

Just PASSING Through

THE BUCK STOPS IN ODESSA

A Museum for all Presidents

By Randy Mallory

Austin has President Lyndon B. Johnson's museum and library. College Station has President George H.W. Bush's museum and library. And several Texas cities are vying to host President George W. Bush's eventual museum and library.

But Odessa's Presidential Museum and Leadership Library is a place for all presidents—whether Texan or not—as I discovered on a recent half-day visit.

Located on the campus of the University of Texas-Permian Basin, the museum serves as a quick study of the history of the nation's highest public office.

A 50-foot-diameter, royal-blue rug bearing the presidential seal welcomed me as I entered the museum's rotunda, looming 45 feet overhead. Ringing the seal are eight columns bedecked with the flags of all 50 states (and seven territories and districts) arranged in order of admission to the Union. The columns represent the eight American presidents who died in office.

Commissioned portraits of eight other presidents—the ones in office since the museum opened in 1964 (Lyndon B. Johnson to George W. Bush)—line the rotunda's circular wall.

Permanent exhibits feature eye-catching displays which encapsulate the lives and times of every White House resident from George Washington to the current president. Timelines, historical maps, and concise text capture the zeitgeist of pivotal American periods—ranging from the founding fathers and the age of Andrew Jackson through manifest destiny and the Civil War, to the world wars, the Cold War, and the traumatic aftermath of President Richard Nixon's 1974 resignation.

There are even small exhibits on the four presidents of the Texas Republic (David G. Burnet, Sam Houston, Mirabeau B. Lamar, and Anson Jones), American vice-presidents, and first ladies. A local seamstress, the late Goldie Dishong, researched the Smithsonian Institution's gown collection and spent 25 years fashioning first lady dolls dressed in replica inaugural or period gowns, dating from Martha Washington to Nancy Reagan.

A casual perusal of exhibits loaded me up with presidential facts. Such as the fact that the 1824 election of John Quincy Adams was decided by the U.S. House of Representatives in the only election of a candidate who failed to garner a majority of either electoral or popular votes. Such as the fact that, from 1789 to 1800, the presidential runner-up was declared vice-president. Such as the fact that in 1940 Franklin D. Roosevelt set the stage for modern party conventions by selecting his own vice presidential nominee, usurping the traditional role of party bosses.

I bumped into visitor and school teacher Virginia Fiske from El Paso and agreed with her conclusion: “There are so many new things I’ve learned, it makes me realize I need to study my own history more.”

A temporary exhibit of the museum’s largest category of artifacts, its campaign collection, proved educational and hilarious. (Parts of the collection continuously rotate through museum exhibits.)

I learned that in the campaign of 1828 opponents labeled presidential candidate Andrew Jackson a “jackass” for his populist views. Jackson liked the image of a donkey and put it on campaign posters. Cartoonist Thomas Nast used the donkey to represent anti-war factions in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1870 and later to identify Democratic Party newspapers. An 1874 Nast cartoon also depicted political factions as animals—a donkey for President U.S. Grant, a Democrat, chasing an elephant labeled the “Republican Vote.” Thus was born today’s party mascots.

I chuckled over campaign posters and buttons, reverent and irreverent. There was the mild-mannered “I’m on the Team” button for the losing Thomas Dewey-Earl Warren Republican ticket of 1948. There was the cutesy “Grits & Fritz” button touting the winning Jimmy Carter-Walter Mondale ticket of 1976. I recalled the display card from independent presidential candidate George Wallace that chided, “Register Communists, Not Firearms.” I almost laughed aloud at the

poster of candidate Jimmy Carter with a beard and long-hair and the phrase “J.C. Can Save America.”

After the 1963 assassination in Dallas of President John F. Kennedy, several locals—including former Texas Attorney General John Ben Shepperd—decided to honor President Kennedy by creating a museum dedicated to the office of the president. By early 1964, the Presidential Room opened in the basement of the Ector County Library. It later changed its name to the Presidential Museum and expanded into the entire library building. In 2002 the museum opened its new home on the UT-Permian Basin campus. Its research library began with Shepperd’s personal collection and now boasts 6,000 volumes on various political periods.

Both Presidents Bush lived in the Odessa-Midland area during their early careers working in the West Texas oil patch. The Presidential Museum recently relocated to its site and restored the 1948 home where George H.W. and Barbara Bush lived with their son, the current president. Photographs provided by the Bush family allowed the museum to restore the living room to how it looked at Christmas in 1948. (The museum also owns the Midland 1977 home of George W. and Laura Bush, open by appointment. CHECK...MAY HAVE REGULAR HOURS BY PRESS TIME)

On my way out of the museum, I noticed quotes from various presidents dramatically displayed on the gallery walls, quotes that run the political gamut.

Some visitors would nod their heads to Martin Van Buren's sentiment: "The less government interferes with private pursuits, the better for the general prosperity." Others might lean toward James Madison's philosophy: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

But most would agree with President Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous pronouncement: "There is nothing wrong with America that the faith, love of freedom, intelligence, and energy of her citizens cannot cure."

Odessa's Presidential Museum and Leadership Library (432/363-7737) is located on the UT-Permian Basin campus at 4919 E. University Blvd., next door to the Ellen Noël Art Museum (432/550-9696).

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RESOURCES

--Museum board pres Lettie England; 432-363-7737

--no contact info for quoted visitor, Virginia Fiske...sorry