

Even if we didn't think of ourselves as political, we who grew up in Washington DC were imbued with a legislative awareness. In college we freely roamed the Capitol halls, explored federal buildings, scrutinized Congressional wives' castoffs at fancy thrift stores and surely knew some lawmakers or their families first-hand. I didn't think politics had rubbed off on me, but this experience proved otherwise.

The Crazy Campaign of '78 ... or How I Got Into Politics

By Linda Holderness

If you're planning to go into politics, then I'm not the wife for you," I told my future husband as we talked of getting married. "I'm the wrong person for that." "Oh, no" he said. "I just like to watch politics on TV. I have no plans to ever participate."

We married, he didn't keep his word – and with my first reluctant taste of political activism a few years later, I, too, became a political convert. My life's trajectory changed – and, coincidentally, at the same time, so did Sacramento politics.

That transformative campaign was the 1978 Democratic primary for the 5th Assembly District, which then included northeastern Sacramento County and a portion of Sacramento city. The sitting assemblyman, Gene Gualco, a hugely popular public figure and friend of ours, was stepping down to run for the Congressional seat being vacated by John Moss. Gene's chief aide, Baxter Culver, had declared for Gene's Assembly seat.

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My husband opted to work on Gene's campaign – it was prudent to back

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the winner, he said – and I was prevailed upon to take on the public relations responsibilities for Baxter. As a stay-at-home mom, I was excited to be a real publicity writer, albeit a volunteer one. I discovered I had a knack for advocacy journalism and got quite an esteem boost when everyone, candidate included, praised my work.

Though I did a credible job, the fact that an inexperienced housewife held such a key position reveals the unsophisticated level of Sacramento politics in those days. Local campaigns were little more than earnest efforts run by family and friends.

With no incumbent, a flock of starry-eyed and, I thought, politically naive aspirants tossed their hats in the ring. Baxter, the only one with legislative experience and party support, had eight

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opponents.

Among them was a middle-aged man who called himself Ben Franklin. His given first name was William, but when he entered politics, he adopted the more notable moniker and did, indeed, reap some of the political attention he was seeking. However, unlike the real Ben, he was dour and socially awkward.

The only other Democratic candidate I remember was an impressive newcomer named Gloria Reynolds. As the lone female, she stood to benefit from the recent passage of Title IX and the strong push for women’s equality the law had generated.

Shortly before Election Day, we learned some local reporters had uncovered questionable practices in Ben Franklin’s business dealings. The newspapers declined to publish this information, however, on the grounds it could be seen as biased so close to the election.

It’s hard to believe now, but Sacramento County was a Democratic bastion in those years. Jerry Brown was governor, and local Democrats controlled nearly every office. The winners of Democratic primaries were almost guaranteed to prevail in November.

While party members lined up to vie for the Assembly seat, there was no Republican rush to file. Finally, a nurse-lobbyist from Citrus Heights submitted qualifying signatures. “We can’t leave it blank,” or something like that, she was quoted as saying. “Somebody’s got to run.” Her name was Jean Moorhead, she ran unopposed and nobody paid her much mind.

Our team confidently pronounced the competition “lightweight” and never doubted Baxter would win. He had by far the best experience; he garnered

all the important endorsements; and we ran an energetic and, we thought, effective campaign. Gene, too, had been widely anointed as the only viable candidate in his packed race.

On election night, we were pumped. Baxter's victory speech was polished to a gleam, and the county's VIPs showed up at his watch party, eager to shake the hand of the district's next assemblyman. But you can never underestimate the reasonableness of the voters.

When the slaughter ended, the results were: Ben Franklin, winner. Gloria Reynolds, second. Baxter Culver, a heart-wrenching third. Everyone else trailed into nothingness.

Post-election surveys showed that voters who hadn't paid much attention to the race – a lot of them, apparently – had chosen Ben Franklin because of his name. "How could I not vote for *Ben Franklin*," one interview respondent demanded with a chuckle. In a similar vein, many women cited feminist leanings as the reason they picked Gloria.

After the election, the newspapers were contrite. They had withheld the information on Ben partly on the gamble he wouldn't win. When he did, they hastened to get it out. I don't remember the charges, and he ultimately wasn't convicted of a crime, but the news was damaging enough that voters paid attention.

In November, he was trounced. And when the reluctant Republican nurse looked in her mirror the morning after Election Day, she beheld the Fifth Assembly District's newest legislator.

During her first term, Ms. Moorhead switched her party affiliation to Democrat and was reelected three times before stepping down. She made a name for herself as the sponsor of some excellent health care legislation. With redrawn boundaries, her seat was held by Republicans for 27 of the next 29 years.

Baxter became a political consultant and never for a minute regretted losing. Ben Franklin backed out of politics and died not too many years later.

And Gene Gualco? You've never heard of Congressman Gene Gualco because, although he was surely the best-known and best-loved politician in all of Sacramento County – and considered a shoo-in for Congress – his

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1982: Folsom's Last Small-Town Election

Before 1984, Folsom City Council elections were held in April. Our family moved to Folsom in July 1980 and voted in one April election, in 1982, before the date was changed to coincide with the general elections in November.

Folsom was a small town then – “10,000 people ‘including prisoners’ ” is how it was often described. We didn't have fancy equipment to tally the votes but we didn't need it – a blackboard and chalk more than sufficed. There weren't that many ballots to count. Prisoners, after all, couldn't vote, as we were constantly reminded. Pinebrook Village residents, about 300 all told, represented a formidable voting bloc at the time – and under the influence of their owner, Neva Cimaroli, they did vote as a bloc.

I volunteered to help with the count. We met at City Hall – the old City Hall that is now torn down – where someone had installed the blackboard. Candidates and a crowd of interested residents gathered in the lobby to await the precinct captains with their sealed boxes of marked paper ballots.

I was in charge of recording the count. One by one, the boxes were unlocked, the ballots were read and each winning name was called out. I chalked hash marks under the corresponding names on the blackboard, grouping them by fives in a common tallying pattern.

At the end, we counted my marks – five, ten, fifteen, twenty and so on. Just as we started the count, someone shouted there was one more: “Elvie Briggs votes for ... ” a man called out from the back of the crowd. I added Elvie's three selections to the total. “So much for secret ballots,” the man next to me muttered.

That year, the winners were David Ferrier, Alan W. Engelhart and Fred V. Scheidegger, all now deceased.

Only in a small town, I thought at the time. But how charming it was – hands-on democracy in action. Amid the chaos and revelry, who was to say mistakes hadn't been made? But no one seemed concerned.

Two years later, everything changed. The vote was held in November. Folsom's ballots had to be driven, in locked boxes, to the county registrar on 65th Street. There was a bit of a stir when the two drivers, along with the ballots, disappeared for a few hours. The election had been a controversial one, and some have questioned the results ever since. But that will have to be another story.

kitchen-table campaign was no match for the one a little-known candidate ran with the help of a pricey San Francisco PR firm. I observed in fascination as much as horror as Gene's hopes sank watching this underdog opponent being pitched by the slickest and most exquisite strategy, signs, letters, op-eds, speeches and brochures Sacramento County politics had ever seen.

Our candidates lost, but I was energized. My output for Baxter was pedestrian compared to the materials that fancy firm had produced, and I knew I had much to learn if I wanted to do this again. So the morning after the election, I visited the Arden Branch

Library and requested every book in the Sacramento County system – a total of four – on connecting with people through writing and design. My life's path was set.

Sacramento politics changed, too. From then on, campaigns were professionally run with the gloss of big city sophistication.

Gene accepted his loss with grace, and his trademark humor, and soon after became a Superior Court Judge.

And the long-shot candidate who ran that perfect campaign? He was the late Congressman Robert Matsui.

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