

★ TEXAS Legends

Pappy O'Daniel

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As we've noted, Texas's size has given an advantage to characters flamboyant enough to grab the voters' attention across the state. One of Texas's legendary governors, "Pass the Biscuits, Pappy" O'Daniel (pictured, left, with Harry Akin) is a fine example of the ability of a colorful outsider to push aside established party leaders and land on top of the state's power structure.

Wilbert Lee O'Daniel was born in Ohio but moved to Texas in 1925. As sales manager for a flour mill, O'Daniel became well known as the host of a radio show featuring music from Bob Wills and Milton Brown's band, the

Light Crust Doughboys. The show opened with someone saying, "Pass the Biscuits, Pappy." It mixed inspirational stories with music, including songs that O'Daniel penned with titles such as "The Boy Who Never Got Too Big to Comb His Mother's Hair." In 1938, purportedly spurred by listener letters urging him to run for governor (although others suggest that wealthy business interests and a public relations expert had done the real urging), O'Daniel declared his candidacy, proclaiming the Ten Commandments as his platform and the Golden Rule as his motto. O'Daniel won the Democratic nomination without a runoff and, facing no real opposition, won the general election with 97 percent of the vote.

An estimated 100,000 people packed into Memorial Stadium in Austin to witness his inauguration, but O'Daniel quickly exhibited his lack of political skill by proposing a thinly disguised sales tax, making numerous questionable appointments, and forgetting his only specific campaign promise—a \$30-a-month pension for every Texan over sixty-five. By the time of his reelection campaign, he was opposed by almost every newspaper in the state, with the *Dallas Morning News* proclaiming, "The highest office in the state has been the laughing-stock of the United States for a year and a

half."ⁱ Voters nevertheless returned O'Daniel to office, but he accomplished little in his second term beyond positioning himself for a move to the U.S. Senate by appointing Andrew Jackson Houston, Sam Houston's only surviving son, to fill a vacancy left after Senator Morris Sheppard died in April 1941. Houston, the oldest man to serve in the U.S. Senate to that point, died the next year, leaving O'Daniel without an incumbent to worry about in the special election. O'Daniel's only serious primary challenger was a young ex-congressman named Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson led through much of the ballot counting, but late returns from rural districts gave O'Daniel the victory, leaving Johnson to await another day.

While O'Daniel's colorful character effectively swept Johnson aside in the Texas primary, it did nothing to endear him to the Washington establishment. O'Daniel's down-home, colorful stylings won him few victories in the nation's capital. His public appeal made him a legend in Texas, but O'Daniel's leadership did little to leave any real legacy of accomplishment, either in Austin or Washington, D.C.

i. Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 394.