

James E. Folsom: Populist

James Folsom was bigger than life in every way. He was 6'8 and wore size 15 ½ shoes. He was so big physically he was known affectionately by his friends and supporters as “Big Jim.” His enemies also called him “Big Jim,” but usually added an adjective after big. He was so big that he was discharged from the army during WWII because there was no equipment to fit him. He then enlisted in the Merchant Marines.

His appetites were big as well, especially when he was a young widower and the unmarried governor of Alabama in 1947. He became known as “Kissing Jim” then because of his fondness for kissing pretty girls during that political campaign. When he was governor, he was named the nation’s most eligible bachelor by the women enrolled in the Barbizon School of Modeling in New York City. He could not resist the temptation to go New York and kiss all the students there.

His bachelorhood and his sexual appetites caused him to be sued by a woman for fathering her child. He had made an agreement with her that he would support her and the child. But his enemies persuaded the young woman to file suit. As was always the case in regard to his foibles, Folsom faced them head on. He settled the suit and paid her what she asked.

He admitted his weaknesses for women by openly telling the story about his political enemies trying to entrap him at his campaign stops. “Folks, you know my enemies been fishin’ for Big Jim a long time, and they’ve used all kinds of bait. Awhile ago a friend told me, said, ‘Big Jim, they gonna hook you this time, they fixin to get an attractive blonde, and they gonna dress her up fine and put perfume on her, and they gonna throw her out and troll for you.’ Now folks, you know what I told my friend? I said, if that was the way my enemies aimed to catch me, if that was the bait they were gonna use, they were gonna catch me every time!”

He certainly used his good old boy image of a southern rounder to good advantage. However, once he remarried the rumors about his sexual peccadillos stopped. In 1948 he married Janelle Moore in a private ceremony at the Rockford Baptist Church in Rockford, Alabama.

The stories about his eccentricities persisted. One such eccentricity was his habit of taking a nap when and wherever he pleased. Often at a campaign stop, he would lie on the ground and take a nap as the crowd gathered around him.

In many ways his eccentricities were a way for him to separate himself from his opponents and associate himself with the average person. He was a master communicator. He invented words and expressions to explain the political situation in Alabama. He called the wealthy and powerful landowners of the Black Belt and the executives of Birmingham industry, private utilities and Alfa, “the Big Mules” and “the Gotrocks”. They were powerful because the 1901 Constitution gave them control over local affairs and prevented more money being spent on education and farm to market roads. The cumulative poll tax prevented many small farmers, workers, and small businessmen from voting.

He called the small farmers and mill workers “Branchheads” because he was going to take his campaign to them where they lived at the heads of branches and forks of creeks. There he argued every citizen of Alabama should have an old age pension of \$50 a month; the cumulative poll tax should be abolished; every child should be able to go to school with free books; every teacher should be paid a living wage; union workers should be protected from vindictive employers; farm to market roads should be built, and liquor should be legally sold in the state.

His ability to communicate with people at the forks of the creeks and brush arbors changed the way political campaigns in Alabama were conducted forever. Previously candidates for state office always went directly to the county courthouse to consult with the “courthouse ring” as it was called then. The ring consisted of the leaders of the county who would tell their constituents who to vote for. Folsom’s method was to ignore the county ring and speak directly to the people.

He hired a country music band to play music to gather a crowd. In 1946, he called his band the Strawberry Pickers. A young Hank Williams played with that band. In 1954, he called them the Meat Grinders. The Grinders were needed to grind the politics of self-interest out of office in favor of those who supported the people. Often his wife Jamelle would join the band and sing two or three songs.

After the musicians had attracted a crowd, Folsom would then speak, using the language of the average Alabama citizens. He also used visual aids quite effectively. His famous corn shuck mop and suds bucket were used to illustrate how he was going to scrub the politicians out of Montgomery and give the government back to the people. He then would pass the bucket to raise money at these rallies. As the bucket passed, he would continue to talk to the crowd in a folksy manner, often telling the story about how his mother cleaned turnip greens.

When Folsom announced he was running for governor in 1946, few people gave the insurance salesman who had never held public office a chance. Grover Hall of the Montgomery Advertiser and John Temple Graves of the Birmingham Post quickly wrote him off as an eccentric and an ignoramus. He was eccentric. He wore combat boots during the campaign to illustrate that he was the only veteran of WWII running for office. He would say his opponents had been lying about him every way they could. They were saying he wore size 15 ½ shoes. He then would hold up his foot and clearly on the bottom of his combat boots was written size 15, not 15 ½. He would say, “See, they even lie about my shoes.”

Even when he won 28.5 per cent of the votes in the primary, no one thought he could win the run-off. But he did, and in 1947, began his first term as governor.

Many argue he was so unprepared to be governor that he had no legislative agenda. Others argue that he was too busy rewarding his supporters with state jobs. . Others argue he was so distracted by a paternity suit that he was ineffective. Still others argued he was drunk much of the time.

Nevertheless, in his first term, in his second term and in every political campaign, he

remained true to his core principles. He was not in any way a Unitarian, yet in his core principles, he upheld the first two of the seven Unitarian principles to the letter. He always believed in the inherent worth of every individual, and he always felt we must do what we can to bring about social justice.

In 1948, as governor of Alabama, six years before *Brown v. Board of Education* and 16 years before the federal Civil Rights Act, Folsom pursued equal opportunity and voting rights for all citizens of Alabama.

Virginia Durr, the great Unitarian Civil Libertarian and the sister-in-law of Hugo Black, came back to Alabama at this time. She said about Folsom's efforts to do away with the poll tax and to register votes: "He supported us but he couldn't do much" because the Alabama Constitution was designed to protect the wealthy property owners.

When Folsom's first term as governor came to a close in 1950, he gave the following report to the people. "There has been much progress in some fields but very little progress in others.

There has not been much progress in fundamental liberties.

It is not really important that several thousand miles of roads have been built for the people during the past four years, and it is not of great significance that teachers' salaries have been almost doubled nor that the reforestation program has been greatly advanced. What really concerns the safeguarding and promoting of democracy for our people, is whether or not every man so entitled is given the right to vote.

We have to face up to the fact that 35 percent of our people are Negroes. We cannot stick our heads into the sand and let the world march by without direction, without planning...Many of them who are qualified to the letter of the law have been maliciously kept from exercising the right to vote. That is not democracy in any man's language."

He also left office being the only prominent southern politician to have supported Harry Truman in the 1948 election, when the Alabama Congressional delegation and most Alabama politicians supported the racism of Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats.

The Alabama Constitution would not allow a governor to succeed himself, so Folsom had to wait until 1954 to run for re-election. Again he used the folksy methods of his first campaign and won the primary, becoming the first governor to be elected without a run-off in many years.

In his second term, he was much better prepared with an agenda for the legislature. However, the 1954 Supreme Court decision integrating the public schools overwhelmed his agenda. Folsom, nevertheless, stayed close to his core principles of seeking social justice and equal rights for all Alabama citizens. He met with and advised Martin Luther King and other leaders during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He attempted to repeal the right to work law. He alienated many of his supporters by inviting Congressman Adam Clayton Powell to visit him in the governor's mansion and have a cocktail. Rural white Alabamians were incensed twice over

because not only was Powell black, but Folsom was openly serving liquor in the governor's mansion, whenever everyone knew if you drank you should drink secretly. Because of that incident, when he became governor George Wallace never served liquor in the mansion.

Despite the turmoil over integration, Folsom's administration passed more road legislation than any governor before or since, increased teacher's salaries and education funding, supported the Tombigbee Water Way, and made the Alabama Docks and thus Alabama more competitive in international trade. He supported the industrial unions and refused to call out the Alabama National Guard to break strikes as previous governors had done.

Folsom ran again for governor in 1962 and would have won again despite his position on integration and civil rights and his belief in the inherent worth of every individual. Even the various scandals and corruption associated with his two previous administrations did not change the way voters felt about him. He joked during the campaign that he had at once been associated with "wine, women and song" but now at 54 he had changed to, "Metrecal, one gal, and sing along with Big Jim."

However, the night before the election, on state-wide television, something happened that is still unexplained. Folsom appeared to be drunk on live television. This caused him to miss the runoff by 2,000 votes and led to the election of George Wallace.

Folsom, in his last years, continued to run for public office but was never elected again. He became blind in his old age and died in 1987.

What is James Folsom's legacy?

Some would say he continued the legacy of corruption in Alabama politics. Recently I talked with an older man who lived in Alabama during Folsom's administration and he commented that Big Jim was just like all politicians, out to get what he could for himself. Another woman said, I never voted for him. I could vote for a fool but I couldn't vote for a clown. Others could never forgive his fondness for liquor and his support for legalizing liquor in the state.

Today, in Alabama, not a single building, bridge, road, school, or college is named for him. Yet he did more to involve ordinary people in the political process than any other office seeker. This is his real legacy.

He was, as George Sims has written, the little man's big friend. Carl Grafton and Anne Permaloff in their book, Big Mules and Branchheads, have perhaps summarized his legacy best. "He was a leader who mobilized the forces of change already developing in the system due to the Depression and World War II. He gave hope and a sense of worth to average men and women who had been told that they not fit for leadership, that their dreams were petty dreams, and that they therefore were rightly excluded from the democratic process. Folsom taught them that the Big Mules' myths of genetic superiority were corrupt. He instructed them on the dignity of the common man and woman and the important part they had to play if democracy was to work and on the fundamental changes in the political system that had to occur before

they could participate fully in their own governance. He helped an entire generation gain self-respect.”