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'Then Audacity Is In Order'

BY SUSAN PAYNTER

The soft, slow Texas tones of Sissy Farenthold are a surprise — until the second or third sentence she speaks.

Then the force and conviction comes through, the force that made her second only to Sen. Thomas Eagleton in votes for the Democratic vice presidential nomination . . . the force that nearly won her the governorship of Texas last year and won the presidency of the National Women's Political Caucus.

In a six-seat plane she talked to me en route to Bellingham where she'd speak at Western Washington State College after a press conference. Following the speech there'd be a tea in her honor; hands to shake, questions to answer.

Then a dinner, then a drive to Seattle for another speech, another reception. Today she will speak in Oregon, then two days of meetings in Washington, D.C.

Such has been the schedule of the former Texas legislator since the Democratic Convention put her in the national spotlight.

"I've been away from home in one state or another six days out of seven the past few weeks," she said. She wasn't complaining about the commitments. But the extra "surprise" appearances and extemporaneous speeches sandwiched into her schedule were wearing her patience thin.

Women in politics is her topic this time around and it's a subject she knows. "When I first ran for the Texas House of Representatives in 1963 I was a joke. It was supposed to be preposterous for a woman to try that. The legislature had 150 members, all men," she said.

"When I ran for governor my sixth-generation Texan family flinched. But I think if you have it straight in your own head what you're doing, and if you believe in yourself, you can face the ridicule.

"The first thing you need is aware-

ness. If you're not aware you have no direction to take. I feel very good about the increasing awareness of American women.

"After awareness you need assertiveness to put your conviction to work. And after assertiveness there comes a time when audacity is in order.

"I had been director of the legal aid program before I decided to run for governor and after closely observing Governor Barnes for four years I had no trepidation about running against him.

"That's why it's so important to get more women into office on all levels. When they understand how the office works and watch the man who holds it, up close, they're not so afraid to run.

"When my name was first put up for the vice presidency it was like when you run for anything, you have a minute of total loneliness when you don't know if you'll get one vote. Then out of its 27 votes Arkansas voted 19 for me. I got 420 in all.

"It's a matter of breaking through the barriers for the first time so next time it's not unheard of for a woman to try. Women need to get political experience on all levels so they are qualified to run for higher ones."

Ms. Farenthold thinks the Women's Political Caucus played an important part in delegate selection to the party conventions and that although they didn't have power, they had visibility.

"It was like cutting our eye teeth," she said. "The message was 'watch us in '76.'"

Since its formation the caucus has billed ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment as its top priority and Ms. Farenthold congratulated Washington on being the 29th ratifying state.

"History is on our side and we have six years to get the 38 states to ratify but we have to get the ERA off our backs and move on to other things," she said.

She said one goal for the caucus is getting a woman appointed to the Supreme Court and another is to fight Nixon's cutbacks in humanistic programs. Long-range plans include endorsing more and more women to elective office.

"Money is the basic problem," she said. "Women need to not only run for office and get into policy making positions in the parties but they also need to contribute money to women candidates.

"I had more contributions from women than men. But someone asked me once if that was because they were women or because they were liberals and I said it was probably because a lot of them were in my family.

"More than my being a woman, my political philosophy made fund raising difficult because I wouldn't go to the Shell dredgers for money or the other contractors who get their contracts from the state.

"Much of my support was from minorities. I'm not just concerned with women's causes although I think they have been long neglected. I'm just as concerned with the deeply-entrenched racism in this country that now has government sanction in the administration and in the justice department.

"I guess my views make me a walking sociological textbook case, a woman, a Texan against racism and sexism, and a Catholic from the Bible Belt."

She said Northerners don't have a mistaken impression of the South as a stronghold of sexism and racism.

"That's just what it is," she said. "But it's a lot of other mixed up things too. I could practice law in Texas before I could serve on a jury.

"Back in 1916 we had a female governor and we permitted women to vote in a primary three years before the 19th Amendment passed. We passed a state ERA in November and ratified the Federal ERA last summer."



—P-I Photo by Phil H. Webber

FRANCES 'SISSY' FARENTHOLD MADE STATE VISIT

"But I went to a girls' preparatory school and a women's college and never studied a thing about women's suffrage. I studied law but never studied one case about sex discrimination.

"The barriers are slowly being broken in Texas. At least now no one is strangling over a woman running for office."

She remembers when the attitude was somewhat different.

"When I first took office I noticed it in a hundred different small ways, like little splashes of cold water in the face. The guards who'd stop me in the legislative parking lot, thinking I was

usurping someone's spot. People always thinking I was someone's secretary."

Even so, Ms. Farenthold doesn't call herself a feminist. "I don't want to be pigeonholed that way. I don't want to be thought of as just being interested in the women's movement. I came in to the movement through politics, not the other way around. Women's rights are just one of several important facets. I can't cut myself off from the nuclear holocaust or pollution, for instance."

She hasn't decided whether a rerun for the governorship is in order but it's a possibility.

Seattle April 5, 1973