

Woodrow Wilson Bean: One in a Million

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

Big Bend National Park. Thomason General Hospital. Transmountain Road. The Sun Bowl Stadium. What do all these things have in common? None of them might be here today without the determination and drive of one of El Paso's most influential leaders. He was a lawyer, a soldier, a judge and politician, as well as one of the most influential figures in the history of El Paso's Democratic Party: the legendary Woodrow "Woody" Wilson Bean, Sr.

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. "Strange as it may seem, El Paso was not a very modern town in those days."

At an early age, Bean and his two brothers and sister were orphaned. He spent the next 13 years of his life at the Masonic Home in Fort Hancock. "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 Scharrer 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 thing," he stated. "You can sit back and say, 'Doggone, 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 donning his goggles 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 of the school paper.

At the very young age of 22, Bean began his political career when he won the 1940 race for state legislature against Ellis Mayfield and Marvin Whittington. According to a 1947 *El Paso Times* article written by Bo Byers, Bean credited that victory to his ability to speak Spanish because he was able to facilitate a relationship with people of Mexican descent in El Paso, a relationship that would serve him well over the years.

The adventurous spirit that led Bean to join the Air Corps had not abandoned the new politician. In fact, according to a May 25, 1985, *El Paso Times* article, Bean hitchhiked between El Paso and Austin during his first term in the state legislature.

During that term, Bean managed to get appointed to the Appropriations Committee, the most powerful committee in the legislature. How did he do this as the new kid on the block? "Politics ... and don't let anyone kid you. That's

why it's so fascinating," he told *El Paso Times* reporter Gary Sharrer, who wrote about Bean over many years. Sharrer added, "For Bean, politics [meant] knowing how to compromise and trade, how to collect favors from friends." It was a skill the young politician would hone and perfect – and use for his constituents for decades.



Woodrow Wilson Bean, shown here in 1975, was a dynamic personality. (Photo courtesy of the University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department, El Paso Herald Post Records, Box 9-Historical People, MS348)

Even though the young legislator had no more than 15 cents in his pocket, according to Sharrer, Bean helped to allocate millions of dollars in state money. It was during that time that Bean authored a bill, along with Sen. H. L. Windfield, that allocated funds to purchase the land for Big Bend National Park, which Bean believed would help bring tourism to El Paso. Bean also allocated money for the building of an auditorium for the Texas College of Mines, now known as UTEP.

Not much more could be accomplished during Bean's first term because of World War II. He joined the Marine Corps as a private in 1941 and served in the South Pacific. While still in Japan in 1946, Bean declared himself a candidate for the state legislature once again. He returned home victorious, not only as a captain in the Marines, but also as a reelected state representative. 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 1947, Bean experienced his first political defeat when he ran for the Congressional seat vacated by retiring Judge R. E. Thomason. Ken Reagan of Midland won the position by 150 votes. Reagan beat Bean once again for the same seat the following year.

Bean told Cleveland that after being "soundly thrashed" the second time by Reagan, he engaged in ranching and farming until 1949 when Bean was again elected to the state legislature after the resignation of Bill Jameson. In 1950, Bean served in a special session of the state legislature, and

then in that same year, he lost his first bid to become El Paso county judge. Shortly thereafter, overseas conflicts arose again, and in 1950, Bean was called back into active duty by the Marine Corps to join the fight in Korea.

After returning to El Paso in 1953, Bean opened his law office. At that time, he once again ran for the state legislature, only to be defeated. "It looked like I was really through with politics and would be a practicing attorney here," Bean told Cleveland, "which I was enjoying very much."

However, Bean's political career was hardly over. In 1954, he was elected chairman of the El Paso County Democratic Party, then reelected in 1956. It was then that Bean first met Sen. John F. Kennedy and his aide, Theodore Sorenson. Bean invited Sen. Kennedy to El Paso to speak at a Democratic rally here, the first time he had spoken publicly in Texas. Bean even took Kennedy on a tour of Juárez.

Regarding Kennedy, Sharrer recalled the story dating back to 1960 when Bean sent more than 100 jail trustees to the local airport to drum up support for the future president Kennedy on a quick campaign stop. Resourceful? No one doubted that about Woodrow Bean.

In 1958, Bean was elected El Paso county judge and made his most significant achievements for El Paso. Bean sponsored the bond issue that made possible the building of the Sun Bowl, an El Paso landmark. He also worked tirelessly with American and Mexican officials to bring about another gateway,

the Bridge of the Americas, also known as the Córdova Bridge, to connect El Paso with her sister city, Juárez. Besides these two huge successes, Bean also began what he considered his greatest accomplishment, the construction of a county hospital, Thomason General Hospital, named for his good friend, Judge R. E. Thomason.

Bean had to fight a lot of people to get the hospital built in central El Paso, including the El Paso Medical Association. Judge Bean wanted it built where the people who would use it lived, but doctors wanted it built in an area more convenient to them. In his interview with Cleveland, Bean said, "After a showdown meeting with the Medical Association, who I never got along with, never did and probably never will, I told them that the hospital was going to [be] built there or there wasn't going to be any hospital built." Now a teaching hospital, it is known as University Medical Center today.

Officially, El Paso's Transmountain Road has the name "Woodrow Bean" in front of it, and the road through the mountains was another triumph of Bean's time in office. 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 people thought I was out of my mind," Bean stated to Cleveland. After all, the road just connected two sections of desert in 1969.

Today, Transmountain Road is part of Loop 375 and connects a highly developed part of West El Paso County with the East and decreases traffic on I-10. It provides drivers beautiful vistas on the West side and close-up views of 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 of failure to file, each with a \$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 m’ 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 Scharrer. “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) reveled in smoke-filled rooms, in convention halls, in the limelight of interviews and in the camaraderie of the Florida and Central Cafes in Juárez.”

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



A mural on the Center's grounds honors Carrasco and the Job Corps, including their canine mascots. Note the statue of Charlie, the dog rescued by the Center's students. (Photo by Ana Villela)

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