran another unsuccessful campaign, this time for the Texas Supreme Court. Defeat at the ballot box never stopped Woodrow Bean from planning his next race, however, not even when he landed in the hospital. “I would like a last hurrah,” he laughingly told Sharrer in May 1985.

Bean was known for his three-pack-a-day cigarette habit, and this led to health problems throughout his life. His first heart attack came at the age of 36. In his May 1985 interview with Sharrer done while sitting in a hospital bed, Bean stated, “Had I known I was gonna live this long I would have taken better care of myself.” Lung cancer had struck the judge.

From his hospital bed, Bean gave advice to aspiring politicians. “Never get mad at anyone. You never get even,” he stated to Sharrer. “And do good for all of the people – that’s what politics is all about … And you’ve got to pay your taxes.” The judge loved to laugh, and he did so, even in the hospital. He told everyone to ignore the “no visitors” sign on his door and he talked with numerous friends daily. “I’ve even had a couple bankers come to see me,” Bean joked, never having been a buddy of the establishment.

Bean reduced his smoking habit to about 15 cigarettes a day while in the hospital, and as Gary Sharrer wrote, promised to quit “tomorrow.” Bean lost his battle with lung cancer on July 14, 1985. On that day, former El Paso Mayor Fred Hervey and Bean’s adversary stated to the El Paso Times that Bean was “an easy-going politician. … He was one in a million.”

The day after Bean’s death, Richard Estrada, editor of Border Politics for the El Paso Herald-Post, wrote, “An era has passed.” Calling Bean an “ally of Mexican American blue collars,” among other things, Estrada said his personality consisted of “equal parts of compassion, ambition, courage and assertiveness.” Bean was a staunch New Deal Democrat, who pushed for a decent county hospital for the indigent and adequate housing for the poor and elderly. He insisted that decent housing was necessary for students to finish high school.

Bean was a character. He was a big man with a bigger voice and people listened when he spoke. They may not have agreed with what he said, but they listened. As Estrada said, “El Frijol (the Bean) reviled in smoke-filled rooms, in convention halls, in the limelight of interviews and in the camaraderie of the Florida and Central Cafes in Juarez.”

The El Paso County Democratic Party honored Bean in April of 1999 with a video that chronicled his legacy. Don Kirkpatrick, producer and director of the video, told the El Paso Times in June 2002 that Bean was one of El Paso’s most effective politicians. “Whether you agreed with him or disagreed with him, he did some great things,” Kirkpatrick stated, “and there’s just no denying that.”

Woodrow Wilson Bean, Sr. was an old-time politician. Today, some of what he said and did might be considered politically incorrect, but no one could deny that he didn’t produce results. Estrada wrote that Bean “loved his family, his country, politics, his friends, people in general, cigarettes, vodka (‘put a lime twist in there: makes it taste just like lemonade!’), Stetsons and boots. In just about that order.” N’uff said. 

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heating and cooling, welding, office administration, and nursing assistant, among others. General education courses were offered to those who wanted to obtain a GED, equivalent to a high school diploma.

According to the Job Corps website, not only does the program offer technical and general education today, but also drivers education and readiness programs. Courses in social and life skills are offered to help the transition to the workplace. The Advanced Career Training program is offered to students with the skills and motivation to succeed in college. Students attend classes at El Paso Community College while enrolled with the Job Corps. In 1979, the center moved to a five-acre campus on the east side, located at 11155 Gateway West.

Carrasco told Hoggan that the center here in El Paso had the greatest number of graduates compared with other centers in the United States. The Job Corps Center allowed Carrasco to return to his first love: teaching. In the article by Intress, Carrasco said, “Some people say I now have a small town job compared to my more glamorous jobs with the State Department. But I view it as a big time job because I’m helping shape lives.” Working every day and up to 60 hours per week, he helped more than 9,000 low income students, mostly high school dropouts. He told Jim Conley, “I’ve always been for the underdog. The greatest emotion is when I see these kids doing well.”

Besides job skills and other educational and life skills, Carrasco’s students learned compassion. In one case, Carrasco and his students took in an abandoned dog they found tied to a tree with a chain. Named “Charlie,” he became the Job Corps mascot and an inspiration to the youth who cared for him. Lorenza Jurado Franco, Job Corps alumnus, said that the students formed a “Charlie Club,” charged with feeding and caring for the dog. El Paso Times reporter Luz Cruz wrote that students felt as if they were trapped by invisible chains and that Charlie reminded them that education was their way to break free of those chains. Charlie was the second animal to be inducted into the Animal Hall of Fame at the El Paso Zoo’s Garden of Recognition.

Carrasco worked with the Job Corps until his death on continued on page 13