

THE CARLSON CHRONICLE

The Duke of Elmore By Chris Carlson

At first glance there could not be two more different people than Frank Church and former President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Surprisingly, though, there were more similarities than one would think.

Both men were terrifically ambitious; both had talented wives who played crucial roles in their success; both could be excellent “stump” speakers; both loved publicity as much as they loved being senators; both relished the give and take of politics; both authored legislation that has touched for the better the lives of millions of Americans past, present and in the future.

Most interesting though is both first came to the Senate courtesy of a missing ballot box in a key county controlled by friends of theirs.

Robert Caro, in his massive yet to be completed five volume biographies of Johnson documents with a story teller’s flair how Johnson finally got to the U.S. Senate by an 87 vote margin over former Texas Governor Coke Stevenson. The key to that “victory” was ballot box 13 in Duval county controlled by one man, George Parr, a Johnson supporter and a true loyalist who was well rewarded for his loyalty.

There’s even a picture of the wayward ballot box sitting on top of the hood of a car with several deputy sheriffs, as well as cronies of Parr’s, one with his foot on the bumper, posing for posterity before the box went into the mists of history.

Less well known is Idaho’s remarkably similar story. Seven years after Johnson took his Senate seat courtesy of a missing ballot box, in August of 1956, young Frank Church defeated former U.S. Senator Glen Taylor in the Democratic primary by less than 100 votes.

The winner would be up against the already dying and somewhat disgraced Senator Herman Welker, one of the few supporters for the red-baiting activities of Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy.

Idaho’s usually Republican leaning business establishment, including the state’s dominant paper, *The Idaho Statesman*, was beginning to recognize the damage being done by “Little Joe from Idaho’s” support for McCarthy. Behind the scenes Church’s friend and campaign manager, Carl Burke, was thought to have enlisted some key establishment support for Church’s bid.

For years afterwards Taylor maintained the nomination had been stolen, and wouldn’t you know it, a key ballot box could no longer be found. The county was Elmore and the finger of allegation has long pointed at veteran State Senator Bob Wetherall, the “Duke” of Elmore county and the counterpart to George Parr, the Duke of Duval county. By all accounts Wetherall’s influence included dominating the Courthouse.

Stories are mixed, facts are few but the consensus is there were more Democratic votes in a key precinct than there were registered voters. When Taylor drilled down on the vote in the key precinct it did indeed appear to have delivered an excessive number of votes for the young Boise attorney. The ballot box that should have been part of any mandatory recount, however, had “disappeared.”

Rumor had the box being tossed in the Anderson Ranch reservoir by the county sheriff on orders of “Duke” Wetherall , where it lies to this day.

Taylor filed a complaint with the Senate which conducted a cursory investigation. During his single term in the Senate (1944-1950) he had not endeared himself to his colleagues. Thus, there was little interest in seeing the flamboyant Taylor , who had run for the vice presidency on the Progressive ticket with Henry Wallace in 1948, resume his old seat.

Taylor, at his own expense, went door-to-door in the key precinct in Mountain Home getting affidavits from voters saying who they had voted for, and buttressing his circumstantial case that Church could not possibly have gotten the margin out of the precinct initially reported.

Of course with the key box missing for any recount he could not prove his case and the complaint was dismissed. The cloud over Church taking the seat he won that November was removed.

If one believes there are few coincidences in politics it should be noted the Wetherall family was subsequently well treated by Senator Church. Bob Junior held down a patronage position that paid nicely for a couple of years and brother Mike, who became a successful attorney and is currently a 4th District judge in Idaho, once served as Senator Church’s chief of staff.

It can be argued that because the family played a prominent role for years in Elmore county, the treatment was earned. Senior served 10 years in the State Senate in the 50’s and 60’s. Claire, his widow (several years after Bob’s tragic death) retook the seat and served for 12 years in the 70’s and 80’s.

Perhaps, but the missing ballot box has a long and infamous history in many states, not just Texas, and maybe even in Idaho.