

Searcy Bracewell works the phone during his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1956.

One of Houston and Harris County's best known political representatives during the 1950s was attorney J. S. "Searcy" Bracewell, Jr. During his lifetime, Bracewell was a successful attorney, state political representative, devoted family man (married to Elizabeth Weaver Bracewell sixtythree years—two children Joseph "Joe" Bracewell III and Elizabeth "Betsy" Bracewell Machac), and very active in civic and community affairs. Today, the law firm that carries his family's name is the fourth largest in Houston and is prominent internationally,

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with offices in eleven cities including New York, London, and Dubai.

I first met him in 2000, in his office, at the Bracewell & Patterson (now Bracewell & Giuliani, LLP) law firm in Houston. Bracewell's warm greeting and beaming smile immediately charmed me; if he were running for public office today, he already would have won me over. Although he was in his early 80s at the time, his gregarious nature, keen wit, and melodious baritone voice made it easy to see that he was naturally gifted for his careers in law and politics.

During the next three years, I conducted a brief series of oral history interviews with him ending shortly before he passed away on May 13, 2003. During these interviews, Searcy Bracewell shared stories about his college years, military service, and what it meant to campaign for elective office in Texas during the late 1940s and the

1950s. Some of his reminiscences, slightly edited for this article, appear below.

Searcy Bracewell was born on January 19, 1918, to Joseph Searcy Bracewell and Lola Blount Bracewell. Raised in Houston, he attended Texas A&M. In addition to his studies, he was a member of the Sul Ross Volunteers and the Corps of Cadets. In his senior year, he served as the Drum Major of the Texas Aggie Band. After graduating in 1938, Bracewell began working in his father's law office in Houston filing, running errands, and doing other office work while studying law at the Houston Law School. Several local attorneys had established the Houston Law School in 1912. It operated until World War II and was one of the many law schools created in Texas during the early twentieth century. Bracewell was admitted to the Texas Bar in 1940, but was called to active duty in the Army shortly thereafter. In

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1943, Lt. Bracewell was assigned to the staff of General George S. Patton's Third Army as an Assistant G-4 (Logistics), where he remained for the duration of the war. In November 1945, along with his father, his brother Fentress, and Bert Tunks, Bracewell established the law firm that would eventually become known as Bracewell & Giuliani. He served in the Texas House of Representatives from 1947-49 and in the Texas Senate from 1949-59. During that time, he sponsored legislation that helped in the development of the Texas Medical Center, the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, and the University of Texas Dental Branch at Houston. In addition to his careers in politics and law, Bracewell was active in community affairs and served on numerous corporate boards, including Chairman of the Board of the Houston Grand Opera.

Bracewell's primary duties during the war involved logistics, making sure that vital supplies reached the frontline troops. One of his most memorable assignments, about which he spoke with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye, was a highly important mission for General George S. Patton, Jr. after the Third Army entered Europe following D-Day.

I got orders—I don't know why me—I was a Lieutenant, I guess, at the time, and I got orders to go back to England...and get General Patton's whiskey! They gave me detailed orders that I was to go and pick up a weapons carrier, which is sort of like a pickup truck, and a driver and go to this certain place, and pick up the seven cases of whiskey that he had reserved and bring them back. So—I flew back to London, and followed the orders, got the whiskey and came back across the beaches so I could bring it to General Patton. The Third Army was moving so fast that nobody knew—and it was complete bedlam—nobody knew where they were. I would stop and inquire and nobody knew where the headquarters of The Third Army was. I was scared to death—not scared about the enemy, but scared the "old man" was looking forward to his whiskey and I was a long time in getting it

there! It took me two or three days, but I found them and got his whiskey to him. And I must say it was completely intact! Then we went on and I resumed my duties in the G-4 Section.

I suppose that my first thought about politics was on the ship coming home after World War II. I was wondering what I was going to do. My father had always been interested in politics and, because of his interest, I had been also, and I thought about running for office. When I got home, it was getting close to the time to announce for the various offices, and I decided to run for the legislature. As I recall, there was no incumbent for the position. Harris County was allotted five members of the legislature. In those days they didn't violate county lines. Now they do. But for some reason or another, back in those days, you just didn't violate county lines, so Harris County had five representatives. So I announced to run for Position 3—that was right after the war, and I think nearly everybody that was elected at that time was a veteran. There were several of us that were elected to the legislature. This was in 1946, the primary was in July and then, of course, the general election was in November, but there was no television. Consequently, the campaigning was much different than it is now-and much less expensive I might add.

The way you campaigned is that you went to various civic club meetings, which were held around the county, and nearly every community had a civic club. And you talked with the newspaper people—editorial staff of the newspapers and tried to get them to endorse you. Endorsement by the newspapers was very, very important as a way of communication. You tried to communicate a little bit by radio, but we thought it was rather expensive. I don't guess it is by today's standards, but that's the way you campaigned—by radio, newspaper ads, and just going around and having coffees and so forth. It was much less expensive. Maybe I should say here that winning the Democratic Primary was tantamount to election. There



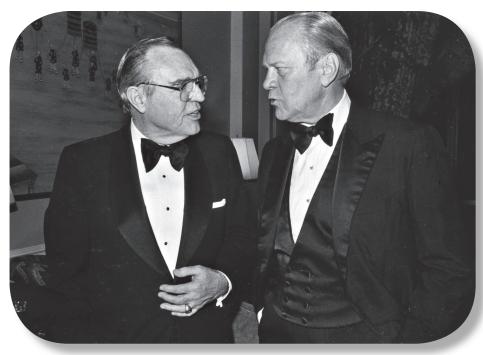
Captain J. S. Bracewell, Jr., U.S. Army during World War II

really was no Republican Party of any consequence in that day. In fact, when I first went to the legislature we had no Republicans. But there was a philosophy difference. You had liberal Democrats and conservative Democrats. And the Conservative Democrats were more conservative, I think, than the Republicans are today, but that was big issue—the basic, philosophical issue—was whether or not you were a Liberal or a Conservative in your thinking.

We had three newspapers—the Houston Chronicle, the Houston Post, and the Houston Press. The Houston *Press* was a Scripts-Howard paper. The *Post* was owned by the Hobby family—former Governor Hobby, and the Chronicle was owned by Jesse Jones. But it was very important to get their endorsement. They not only editorially endorsed, but if they were for you, they gave you a lot of publicity and that, as I say again was extremely important. So, I campaigned. I found out how big Harris County was—you don't really realize it until you go to every little hamlet that is around. I got in the runoff in the Democratic Primary—categorized as a Conservative Candidate, which I was, the other Democrat who got in the runoff was Al Shulman, a young lawyer here. We had a runoff, and I happened to get elected.

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Searcy Bracewell with President Gerald R. Ford.

The Constitution of Texas provided that there would be thirty-one Senators in the State and that no county would have more than five Representatives or one Senator. And, of course, we had the five Representatives and one Senator. The Senate seat, I think, was vacant, and so, a fellow named Lacy Stewart was elected in the Senate. So. the legislature met and only about two months after meeting, Lacy Stewart had a heart attack and died. The Governor called a Special Election to fill his seat. His widow decided to run and she won. She didn't like politics—her father and some people had talked her into running, and then she ran and won, of course. And for some reason or another, we got very well acquainted. She sort of relied on me for advice and toward the end of the term, she called me and said, "I'm not going to run for reelection and I just wanted to give you notice. I'm going to resign—I'm going to resign tomorrow." I appreciated her giving me that notice. So I resigned from the legislature—I had served one term. I was running for reelection to the House. But she gave notice that she wasn't going to run, and then I gave notice that I was not going to run for reelection, but I was going to run for the Senate. So, she gave me a day's notice to try to get ahead of the others

because of our friendship. But I ran and won for the State Senate. And, as I recall, my total expenditures were \$7,000, which is a very small amount compared to what it costs these days to run for office. I didn't have any fundraisers. Nobody had fundraisers—we'd get a few donations. I think most people were of the same opinion that

ever held office—that it really wasn't a good thing to do and so we pretty well financed our own campaigns.

I remember going to a little farming community up in Cypress. I was going down a dirt road and there was a fellow plowing. I stopped my car and he was coming down plowing with a mule and his plow, and I waited for him at the gate where he would come and turn around. He stopped and talked with me and I told him I was running for the legislature, and I gave him a card, and I would appreciate his consideration. I had been in the legislature for the past term—thought I was fairly well known, but I gave it to him and he looked at it and looked at me and said, "Well, I'll vote for you." He said, "the fella we got in there now ain't doin' us no good!" I was the one that was there! So people don't-it's hard to imagine, but they pay little attention to politics.

After I had been in the state senate about ten years—I had been very active and I thought I was pretty well known—I decided I would make a run for the United States Senate. This, again, was a plurality election and in



Houston television personality Marvin Zindler, Elizabeth Bracewell, and Searcy Bracewell.

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Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen and Searcy Bracewell, 1997.

that election, there were nineteen of us. Here again, we had the philosophical difference that was the main campaign issue—the liberal-conservatism. I guess somewhat as it is now, but the conservative is the Republican Party, but there was no Republican Party to speak of in those days. Senator Ralph Yarborough was elected to the Senate. He was a district judge in Austin and he had the endorsement of the liberal element and he won the election with only about 33% of the vote. I ran third in that race. Martin Dies, who was head of the Un-American Activities Committee, which had some notoriety, was second and I was third. And that was in 1957. I never did run for office after that. I had served twelve years, two years in the House and ten years in the Senate.

I was going to say that the rationale for my running for the state-wide office was, number one, I was pretty well known in Harris County, which was where the largest population was—certainly the largest county in Texas. I went to the three newspapers prior to making a decision to run, and they all three said they would support me. I thought that was very important in a nineteen-man plurality race. My rationale though was entirely wrong. People would tell me, "Bracewell,

you're a—compliment me—you're a fine man, but you don't have a chance." Martin Dies, who was a well-known Chairman in the Congress, is going to have the conservative support. This turned out to be true. I think if it hadn't been for Martin Dies, I probably would have won. But, nevertheless, I didn't. And that was sort of my end of, as I said, running for public office.

This was sort of the dawn of television and the dawn of the Republican Party in Texas too. I tried to make the first television [campaign] talk in those days. The television station had just been established, I believe. But, it didn't turn out very good. It got all messed up mechanically and so forth, but —I got some publicity that I was going to make the first television talk. And I don't think anybody ever heard it!

But, what I did—just to think about running over the state—sort of an awesome thing—you don't know what to do. What would you do to start out running over the state? Well, I had gone to school at A&M and the Aggies were very clannish in those days—as they are today. Nobody—I think I'm correct on this—nobody from A&M had ever run for state-wide office at that time, up to that time. So, that was my

campaign organization. I advertised the fact that I had gone to school at A&M in various parts of the state and asked them if I came there would they get a little group together that I could meet during this campaign. They nearly always readily agreed to that, and so that was my campaign organization. I campaigned pretty hard and went all over the state and had these little meetings that had been put together by somebody from A&M. I thought I had a pretty good chance, but it turned out I didn't, of course.

I remember being up in the Panhandle one time and there was an A&M fellow there that had gotten a group together and he was very gung-ho about my race, and he said "Let me have some of your placards . . . I'm going to put them out—tack them up around." That's another campaign thing that was done quite extensively was having these placards that they put in the yard and tacked up on a tree or telephone pole. He said, "I'm going to get somebody to put them out and around in this area." One night, I got a call from a deputy sheriff in Oklahoma who said that there was a fellow they had arrested for DWI, and he had a bunch of my placards in the back of his pickup truck. And I talked with the deputy sheriff and I said, "Did he have a wreck or hurt anybody?" "No, he didn't." I said, "Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd just keep him there overnight in jail until he sobers up and then let him go tomorrow." So, he had just gotten over the state line into Oklahoma and was putting up those signs. Well, I got no votes in Oklahoma and very few in Texas! But it was a wonderful experience. I cherish it very much. I found out that Texas is a big state and that it's a beautiful state and so I enjoyed the—even though I lost, I enjoyed the campaign very, very much.

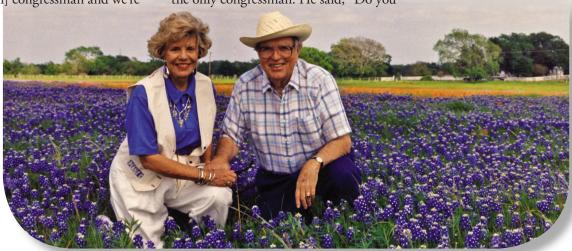
I'll tell you this one final thing and then maybe we better shut it down. The Legislature was getting ready to meet and I had never met Mr. Jesse Jones, but I knew he was a leading citizen in Harris County, Houston, and I thought I should go by and pay my respects to him, so I called his secretary and asked

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for an appointment. I had just been re-elected to the Senate, and she set up an appointment for us to go. He was getting pretty old at that time. It was in the 1950s. And I said, "Mr. Jones, I just want to pay my respects. The legislature is getting ready to meet." He said, "Well, what are you going to be taking up?" And I said, "Well, one thing that is of real, vital interest to us is this congressional seat—they've allotted us an [additional] congressman and we're

entitled to it by virtue of the population. I'm going to do my best to get the seat for Harris County." He sat behind his desk and he said, "Why do you want to do that?" And I said, "Well, sir, we're entitled to it"—and I went through my spiel. But, the conversation was very unsatisfactory. His next question was "why do we want another congressman?" I went through my spiel again—he was a great friend of Albert Thomas, who was the only congressman. He said, "Do you

think we'd be better off with two than we are with one?" And I gave him my spiel again, and, finally—as I say—it was a very unsatisfactory meeting. He finally said, "Well, I don't see any sense in that. We've got a congressman—we've got a good one—what do we want two for?" The longer I live, the more I see the wisdom in the old man's thinking. \*\*



Elizabeth and Searcy Bracewell enjoying the Texas Bluebonnets near Roan's Prairie, Spring 1994.

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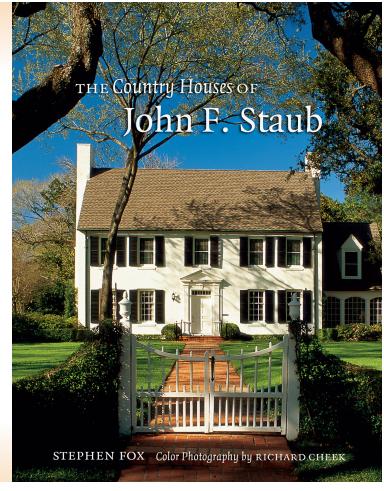
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