



The Killer Bees

No story better reflects the eccentric politics created by the rules of the Texas Legislature than the story of the Killer Bees. The Bees emerged in May 1970 during a battle over whether Texas should have a separate presidential primary in 1980. One side, supported by former lieutenant governor Bill Hobby, favored a separate primary so that conservative Democrats could cast a vote in a Republican presidential primary for Ronald Reagan or former Texas governor John Connally on March 11 and then return to the Democratic Party in May to outvote the liberals in the primary for other offices. The other side wanted a single primary that would force conservative Democrats to choose a party. Hobby nicknamed some of the liberal legislators who resisted his agenda in the legislature the “Killer Bees,” because he said he never knew where they would strike next. Opponents of the separate primary were worked into a frenzy when Hobby slipped

the primary into an innocuous election bill that had already passed the Texas House and was coming before the Texas Senate. This would have allowed him to get around the two-thirds vote required to pass most bills. With ten days left in the legislative session, the Bees had grown to twelve members, but they knew that they lacked the two-thirds majority required to block passage. However, they also realized that the Senate would lack a quorum and couldn’t pass any more bills if all twelve of them refused to attend.

The Killer Bees took flight and disappeared from the legislature. Law enforcement was sent to round them up while the rest of the senators found themselves unable to leave the Senate as Hobby kept them in the capitol building. For five days the Bees evaded authorities, although nine of them were hiding in an apartment just over two miles from the capitol building. The Texas Rangers nearly caught Senator Gene Jones after he left the

Austin hideout because of claustrophobia. When lawmen arrived at Jones’s new hideout, they mistakenly arrested his brother when he answered the door while Senator Jones jumped the back fence.

Although Texans might not have usually sided with the liberal-leaning Bees, there was little sympathy for the political interests behind the bill for a separate primary, and Texans and the nation found themselves caught up in the spectacle of the small band of Bees eluding a statewide manhunt and foiling the powerful forces aligned against them. Eventually, Hobby relented, inviting the Bees back to the Senate after abandoning his maneuvers on behalf of the bill. While the saga of the Killer Bees reads like a surreal adventure, it highlights the problem with the Texas Senate’s requirement that a bill be passed with two-thirds of the vote, a threshold that is high enough to allow a determined and creative minority to resist change.