

★ TEXAS Legends

Landslide Lyndon

Today, visitors to the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum in Austin can watch a mechanical figure of the former president lean on a split-rail fence and spin yarns about Texas. Johnson occupies a unique position in that he has both starred in and recounted many Texas legends.

The career of Lyndon Baines Johnson saw his rise from a teacher in a poor school in Pearsall, Texas, to president of the United States. When “Pappy” O’Daniel, in what one newspaper called the “most constructive act” of his career, retired from the U.S. Senate, the battle to succeed him pitted Johnson against former governor Coke Robert Stevenson. Stevenson was considered unbeatable by some, but Johnson won the endorsement of many of the state’s newspapers and “Ma” Ferguson, who remembered that Johnson attended the funeral of her husband while Stevenson skipped the service. Johnson concentrated on the large urban areas and zipped around the state campaigning via helicopter while Stevenson was content to drive around in an old Plymouth.

Stevenson finished first in the primary, easily besting Johnson by a vote of 477,077 to 405,617. However, lacking the majority needed to win the nomination, the two

candidates faced off in a runoff election. Official returns from the runoff took three days to compile before the Texas Election Board announced that Stevenson had won by 362 votes. However, “late returns” were still coming in, including what would become the legendary Box 13 from Alice, Texas, which belatedly revealed 203 uncounted ballots, 202 of them for Johnson. Upon further examination, the poll lists showed that Box 13’s voters had signed in and voted in alphabetical order and in identical handwriting. Amended returns gave Johnson a margin of eighty-seven votes statewide and the nickname of “Landslide Lyndon.”

The State Democratic Executive Committee had the final word on the primary returns and voted 29–28 to certify the Johnson victory. While some of Johnson’s critics have pointed to evidence of voter fraud in Alice, others point out that there was evidence of similar vote fraud on behalf of Stevenson in East Texas. As T. R. Fehrenbach concluded in his classic history of Texas, “Johnson’s men had not defrauded Stevenson, but successfully outfrauded him.”ⁱ

While Johnson’s leadership of the nation as it tackled landmark civil rights legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964



Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum/National Archives

and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, has given him a well-deserved place in history, it’s worth remembering that Johnson, like many other leaders of his time, came to power under the wing of powerful party bosses and sometimes won high office by taking the low road.

i. T. R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*, updated ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2000), 659.