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WHEN I STARTED MY CAMPAIGN, THERE WERE ONLY TWO REASONS THAT voters outside of DeLeon would ever have heard of me. Sports fans might have seen my name in the paper because I'd played basketball and football at DeLeon High School. And many of the farmers in Comanche County knew me because I'd worked one summer measuring peanut allotments in the district. Now, between those two, you might think that being a football player would bring greater political advantages, especially considering how popular high school football is in Texas. But it was that tedious, dirty peanut allotment work I'd done a few years earlier that got my campaign rolling, in two ways.

Because peanuts were a subsidized crop, each farmer was only allowed to plant a designated amount — and the government occasionally hired people like me to go make sure farmers weren't planting more than their share. Using a wheel at the end of a stick, I'd walk around the edges of the peanut plots, measuring how many acres each farm was cultivating. Just about everybody pushed



their limit a little bit, to see what they could get away with. I knew that, but I also knew that there were plenty of peanuts — maybe up next to a fence or a tree line, or lying in a shady spot — that would ultimately die from lack of sun or water, and I felt those ought to be subtracted from the final amount.

Whenever there was a question, I always erred on the side of the farmer, and they knew and appreciated that. There probably weren't too many six-foot-three, red-headed, sunburn-faced peanut allotment surveyors wandering around West Texas, so even if they didn't know my name, those farmers remembered me when they saw coverage of my campaign.

The other big benefit to the peanut allotment job was getting giant soil conservation maps. These were made up of aerial photographs, blown up so big that they showed every road, farm, and house in each county. It might take 20 or so of these maps to cover all the land in one county, so I had a couple dozen of them, showing every single house in the three counties of my voting district. Using the maps, I began visiting every house, one by one, and marking each off with a red pencil.

For three months, I woke up with the Baptists and went to bed with the drunks, spending 18-hour days trying to shake every hand in the district. I'd show up at the dairy barns at 4 a.m. to catch the farmers milking their cows. I'd call on businesses during the day and visit homes during the late afternoon and evening. Then I'd go to the bowling alleys and the truck stops, which were the only establishments open until midnight.

In his later interview with the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Ham Locke described a day in my campaign: "[Ben] went to a pie supper over at Stag Creek one night and had an appointment later that night in Brownwood. He finished up after midnight. I ran into a café owner over at Goldthwaite the next day and he said, 'When I opened up this morning at 5, there was Barnes standing out in the dark holding his hand out and asking for my vote.' Found out that Ben had opened up all the cafes, service stations, and stores that way and was gone by 9 a.m. to campaign someplace else."

Pie suppers were the heart of the campaign, and I must have gone to about a hundred of them leading up to primary day. I'd started off at such a disadvantage, with Ike Hickman being a local celebrity and me being a 21-year-old nobody, that I had to meet as many people as quickly as I could. At a pie supper, I could shake hands with a few dozen people, and stuff myself with pie in the meantime. At one such supper, though, I got a little bit of a scare when a gentleman who was a pillar of the community suddenly got up to speak.

We were in tiny Proctor, Texas, the town where my mother had graduated from high school, and while everybody was milling about, a man I recognized



as a judge from Gatesville rose and tapped his glass.

Now, I didn't know this judge from Adam. I couldn't imagine what in the world he was going to say about me, unless it was that I had spilled some blueberry pie down my white shirt. I stood there frozen for a minute, and he started speaking.

"I've got something to say," said the judge. "I want to tell you a story." And he launched into a story from a few decades back, about a time when a gang of white vigilantes was getting ready to lynch a black man. The mob was fired up, yelling and pushing for the lynching to start, when suddenly two men passed nearby with a team of horses.

"Jesse Barnes was driving that team," said the judge. "And his father, Benjamin Franklin Barnes, was riding with him. Jesse held that team up while his father aimed his shotgun at the crowd. 'You let that man go,' he said. 'Or I'll make sure you do.' And he held that shotgun on the crowd until they let the man get away."

Jesse Barnes was my grandfather and Benjamin Franklin Barnes my great-grandfather. I had never in my life heard that story, and I stood there rooted to my spot. The judge went on. "I'm going to vote for Ben Barnes," he said, "because we need men who come from that kind of bloodline helping to run Texas."

In those days, that kind of simple moment could literally prove a campaign's turning point. Bit by bit, people began to learn who I was, and I started to earn the trust of the voters. And as the primary drew closer, I pushed myself harder. I didn't have enough time to drive home to my parents' place every night, or any money for hotels, so I just slept in my car. I'd shower and shave at truck stops, in exchange for filling my car with their gas — which I also could barely afford. It was just about as shoestring an operation as you can imagine, but it was the only way I had a prayer of winning. I spent months covering every square inch of those counties, and by the time primary day rolled around, every single house on those tattered soil conservation maps had a red "X" marked through it.

Ike Hickman hadn't taken my campaign very seriously at the beginning, but as time wore on he'd realized I was gaining ground on him. Whatever good news I received, he tried to counter by appealing to Brownwood's most conservative elements. When the REA co-ops announced they were supporting me, Hickman talked up the fact that he was for the utility companies, knowing that Texas Power and Light was a big political force in Brownwood. When the railroad's Brotherhood of Local Engineers endorsed my campaign, Hickman made a big stink over the fact that Labor was backing me. I was so green I didn't



really even know what that meant — I just wanted those railroad guys to vote for me.

At the end of primary day, on May 7, 1960, a lot of people — including probably Ike Hickman — were in for a surprise. I'd beaten Hickman by almost a 2-to-1 margin, with 8,023 votes to his 4,293. And with no Republican opponent facing me in the November general election, I had effectively won the seat. I'd just turned 22 a few weeks earlier, and now I was headed for the Texas legislature.

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