

Parley of Prominence: The Houston Democratic National Convention of 1928*

by Jon L. Gillum**

ON JANUARY 13, 1928, the residents of Houston, Texas, awoke unexpectedly to news that they would be hosting the Democratic Party National Convention. In a stunning move the day before, Jesse H. Jones, prominent Houston businessman and Democratic Party leader, almost single-handedly secured the convention for his beloved city. For the first time since before the Civil War, a national party convention was coming to the South.¹ During the convention six months later, Alfred E. Smith became the first Roman Catholic nominated for president by a major political party. In addition, his running mate, Joseph T. Robinson of Arkansas, became the first southerner on a major party ticket in more than half a century. Aware of the media attention for Houston from around the country, local residents felt assured that their city would emerge from the political parley with a national reputation.

As Democratic Party leaders prepared to convene in early January 1928 to decide the location of their next presidential nominating convention, the city of Houston was on the move. The city had finally eclipsed long-time rival Galveston as the premier urban center of the Texas

Gulf Coast, and with a population increase of 111% over the decade of the 1910s, Houston was quickly surpassing San Antonio and Dallas as the largest, most populous city in the state. Fueled by a lucrative oil industry and flourishing ship-channel trade, Houston was experiencing a construction boom. A new municipal airport had recently been built, and the city's skyline was rapidly expanding with thirty-five million dollars in new buildings alone. Still, the city's population of nearly 300,000 earned it a place among the thirty most populous cities in the country that was tenuous at best. New Orleans even kept it from the title of largest metropolis in the New South. Thus, despite the city's rapid growth and increased prosperity, most Houstonians felt, as one historian discerned, "plagued by a nagging suspicion that no one was paying attention." Unknown to most, Jesse Holman Jones was about to put Houston on the national map, bringing the recognition and respect city residents had craved for so long.²

Jones had played a key role in Houston's recent economic expansion. A wealthy businessmen, industrious builder,

and owner of the *Houston Chronicle*, Jones was undoubtedly the city's most influential leader, and the burgeoning center of downtown was, as one journalist noted, "practically his private fiefdom."³ Yet Jones was not a man of one dominion. As Finance Chairman of the Democratic Party National Committee, Jones had earned the unconditional admiration of other Democrats by rejuvenating their party's finances in the years following the disastrous 1924 convention at Madison Square Garden. At that convention, delegates had to cast 103 ballots before nominating John W. Davis in a race thought to be exclusively between Alfred E. Smith and William Gibbs McAdoo. When Jones was named to the Party subcommittee charged with hearing bids for the 1928 convention, he clearly commanded respect as a man of local and national stature. As the subcommittee went about its business, Jones combined his knack for corporate wheeling and dealing with a touch of down-home southern hospitality to stage one of the greatest upsets in Democratic Party history.

On January 11, Jones invited the subcommittee members to prepare their

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report on the various convention offers in the parlor of his Mayflower Hotel suite in Washington, D.C. While subcommittee chair John T. Barnett of Colorado and fellow members Arthur G. Mullen of Nebraska and Bruce Kremer of Montana were all well-acquainted with Jones, none had any idea that he planned to make a serious bid for Houston. In the days leading up to the meeting, Miami, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and Cleveland, were the front-runners in a race where newspapers mentioned places like Atlantic City and Houston as only "[o]thers in the field." Each of these leading cities had offered sizable financial contributions to subsidize convention costs and to keep the Democratic National Committee from falling into further debt. They also possessed large convention halls capable of seating more than ten thousand people and an equal number of hotel rooms to boot. Nevertheless, as the subcommittee continued its work, Jones asked the other members to pardon him while he went to his bedroom. Behind closed doors, Jones hurriedly had his secretary compose a written bid for the convention on behalf of the city of Houston. To the offer, Jones attached a personal check of \$200,000. He then immediately returned to the meeting where his impromptu proposal was met with surprise and amusement. Although the rest of the committee agreed to entertain Houston's bid, Jones had to wait until the general meeting of the entire Democratic National Committee the following morning before he could truly sell his city.⁴

National Party Chairman Clem Shaver called the general meeting to order the next morning at the Mayflower Hotel. Although Jones had announced Houston's offer at an earlier executive session, most of the Committee members were unaware that the anticipated showdown between San Francisco and Detroit was about to take an unexpected twist. After subcommittee chairman Barnett gave a brief oral summary of the offers of various cities, he announced that Houston had placed a bid

of \$200,000 and offered an auditorium capable of seating 6,500 people. San Francisco's chief advocate Isidore B. Dockweiler asked Barnett to loudly restate Houston's seating capacity. Feeling confident he had trumped Jones' last-minute proposal by pointing out the inadequacy of Houston's auditorium, Dockweiler felt certain that San Francisco was on her way to landing the convention. Still, representatives from each city had fifteen additional minutes to present their cases, and during these solicitations Houston's appeal began to skyrocket. Advocates from Detroit, Miami, and Chicago all read welcome letters and introduced distinguished

\$150,000 and a convention hall seating 12,000. When it came time to sell Houston, however, the city's boosters made a convincing three-pronged appeal to the Party.⁵

The first Houston backer to do so was Jed Adams, who mentioned nothing of Houston's large financial offer, but instead chose to praise the service and leadership Jesse Jones had provided as Chairman of the Party Finance Committee. Jones then continued the presentation by boasting everything from the world-class elegance of the Rice Hotel to the countrified merits of Texas fishing. As a railroad and steamship Mecca, Houston would offer convenient transportation

options for convention visitors, and Jones assured the Committee that the city's hotels would not overcharge guests—indeed, he owned nearly all of them. Sensing that the city's existing municipal auditorium would not stand a chance against the offers of competing cities and increasingly driven by thoughts of the economic and publicity benefits Houston could reap as a convention city, Jones also announced that Houston would build a new convention hall to the Committee's specifications. He proclaimed that "Houston's hospitality will be a blank check. You can fill it in yourself for what you want," and backed-up his word by promising personal automobile service and private home accommodations for convention guests. To convince the Committee that the notorious Texas heat would not be intolerable in the early summer, he offered assurances that Houston's climate was actually "very comfortable" in June with "temperature ranges in the eighties and lower nineties." He also noted the added benefit of cool "gulf

breezes" that made "light cover" necessary "for comfortable sleeping." Apparently impressed with Houston's ability to stage a successful convention, Jones' offer was met with thunderous applause.⁶

Largely convinced that they *should* pick Houston and confident that Houston could be picked, the Committee next heard Congressman Daniel Garrett tell them why they must pick Houston.



The Rice Hotel in the mid-1920s.

speakers lauding their unique facilities, generous hospitality, and plentiful hotel accommodations. Miami proposed a \$100,000 offer and a convention hall accommodating 15,000 people, while Detroit offered a bid of \$125,000 with an auditorium seating 17,000. Chicago presented a check for \$130,000 and a 15,000-person arena, but Cleveland attempted to top it with a bid of

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy Houston Endowment, Inc.

Garrett billed Houston as the leading city of the South—a region of the country that had faithfully “voted the ticket straight” but had been passed over for a convention since before the Civil War. Garrett warned the Committee that southern states were “getting a little bit weary of” standing behind a party through thick and thin that otherwise ignored their wishes for “expediency’s sake.” Garrett also took time to reinforce Jones’ assurances about Houston’s weather. He lightheartedly vouched that Houston would be “all right” in June and that a little warmth might, in any event, be “best for the party in the end.”

Following Garrett’s plea of political pragmatism, San Antonio Congressman John Boyle spoke on Houston’s behalf to buy time for Texas Governor Dan Moody, whose train was running late. Boyle fused the arguments of Jones and Garrett, calling Houston the “fastest growing city in America” located in a state and region known for its unwavering loyalty to the Democratic Party. Despite Boyle’s delays, though, Governor Moody failed to arrive before representatives of San Francisco made the last convention bid, offering a whopping \$250,000, a facility seating 15,000 people, and an unrivaled number of hotel rooms. Moody did, however, arrive just in advance of the ballot call, speaking long enough to extend a Texas-size welcome from a state with “nine Democrats . . . to one Republican.” With each city’s offer on the table, the ballot process began only after Vincent Miles of Arkansas made a last-minute pitch for Houston. Miles whimsically advised Committee members to select Houston because “Mr. Jones owns the biggest hotel down there and if we get broke down there he will cash our checks, so we can go home.”⁷

On the first ballot, Houston led the contest with 30 votes compared with San Francisco’s 24, Detroit’s 23, Cleveland’s 13, Miami’s 6, and Chicago’s 5. Yet, four more ballots would be necessary for the city to secure a majority of Committee votes. On the fifth and final ballot Houston mustered 54 votes, defeating

San Francisco by a narrow margin of six. Chicago and Miami had been eliminated after the first ballot, and Cleveland was removed from contention after the fourth. Detroit, however, managed to survive all five ballots but only received one vote in the last tally, lending credence to the idea that the city was too close to reserves of Canadian spirits for a party divided over Prohibition. Not wishing to exude an image of discord, the Committee moved to make Houston the Party’s unanimous choice for the 1928 convention.⁸

As news of Houston’s selection spread quickly, journalists and political commentators alike voiced explanations



Jones and prominent Houston architect Alfred C. Finn examine plans for the convention hall.

for the Democratic National Committee’s unanticipated decision. Most analysts believed the Committee opted for Houston largely because of the regional issues Congressman Garrett had underscored at the meeting. While the selection of Houston did serve as a historical concession to the South, it also made practical sense within the political context of the time. Even though New York Governor Al Smith was expected to easily

win the Party’s nomination in June, his presidential candidacy was far from universally welcomed. A Catholic known for his strong ties to Tammany Hall and his adamant opposition to Prohibition, Smith threatened to alienate voters from the “dry,” Protestant, and predominantly rural southern states in the November election. As a result, many Committee members realized that the summer convention would be more important as a litmus test of Party unity than as a forum for the selection of a candidate.

To conclude that the Committee favored Houston solely because it was politically wise, however, would be to ignore the all-important role of Jesse Jones in the selection process. Although regional political concerns may have swayed the Committee to hold its next convention in the South, it was Jones who brought the national parley to Houston, one of the smallest cities to ever entertain a national political convention. With his own riches and reputation, Jones succeeded in landing the convention for Houston without the knowledge or support of Houston’s city officials. Mayor Oscar Holcombe was just as surprised at the news of Houston’s selection as the average local resident, having to call Jones personally to learn exactly what his city was expected to do. By choosing Houston, the National Committee was able to ameliorate southern disenchantment, reward Jones’ years of loyal service, and simultaneously improve the Party’s prospects for an Election Day victory.

Most Houstonians reacted to the news of their city’s selection with outpourings of appreciation and euphoric excitement.

Newspapers declared “Houston Goes Wild” as the entire city became “electrified” with the thought of hosting an event that would attract the “[c]ream of American newspaper talent” and bring “national distinction upon a new and rapidly rising city.” Local officials were reported to be “humming” at the idea that Houston would assume “a new place among the big cities of the nation.” Mayor Holcombe relished in the expectation that “money will almost flow like water,” while

the Houston Fire Commissioner expressed his dumbfounded surprise with a simple "wow." Even hotel bellboys were "jubilant" in anticipation of the sizable tips they could expect from convention visitors. Houston celebrated even more on January 31 when Jesse Jones returned from New York to a hero's welcome. In what was hailed as "the greatest demonstration . . . in the city's history," throngs of admirers estimated at nearly 50,000 greeted Jones. A multitude of bands and a salute from the Texas Air National Guard rounded out the festivities. Although a vast road of pre-convention preparations lay ahead, no one seemed to mind taking a day off to celebrate what one journalist labeled "the greatest honor that ever yet has been conferred on any city of the New South."

Implicit in the city's enthusiasm was the assumption that the rest of the country would view Houston's selection positively—an assumption that proved to be largely incorrect. While most commentators from outside the region could swallow the political strategy leading to Houston's selection, the notion that the convention would be unaffected by scorching Texas heat seemed completely preposterous. The Springfield, Massachusetts *Republican* had little to say of the Houston convention except to advise delegates "to get the lightest weight summer clothing available." Newspapers like the *Nashville Banner* apparently did not consider reports of Houston's first snowfall in three years as any indication that the city's climate was mild, warning that temperate weather in Houston "remains almost an absurdity." In contrast, the *Ohio State Journal* took a more humorous approach, noting that the Republican convention host, Kansas City, also "apparently has convinced herself that personally she's a delightfully cool place in the summer." The *Indianapolis News* exuded a much harsher tone, however, labeling Houston's weather as "pretty mean for a National Convention." In a similar vein, the *Chicago Tribune* mocked the assurances of Houston officials, predicting that convention delegates would only experience a "gulf breeze" in their prayers. Finally, at least one newspaper tried to rationalize Houston's weather as a political advantage, remarking that the convention should be one of harmony for the "penalty for going more than five ballots will be death by heat."⁹

In the months following Houston's selection, external criticism did little to lessen the vigor of the city's pre-convention efforts. On the contrary, understanding that their city was "on trial" now more than ever, Houstonians rose to the challenges that a first-class political convention demanded. Financing the event proved to be the most immediate concern, for without adequate funds the new convention hall Jesse Jones had promised could not be built. Houston banker and oil magnate Ross S. Sterling took charge of the newly formed Finance Committee and immediately sought commercial contributions and private donations to raise the estimated \$300,000 needed. When city-based contributions proved insufficient, the Committee canvassed the entire

state, soliciting donations from judges, cities, and chambers of commerce as partners in what it billed as a truly Texas affair. With a similar strategy of inclusion, the Committee also initiated a massive button drive, peddling blue and white "Me Too" buttons on street corners and in house-to-house crusades. Designed to distinguish the true patrons of Houston from indifferent city residents, the button drive added \$18,500 to the convention fund.

The Finance Committee's diverse efforts ultimately raised \$356,907, but not without causing an embarrassing publicity blunder just before the parley began. In an attempt to assuage fears that the convention might not provide an adequate financial yield, convention hall chairman C. J. Kirk released an estimate of the rev-



Houston's growing skyline in the 1920s, with the Rice Hotel in the foreground; the convention hall nearing

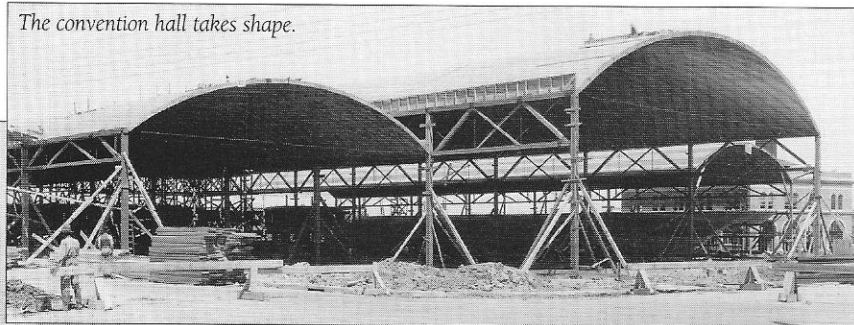
enue local merchants could expect to receive during the convention. After taking every possible source of revenue into account from hotel bills to ice cream sales, Kirk found he was still \$180,000 short of an acceptable return. In haste, he penciled in the shortage under expenditures for "wine and women." The comment immediately drew widespread censure from the press and especially from the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who expressed outrage at Kirk's insult of Southern women. In the end, Houston had financed its convention, but in the process it had called into question the city's budding national reputation.

As the Finance Committee mustered contributions, work began on the new convention hall. Plans to simply revamp Houston's existing Municipal Auditorium were quickly scrapped in favor of a world-class facility that would dazzle city visitors as much as it would serve the practical needs of the convention. Opting to build the temporary hall on land previously designated for a new civic center, city leaders announced that the chosen site was "so situated that no tall buildings will obstruct the Gulf breezes." Climate concerns, however, proved less troubling than razing the more than thirty houses that still dotted the property. Construction proceeded in

sections during the mind-boggling engineering feat of completing Houston's new convention hall in only sixty-four working days. Designed to minimize heat and maximize the number of spectators, the hall's unique open ceiling perimeter allowed for ventilation as well as outside public viewing from a raised platform. The installation of enormous "Typhoon" fans made such open ventilation more effective, but they also required a giant amplification system to compensate for the resulting noise. With an expansive roof of yellow pine that towered fifty-eight feet above the ground, the hall also boasted an elaborate system of ceiling rods and arches that provided 80,000 square feet of open meeting space. City boosters proudly billed the structure as the "[l]argest floor area of any building on Earth under one roof" with its vast, nearly column-free expanse offering 33% more meeting space than the "gloomy, close, depressing" hall of Madison Square Garden.¹⁰

During May and June, convention officials made additional touches to the interior and exterior of the hall, though not without a few setbacks. Emblazoned with white walls, a striped red and gray roof, and green and gold trim, the hall's exterior soon displayed flags and statues of American eagles, some with wing spans of twelve feet. The final enclosure of the building, however, caused a humorous delay when a flock of sparrows became trapped in what was called the "world's biggest bird cage." Extensive leaking after heavy downpours proved to be the worst problem, though, warranting quick repairs to insure that "wet" and "dry" did not take on added meaning in a convention soon to debate Prohibition. Despite sparrows and showers, preparations in the interior of the hall moved forward without further delay with the completion of a state-of-the-art press facilities, including sound-proof radio booths, large telegraph stations, and exclusive office spaces for press agencies. An emergency hospital took its place in the hall, along with such amenities as lunch stands, scores of telephones, and eighteen Frigidaire water-cooling systems to provide liquid refreshment for thirsty convention guests. As a finishing touch, the interior walls were adorned with a large assemblage of American and state flags, while rows of seats were flanked with pots of crepe myrtle. Confident that their new temple would

The convention hall takes shape.



completion in the center; and the skeleton of the Gulf Building under construction on the left.

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serve them well, Houstonians often took Sunday afternoon strolls near the convention site to watch the construction of "Democracy's Cradle."¹¹

While overseeing the building of the new hall, city officials also made countless other improvements to dress Houston in her best "Sunday clothes." Mayor Holcombe proclaimed the first of April as "Clean-Up Week," prodding city residents to beautify their homes by planting flowers and cleaning-up unsightly rubbish. Two days later, 1196 cubic yards of trash had been cleared from Houston streets, but there was still much to be done. In anticipation of an automobile stampede, workers repaired damaged streets and paved additional ones. The city also finalized plans for adorning downtown streets with flags, barrels of ice water, and nearly 200 additional police officers during the convention. New Texas road maps designed "to spread knowledge of the Lone Star State and its history and attractions" along with expanded city parking lots rounded out efforts to welcome out-of-town motorists.

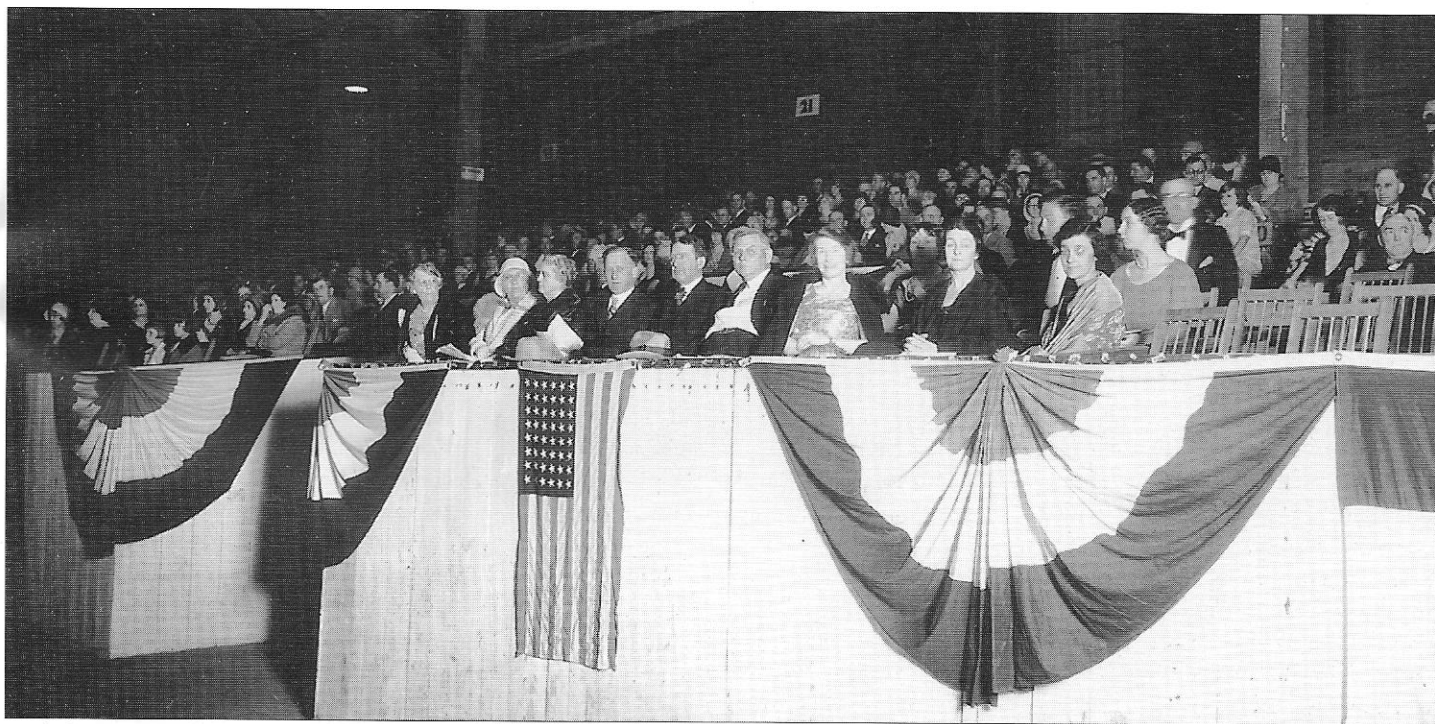
Because Houston lacked hotel facilities to accommodate all convention visitors, a variety of additional housing options also had to be identified and made available. Such accommodations included

private homes, dormitories at the Rice Institute (now Rice University), campsites at Galveston beach, and specially built tourist centers that offered shower baths and first aid facilities. Heightened efforts by local and federal officials to enforce Prohibition resulted in the confiscation of several shipments of liquor earmarked for convention bootleggers. To provide convention guests with entertainment they were sure to remember, officials amassed almost a dozen marching bands and made preparations for the "biggest rodeo ever held in the Southwest." In addition, an enormous Hospitality House was built adjacent to the convention hall to provide cold drinks, shaded benches, rest room facilities, writing rooms, telephones, and information booths for visitors unable to gain admittance to the actual convention. Private companies joined in readiness efforts as well, with Southwestern Bell alone spending nearly \$500,000 for new telephone lines and booths in the heart of the convention area—the largest, most expensive expansion at that time in the company's history.

With the potential for so many improvements to amplify an already inflated sense of city pride, it is no wonder that one journalist quipped: "The only trouble about having the

Democratic Convention in Houston is that Texas will blow so much about it. We shall never hear the last of it." Indeed, by June city officials had already sent thousands of photographs, stories, and propaganda to cities all across the country heralding the finer points of America's newest convention city. Houston was finally ready to capitalize on its newfound notoriety, and its crowning moment lay just over the horizon.¹²

Houston's pre-convention preparations were by no means an exclusively white male affair. Throngs of area women proved indispensable to the city's fund-raising and beautification efforts, prompting the *Houston Post-Dispatch* to recognize that the success of events like the "Me Too" button campaign largely hinged upon the labor of women. While most women's groups lent their energies to the city in such traditional social "housekeeping" activities, others like the Women's Christian Temperance Union preferred to take direct political action. Choosing to place their own political agendas above Houston's quest for national commendation, however, these "cold-water throwers" became easy targets of blame when the city's preparations occasionally went awry. Blacks on the other hand, had no such opportunity



Inside the convention hall



Democratic Party members from across the U.S. filled the streets of downtown Houston.

to move beyond their historically subordinate roles. Although city officials urged the “negro section of the city” to “clean up and beautify” their homes and lawns, the greatest pre-convention demand placed on Houston’s black population was for their “dependable” services as “cooks, maids, porters, chauffeurs and other help.”

Houston’s pre-convention preparations obviously did not occur in a political vacuum. As city officials molded the environment in which delegates would meet, independent political currents simultaneously chiseled the contours of the convention agenda. On the eve of the convention, Al Smith practically had the Party’s nomination locked-up with more than 700 delegates in his pocket and another 170 leaning his way. Indeed, Smith was not expected to win by a landslide only because a few states had decided to send uninstructed delegations and others had promised to back favorite sons like Cordell Hull of Tennessee, James Reed of Missouri, and Jesse Jones of Texas. Nevertheless, Smith seemed likely to easily obtain the votes of two-thirds of the delegates that he needed to secure the nomination, and he decided not to attend the convention in Houston.

Although it was customary at the time for presidential candidates to

decline attending their nominating conventions, Smith had more significant reasons for opting to be “the most important man, not in town.” He had promised the state of New York that he would not “lift a finger” to obtain the Democratic nomination, electing instead to let his public service record make him deserving of the nomination. Moreover, as an associate of the infamous Tammany Hall, Smith did not want to appear to be “grasping for the nomination.” Even more importantly, as a candid opponent of Prohibition, Smith did not want to envenom the deep division between “wet” and “dry” factions of the Party. As H. L. Mencken noted, “Al Smith’s no hypocrite. He doesn’t go out and make people believe he’s a rank Prohibitionist when he’s a guzzler.” While Smith opted to monitor the convention by radio, he did prompt his wife and children to attend the convention. Painted by the press as “dowdy, vulgar . . . and a heavy drinker,” Mrs. Smith heeded her husband’s request to use the convention to redefine her public image as a “good, simple, and handsome woman.”¹³

With hopes for harmony overriding fears of division, an estimated 33,000 visitors began to descend upon Houston in trains, cars, and ships during mid

June. The early arrival of such standouts as Congressman Cordell Hull and popular humorist Will Rogers threw Houston into a state of “bedlam,” as convention “fever” swept the city. Vendors hawking everything from Al Smith ties embroidered with beer mugs to “buttons as big as saucers” elevated the “carnival-like” atmosphere of the city. Sporting cigars and solemn faces, George W. Olvany declared on behalf of the Tammany delegates, “We came here to nominate for president an Abe Lincoln from the ‘Sidewalks of New York,’” as bands serenaded them with the song of the same name.

Al Smith’s wife and children soon reached the city as well, bearing reports that the nominee-to-be “was eager . . . to get their observations and impressions of the convention.” Having just covered the Republican convention in Kansas City two weeks earlier, members of the “Convention Press Army” also filtered into the city, discovering that in Houston they were celebrities in their own right. Undoubtedly the most anticipated luminary of the convention, however, was famed New York mayor Jimmy Walker. Decked in a purple suit and white Panama hat, Walker stepped off his train to the largest welcoming crowd of the Houston convention. Thousands of female fans fawned over the dapper “Prince of Wales.” One adoring follower who “looked old enough to know better” exclaimed “Isn’t he just too cute!” With taxis marked “Coliseum Only” and activists hoisting flyers at every passerby, Houston’s new convention hall was formally dedicated on June 24 in a lavish ceremony attended by Edith Wilson, wife of the late President. Houston’s rise to prominence had finally begun.¹⁴

National Party Chairman Clem Shaver opened the first session of the convention on June 26 to trite welcoming speeches and rather uneventful logistical Party business. In contrast to the convention’s mundane opening, however, famed historian and writer Claude Bowers brought the first day of the Houston convention to a fiery close with a “bombastic, fist-shaking” keynote address that declared Republicans “pillage[d] by law” and “[stole] by stealth.” Wearisome presidential nominations filled nearly all of the second day of the convention but not before Permanent Chairman Joseph T. Robinson delivered

a controversial speech denouncing religious affiliation as an inappropriate criteria for political office. A riotous demonstration ensued as avid Smith backers chanted "Al! We want Al!" while southern dry delegations chose to listen to the sounds of "The Old-Time Religion" from their seats. Franklin D. Roosevelt had the honor of prompting thirty additional minutes of political pageantry when formally nominating the "happy warrior, Alfred Smith," bringing the first two days of the Houston convention to a boisterous close as the sounds of "The Sidewalks of New York" faded into the night.

With radio announcers beaming news of Houston to a nationwide audience of eleven million, city residents redoubled their concern with the impression their city was making on convention guests and journalists. Local residents took their first sigh of relief when convention visitors reacted positively to Houston. Whether commenting on the "huge success" of Houston's pre-convention preparations or the many "pretty women" gracing the city's streets, accolades of "marvelous" and "beautiful" were a dime a dozen. Convention guests also spoke highly of the many forms of entertainment the city had prepared. Twice daily, guests were treated to the "grueling contests of cowboy sport" at the convention rodeo held at the Rice athletic field, while visitors seeking more traditional entertainment took in a performance of the "Houston Durbar," a grand novelty show featuring a cast of 600 actors and dancers in such convention boosting numbers as "Democrats ... Houston Welcomes You." Despite enhanced efforts to enforce Prohibition laws even before the convention began, out-of-town guests had little trouble rounding up liquid entertainment and participating in what one visitor labeled drinking "orgies that would have been a disgrace even in saloon days." Will Rogers summed up this sentiment best: "The whole talk down here is Wet and Dry. The delegates just can't hardly wait till the next bottle is opened to discuss it."¹⁵

Even with a profusion of cool beverages, few guests found adequate refuge from the scorching Houston heat. As mounted police officers watched their horses' hooves sink into the sizzling pavement outside of the convention hall,

delegates within only muttered "cool" when describing tempers, not temperatures. Between convention sessions many Party dignitaries could be seen flocking "coatless and perspiring" to nearby ice trucks for any relief they could find from the incessant heat. After some visitors were treated in Houston hospitals for heat-related illness, Will Rogers noted that "if perspiration was a marketable commodity, the party could pay off the national debt." Journalists at the Rice Hotel similarly reported crowds of "a thousand sweating men and women, panting, laughing, [and] swearing," including one heat-aggravated maverick who fired his revolver in the hotel elevator after losing patience with the maddening hysteria. Indeed, after a horse-mounted woman galloped up the Hotel's staircase to "freshen up" in the powder room, one historian appropriately labeled the heat-exacerbated atmosphere of the Houston convention as a "circus of Texas-style high jinks, hoorahing and high-rolling, highfalutin business and social hobnobbery."¹⁶

While many visiting women assisted local organizations with entertainment and hospitality activities, others participated directly in the convention. The

Democratic National Committee had urged states to fill half of their recently accrued "at large" positions with female delegates, ostensibly giving women "adequate representation" at the Houston convention. However, the addition of a new male "at-large" delegate for every new female one made this change essentially cosmetic, confirming the Party's underlying desire to maintain "prevailing party custom." The scant presence of women on convention committees only confirmed the Party's commitment to this traditional view. What women lacked in formal power, however, they made up with informal lobbying. As one journalist noted, "giggling flappers" could be seen at every street corner rallying behind various causes, the most important of which was Prohibition. Consequently, hundreds of women gathered at regular prayer meetings lasting as long as five hours to plead for divine intervention against Smith's nomination. To them, behind Smith's candidacy loomed "the greatest crisis since the Civil War," and every possible action was justified to prevent such an apocalypse.¹⁷

Politically-minded women fared much better at the Houston convention than blacks. A lynching in Houston only



Looking north on Main Street around the time of the convention.

six days before the convention became the source of much concern in national newspapers (see the article by Dwight Watson in this issue). Unfortunately, those in charge of the convention did little to ameliorate the lynching's underlying message. As one commentator discerned, the Democratic Party functioned as "a sort of racial church in the South" where "heresy is a crime." As a result, "no half-subdued, half-defiant Negro delegations" could be seen at the Houston convention "for the Negro does not vote with the Democratic Party in the South and Democracy knows him not." Blacks who attended the convention sat in a chicken wired "colored section" within the convention hall, a portion of the otherwise packed facility that was "seldom full." Thus, it was no wonder that one observer felt the Houston convention exuded an atmosphere of the older South, where the only sound piercing the unspoken silence of white superiority was that of black jubilee singers performing slave spirituals—a diversion from the "cotton-growing heat" that was much to the delight of many white convention guests.¹⁸

Between convention sessions and entertainment activities, the Party Platform Committee met in the "furnace-like" Houston Public Library to hash out its formal views on such controversial issues as agricultural relief, tariff rates, and Prohibition enforcement. After hours of heated debate, Southern "bone-dry" factions and "moist" Northern delegates agreed on a comprise plank that called for "an honest effort to enforce" the 18th amendment—a deliberately ambiguous provision that allowed individual Party members to maintain their own views on the real need for Prohibition. While the Party's Prohibition plank could be seen as "a passive endorsement of the status quo" designed to promote "harmony" and "the success of the Democratic Party," the same could not be said for the plank on agriculture. To address the plight of America's farmers, the Platform committee adopted an assertive plank calling for federal support in the form of loans and cooperatives. Moreover, the plank on tariff rates signaled "a remarkable abandonment by the Democrats at Houston of their historic position." The Party voiced Republican-like support for more protective rates, reflecting the

increasing industrialization of the South and the desire to protect the interests of big business. Indeed, after the Platform Committee proceeded to abandon a League of Nations plank for first time since the Wilsonian era, one delegate remarked, "McKinley could have run on our tariff plank and Lodge on our plank on international relations." Still, by

around the convention hall amidst falling balloons and enlisted the sights and sounds of the Old Gray Mare Band—a phalanx of musicians and donkeys led by Mrs. Katie Parks. After thirteen minutes of horsing around, Chairman Robinson kindly declared that "the lady will please remove the cavalry from the hall." On the first roll call for the presidential



advocating state rights and refusing to adopt an anti-lynching plank as the Republicans had done two weeks earlier, the Houston Democratic Platform was distinct, signaling a redefinition of "traditional Democratic doctrine" that shunned "the received wisdom of the Wilsonian Bryanite Democracy."¹⁹

On its third day, the convention approved the Platform by a voice vote, marking the first time an amendment roll-call vote was unnecessary since 1912 and the first time a minority report was not filed since 1882. The most animated demonstration before the vote came when the name of Jesse Jones was placed in nomination. Southern delegates paraded

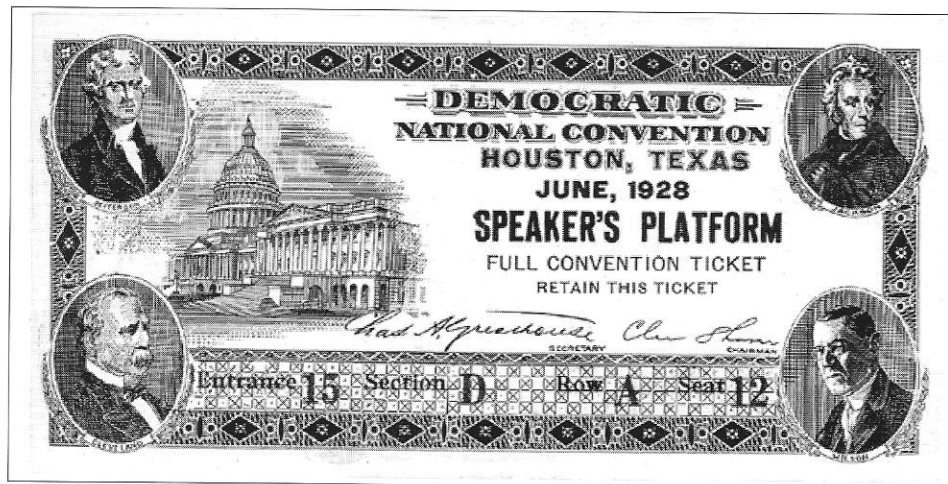
nomination, Smith received 724²/₃ votes, falling just short of the 733¹/₃ needed. When it became apparent that no other candidate had received enough votes to challenge Smith, many delegates abruptly switched their votes in favor of Smith, making a second ballot unnecessary. Smith won with a total of 849²/₃ votes, becoming the first Roman Catholic nominated for president by a major political party in American history.

In heartfelt jubilation, Smith's wife waved a green handkerchief while calling her husband's nomination "the happiest moment of my life." Careful to avoid exciting the edgy nerves of Smith's opposition, the Tammany delegation

kept its euphoria at a polite and modest level. As one reporter noted, "the band never tooted 'Tammany' at all and they didn't even spring the side walk piece until late in the show when everybody was fed up with Dixie." After the Party had overcome the division that Smith's nomination had threatened to incite, Will Rogers wryly concluded: "Democracy has found a candidate, now they are looking for a drink."²⁰

In contrast to the capacity crowds of the first three days, the convention hall was only two-thirds full on the fourth and final day for the nomination of Smith's running mate. Although several states offered favorite sons, or a favorite daughter in the case of Wyoming's Nellie Tayloe Ross, few doubted that Senator Joseph Robinson of Arkansas had the vice presidential nomination all but wrapped-up. Southern, Protestant, and "dry," Robinson offset Smith's nomination by appealing to "championed Prohibitionists, who thought of Tammany as a uniquely wicked organization" and "whose heritage included a deep substratum of hatred and fear of Roman Catholicism." Unsurprisingly, Robinson secured the nomination handily with 1035½ votes. Noting the larger significance of Robinson's selection, the *Arkansas Gazette* pronounced: "The action of the Houston convention is of historic significance because the nomination of Senator Robinson means that after sixty-four years of virtual exile from such honor, the South again furnishes one of the two men named as standard bearers by a major party."

Before the final gavel sounded, a brief acceptance telegram from Smith was read to the remaining delegates. After listening to the Party platform over the radio and later receiving confirmation of his nomination from Robinson, Smith made his views on Prohibition unquestionably clear so delegates might select another candidate if they found his position undesirable. Beaming with Platform lingo, Smith proclaimed that "[c]ommon honesty" required "fundamental changes in the present provisions for national Prohibition." Not wishing to disturb the harmony that had dominated the proceedings, Franklin Roosevelt quickly brought the convention to a close. As



Platform Pass for the 1928 Convention

one journalist noted, "The Democratic donkey with a wet head and wagging a dry tail left Houston."²¹

Most Party members left Houston feeling that the convention was enormously successfully, having avoided the potential rift between the "wet reactionaries of the east" and "the dry anti-Tammany progressives of the south." Some scholars have argued that Smith's placid nomination was attributable to a feeling of exhaustion lingering from the 1924 convention, to his unrivaled national preeminence, and to a belief that he was the Party's only chance to win the November election. Others have concluded that the Party never truly believed Smith could win the Presidency, feeling instead that they "must nominate him and get it over with or he would be a menace for the next twenty years." This latter group of historians has interpreted Smith's nomination as "the product of an ideological and sectional cease-fire rather than of a genuine healing of the wounds of 1924."

Any concord prevailing at Houston proved short-lived as Herbert Hoover defeated Smith decisively four months after the convention, garnering 444 electoral votes to Smith's 87. Moreover, Smith did not even carry his home state of New York and lost the southern "rim" states of Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. As one writer noted, Smith's defeat marked "the most serious crack in the Solid South since its inception." Only states with the highest percentage of rural areas, the greatest dependence on one crop agriculture, and most importantly, the highest

percentage of blacks remained loyal to the Democratic Party. In a contest where the Republican nominee had "promoted Negroes to minor posts in charge of white clerks in his department" and where the Republican platform called for federal anti-lynching laws, preservation of southern racial hierarchy ultimately overshadowed secondary concerns over "Rum and Romanism,"²² at least in the deep South if not in the southern border states.

In the end, the lasting significance of the 1928 Democratic National Convention to local residents did not lay in the realm of politics. They had viewed the convention as their city's long-awaited "coming out party," and the decisive and divisive defeat of the Democrats in the November general election was of little consequence. In six short months, Houston had transcended the boundaries of regional notoriety to become a city of truly national prominence. As one journalist proclaimed: "No longer will Houston be known but to a few. Her fame will be universal." In preparing for a convention when time was of the essence, the citizens of Houston gained a distinction that proved timeless.²³ The city emerged from the national spotlight with an enhanced reputation as a city on the move, one with "can do" leaders such as Jesse Jones who could be counted on to push Houston to even greater future prominence. ■