

Officials, freight trains and a nonexistent elephant

Time was, about 30 years ago, when politics was fun. In the heady days of the New Frontier and the Great Society, before the Vietnam War split the country into angry camps, political practitioners enjoyed their trade.

Exciting things were happening. Government had not become a dirty word, and political rivals did not so snarlingly rip apart one another's personal reputations. Those who did were often scorned by voters.

Here in Fort Worth, officeholders had fun together. Tarrant County District Attorney Doug Crouch was the most uninhibited. Wondering what life was like for the out-of-work hobos of the 1930s, the district attorney one day donned coveralls and comfortable shoes and hopped a freight to Santa Fe.

The experience was so much fun that Doug began recruiting companions for other such trips. Although tempted, I de-



murred. I figured that constituents, even if they admired my verve, would disapprove.

But state Sen. Don Kennard found the adventure too alluring to decline. After one short rail trip, Kennard was an instant devotee. He even let his teen-age daughter, Karen, talk him into taking her with him once. She recruited a girlfriend to go along.

Kennard and Crouch, state senator and district attorney, dressed in old dungarees and accompanied by these two teen-age wards, boarded a westbound freight in the Fort Worth yard. When the train stopped at Benbrook to take on water, Kennard jumped off to reconnoiter, spraining his ankle in the process.

As the freight resumed motion, the senator shed his dignity in an agonizing effort to catch the moving train. The damaged ankle slowed him down, and he never caught up. This left Crouch in an otherwise empty boxcar with the two girls.

Fate took a comic turn. When the train stopped for a load of freight in Weatherford, a railroad detective spied the middle-aged man in faded jeans with the two young girls. He promptly arrested them and asked for some identification. Crouch had none.

What is your occupation when you're working? the detective asked.

I'm the district attorney of Tarrant County.

Oh, sure. Holding the trio in custody, he called the Sheriff's Department. It was not

until they entered the county courthouse, and Crouch was greeted familiarly by several Weatherford lawyers, that the sheriff's deputies believed him.

On another occasion, Fort Worth native Bill Newbold was home on leave from his U.S. Information Agency job in Cambodia. Newbold extolled the flora and fauna of that faraway country. The little ocelots are

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beautiful. Newbold exclaimed. When I get back to Cambodia, I'm going to get a pair sent to the Fort Worth Zoo.

Ocelots! Kennard exploded in mock contempt. That's the trouble with Fort Worth! We think too small. Don't send ocelots. Send elephants! Send something big enough to challenge our imagination!

I filed that comment away. After a couple of months, with Newbold back in the Far East, I conspired with a friend in the Customs Service to send a bogus message to Kennard:

**YOUR ELEPHANT IN HAND.
\$1,273 OWING. PLEASE REMIT.
GIVE INSTRUCTIONS FOR
SHIPMENT TO YOU.**

Crouch, Dave Belew and I all supposed Kennard would throw up his hands in horror. His house occupied a small city lot. The last thing he needed was an elephant. We had a good laugh at Kennard's expense.

Our mirth was cut short when we picked up the next day's *Star-Telegram*. The state senator had publicly announced his good fortune. He owned a Cambodian elephant and would have it shipped immediately to Fort Worth, he proclaimed.

The senator called me later that morning to share this glorious news. I've always wanted an elephant, he exulted. He said he'd ask advice from Lawrence Curtis, then curator of the Fort Worth Zoo, on care and feeding.

The only problem: There was no elephant.

Frantically, I called Curtis. Whatever you do, talk him out of taking delivery! There isn't any elephant. Tell him how much trouble they are, what a mess they make, how much it costs to feed one!

Curtis owed me favors. I had sprung some zoo-bound penguins from quarantine in Peru and had talked Australian authorities into sending the zoo some rare lungfish,

called living fossils. Surely the zookeeper could dissuade Kennard from wanting the nonexistent elephant.

What I failed to reckon with was Curtis' appetite for a practical joke. The next headline trumpeted: Kennard Gives Elephant to Fort Worth Zoo.

Now I was really on the spot. If I failed to deliver, there'd be egg on all our faces. But where to find an elephant? I feverishly called zoos and circuses. Nobody had one to spare. My phony customs source sent messages of delay — quarantine, red tape. Time was running out.

Finally our ambassador to India, Chester Bowles, came through for me. The rajah of Kollengode had a baby elephant and was trying to give it to our ambassador as a token of international goodwill. Unlike Kennard, Bowles had no yen for a pet pachyderm. He convinced the rajah to give it to the children of Fort Worth instead.

American Airlines sent a freight plane. The rajah's son, who had always wanted to visit America, accompanied the young animal as *mahout*, or caretaker. With much fanfare, a presentation was made at the zoo.

The *mahout* stayed on for six weeks as Kennard's house guest. And we all lived happily ever after.

**Fort Worth is a former speaker
of the U.S. House of Representatives.**

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