

### Excerpt #3 - The Texas Legislature, the “Lege”—Austin’s Fun House

I had several cocktail hours and dinners with Ben Barnes, a former (and youngest) Speaker of the Legislature, Lieutenant Governor, and a pontificating egomaniac. Throughout dinners, I fantasized about severing his windpipe with my shrimp fork, but the war stories were priceless. Texas politics is the finest form of free entertainment on the planet. The Texas political philosophy and mentality are unique. Barnes demonstrated how Texas voters have succumbed to crooks, idiots, dorks, the comatose, and the occasional upright representative. Texas voters (like most of America) hold their noses and vote against the candidate they can’t stand the most. The Texas political phenomena is a classic study in contradictions and cultural charisma. It’s a berserker comedy, sho’ nuff. It’s a tough call to see who would claim the title of Most Bizarre Political Figure. The actions and antics of the Lege are known from Austin to Boston, from Galveston to Washington. Did Alice go to Dallas to find Wonderland? “She-it,” Alice could have stayed in Austin. As they say around the Lege, “If you can’t drink their whiskey, screw their women, take their money, and vote against ’em anyway, you don’t belong in office.” At a Citizens’ Conference on State Legislatures, Texas was ranked thirty-eighth. A comment was made from the Lege floor, “My God! You mean there are twelve worse than this?” Official state license plate slogans nominated were: “Nothing is too much for Texas,” “Texas—Land of Wretched Excess,” and “Fuck Alaska.” Bless their hearts. One of my favorite politicians was former Speaker Gib Lewis. What you noticed most was how he kept fighting to express himself, trying to battle his way out of an incorrectly constructed, ill-used sentence. Surely, the Gibber is the Master of Malapropism. Gib’s speeches were known as “Gibberish.” Some of his prized comments were:

□ “Dispend with the objections and get on with the vote. This is unparalyzed in the state’s history.”

f “I want to thank every one of you for having extinguished yourselves in this session. I am filled with humidity.”

f “This legislature has far-reaching ramifistations, the problem’s a two-headed sword, growing like mushingroom.”

f “We don’t want to skim cream off the crop here. We’ll run it up the flagpole and see who salutes that booger.”

f “There’s a lot of uncertainty that’s not clear in my mind.”

If it’s something unusual, Gib called it “adnormal.” “Economic diversity” became “economic virility.” A “dynamo” was called a “domino.” If you needed to cut the budget, “Don’t fire people, but do it through ‘employee nutrition.’” When the Gibber was first elected, he forgot to add some items to his financial disclosure statement—an airplane, an oil well, and a “bidness” he had with his lobbyist buddies. He explained that he ran out of room on the paper. The next time he was reelected, he just forgot to file his disclosure statement and thanked his colleagues. Once again, he was “filled with humidity.” In admonishing one of his Lege members, he blurted out, “I can ’splaine it to ya, but I cain’t unnerstan’ it for ya!”

When Gib estimated the state's budget deficit at five billion dollars, he closed the session with, "Gennelmun, I move we go outside and throw up." Speaker Gib Lewis justified stocking his ranches with deer, elk, turkey, and bass without being charged by Parks and Wildlife by pointing out that he'd been supporting their bills for over seventeen years. But the Gibber's finest moment was when one session was held on Disability Day, honoring the handicapped. The governor issued a proclamation, which Speaker Lewis proudly read without a lot of mistakes and "Gibberish." After the proclamation, the Gibber then looked up at all of the handicapped folks who had parked their wheelchairs in the front row of the gallery and offered, "And now come on. Y'all stand up and be recognized" and started the applause. The Gibber doesn't remotely eclipse other Texas politicians. Here's but a sampling: One newly elected official in the new session for reform called a staff meeting and said, "Boys, stealin's out."

□ State Senator Bill More backed bills where he personally profited saying, "I'd just make a little, not a whole lot."

*f* State Representative Hudson Moyers went to the slammer for buying a pickup truck with Lege's postage stamps.

*f* State Representative Ben Bynum, later county Judge Bynum, got convicted of failing to keep track of the public monies. His Honor kept cashing checks for the new county courthouse at the liquor store.

*f* Bo Pilgrim, a Texas "chicken" millionaire, walked onto the floor of the Lege and handed out ten-thousand-dollar checks with no payee filled in. The Lege was meeting on a workers compensation bill. As it turned out, it was legal in Texas to walk onto the State Legislature floor with ten-thousand-dollar checks; just another "bidness" campaign contribution.

*f* A classic Lubbock political story is of a newly elected state senator who went to Austin and started drinking with another senator-elect. The lobbyist for the chiropractors offered them two hundred dollars each to vote for their bill. They took the money. The chiropractors' bill came to the floor, and the two new senators voted against it. The new senators "splained that the doctors' lobbyists had paid them four hundred dollars to vote against it.

*f* For the most loopy, this one gets my vote. State Representative Mike Martin from Longview came up with a surefire plan to ensure his reelection. Martin paid his cousin Charlie to shoot him in the arm with a shotgun. Martin claimed that he had been shot by a Satanic cult that didn't want him representing the American family values. Cousin Charlie confessed and Martin went into hiding. The Texas Rangers tracked him to his mama's house, and found him hiding in the stereo cabinet. He always did want to be speaker. Martin sued his cousin for having shot him and was fined two thousand dollars for lying to the grand jury. Maybe it's the water in Longview.

*f* State Senator Carlos Ashly wrote cowboy poetry, claiming the title of Poet Lariat. (Had help from Gib Lewis).

*f* And let's not forget that Senator John Wilson of LaGrange was reelected although he was dead. The voters wanted to send a message to the other candidate. Commissioner John Hightower

commented on former Governor Bill Clement's studying Spanish: "Oh God, now he'll be bi-ignorant."

*f* When women started getting elected to state office, the men engaged in an effort to clean up their profane remarks. Several creative legislators listed 41 of the filthiest expressions they knew and assigned code numbers between 801 and 913. Thus, a heated debate could result in "832 you," and the ladies wouldn't be offended.

*f* When Texas lobbyists back the wrong candidate, they "have to catch the late train" over to the winner. They call it the "midnight special" and commence with a conciliatory conga line from oil, banking, insurance, etc.

□ Comments from the floor: "Who put Tabasco in his oatmeal?"; "Why do you need a belt and Big Jim suspenders?"; and "He's tough as bob war." Bob war is used to make fences. Where they routinely, and in session, call the Lieutenant Governor "Lite Guv?"

*f* When a state senator won a congressional seat, one of his fellow Leges mused, "Sumbitch's gone uptown. He's droppin' Latin phrases in ever'day conversation."

*f* Senator Carl Parker observed, "If you took all the fools out of the Lege, it wouldn't be a representative body anymore. Parker was later charged with pornography trafficking, prostitution, and that old standby, perjury.

*f* Bill Clements was asked why he lied repeatedly about the SMU football scandal. He calmly replied, "Well there was never a Bible in the room." Texas has a different view of ethics.

*f* If a legislator's caught telling a lie, the standard response is, "Y'all caught me speedin'."

The Lege has a unique view of the laws of economics. "It ain't a trend till you've seen it twice." And the members of the Lege have adopted the CIA and White House motto: "Admit nothing, deny everything, make stronger counteraccusations." Texans have always been fighters and excellent in debates. They synchronize (or as Gib Lewis says, "circumcise") their Rolexes and hunker down. Texans won't get cornered between the Rio Grande and the North Pole. And they won't blink first. Texas invented ophthalmological machismo, a new testosterone barometer. You can't be a tough guy with a tic.