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Lake Tahoe, Nevada

(Jim Brown's column is posted from the far west this week as he travels to Lake Tahoe to address insurance executives from the Western United States.)

LOOKING BACK OVER 40 YEARS OF NATIONAL POLITICAL CONVENTIONS

This is the first time in 40 years that I have not attended a national party convention where a presidential candidate is selected. But the Brown family will be well represented. My sister Madelyn is an elected delegate to the Democratic National Convention that begins this weekend in Boston. And so is my Mother.

I wonder how many mother-daughter delegates have ever been elected to attend such an event? Eight years ago, four Browns represented Louisiana, including my Dad and yours truly. That has to be some kind of all time record. My mother refuses to list her age, but she cannot deny that I'm 64. If she would fess up, she might well claim to be the oldest elected delegate attending either party's gathering.

My first Democratic convention was in Atlantic City in 1964. On summer break from Tulane Law School, I drove my twelve-year-old Volkswagen convertible up to New York City to visit relatives, and made a last minute decision to divert to Atlantic City. The Democrats were gathering in the old civic auditorium on the boardwalk, which for many years was the site of the Miss America pageant. I was able to park my car about half a block from the auditorium and walk right up to the front door. A guard asked me where I was going, and I said I wanted to join the Louisiana delegation.

"Are you supposed to be with them?" he asked.

"I sure am," I said. I might have exaggerated a bit, but I was still hoping to get in the door.

"Well, then welcome to Atlantic City, and go right on in."

I stood about fifty feet away from the stage where President Lyndon Johnson kept the crowd in suspense until he announced that Sen. Hubert Humphrey would be his running mate. Johnson was a cinch to be reelected, and the Democrats pulled together as one big happy family. What a contrast to what happened four years later.

In 1968, the Democratic convention was held in Chicago. I was living in Ferriday, La. then with my wife and our two-month-old daughter Campbell. We decided on the spur of

the moment to travel to Chicago and visit old friends, so we packed up the car and headed north.

The main party headquarters was at the Sheraton Hotel, which faces Lake Michigan in downtown Chicago. I spent my first day at the convention “people watching” in the lobby, and reading the scores of brochures being passed out by special-interest groups lobbying delegates.

Major opposition to the Vietnam war was building, and a large number of protesters had gathered in Grant Park across from the Sheraton. Confrontations were breaking out between protesters and police officers all around the hotel.

I ran into Ingersoll Jordan, an old friend from Tulane who was working for Congressman Hale Boggs, a New Orleanian who was the Majority Leader of the House in Washington. Off we went to the Blackstone Hotel close by for dinner. The restaurant at the Blackstone is in the basement. Just as we started our meal, I looked up to see white smoke seeping down the stairs into the dining room. My experience in the military told me immediately that it was tear gas, and I knew we had to get out quickly. The waiter had just put down my filet mignon. I grabbed the steak off the plate, slapped it over my nose and mouth, and dashed up the stairs through the tear gas, losing my friend in the confusion.

By the time I reached the street, riots were breaking out up and down Michigan Avenue and all over Grant Park. I knew I could get a better view from the top of the Sheraton, so I headed for the elevator in the lobby. When the doors opened, there were three people inside: Senator Russell Long, State Senator Mike O’Keefe and Governor John McKeithen. Rumors had been circulating around the convention that McKeithen was under consideration as a possible choice for Vice President on a Hubert Humphrey ticket.

Sticking my hand out, I introduced myself to John McKeithen. “Governor, I’m Jim Brown from Ferriday, Louisiana. McKeithen smiled, but he was visibly surprised at my introduction.

“Why Jim, what are you doing up here?” he asked.

Governor,” I said. “I came all the way up here to support you for vice-president.”

McKeithen laughed, slapped me on the back, and told me he could not be more pleased.

Some months later, O’Keefe told me they had been on their way up to Vice President Humphrey’s suite to urge him to put McKeithen on the ticket. When he didn’t get tapped for the job, the Governor left in a huff and headed back to Louisiana.

Now for a good Republican Convention story.

It was 1988 in New Orleans. The GOP gathered to pick their nominee at the Superdome. An old friend had a box suite and invited me to join him there to watch the festivities. The President to be, George H.W. Bush, had just completed his acceptance speech and the Suite emptied out. I lingered to watch all the celebrating, when the door opened and Sen. Bob Dole walked in.

Dole had lost the nomination to Bush in a heated battle marked by some sharp exchanges. The Kansas Senator had won the first battle in the Iowa Caucuses, with Bush finishing third. But the President to be recovered and was unopposed for the nomination at the convention.

“I must be lost,” he said. “There’s supposed to be a suite where I can sit a bit, but I’ve forgotten the number.”

Senator, you are welcome to relax here.” I offered him a drink and we both sat and watched the jubilation and TV commentary. You could tell he was wishing he could have been taking on Gov. Dukakis in the coming fall election.

“Dukakis is leading in the polls now,” I asked. “Can Bush win?”

Dole paused for a moment, then said: “Yes, I believe he will. But that promise about ‘read my lips....no new taxes.’ That may come back to haunt him if he does.”

The Senator was right on the mark. That phrase was a big factor in Bill Clinton’s victory four years later.

I was a guest this week on “The Morning Show,” broadcast on KMLB in Monroe and hosted by Republican political activist Lee Fletcher. Lee lost the Fifth District congressional seat by a narrow margin to the present incumbent, Rodney Alexander two years ago. Lee reiterated that although Alexander may be a “nice guy,” he thinks it’s time for the Congressman to fish or cut bail. “He can’t play it both ways. Either he’s an active democrat or he should make the switch if he wants to be more conservative. Right now, he seems to be in no man’s land,” says Lee.

This race will certainly heat up a good bit starting next week with the announcement of Alexandria attorney and former state representative Jock Scott.

I receive numerous e mails about what appears in my weekly columns. A lot of readers like to comment on the quotes I list. They vary, purposely, in tone from the humorous to the satiric; from the thoughtful to the hopeful. And from the bitter to the optimistic. Last week’s quote from Martin Luther King drew one of the largest number of responses I have ever received.

*“ In the End, we will remember not the words of our
Enemies, but the silence of our friends.”*

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown
