

Jim Wright and Weatherford

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Roots

In 1989, Jim Wright ended more than 34 years of service in the United States House of Representatives when he resigned as Speaker, a position he had held for two years.

The resignation brought to an end more than 40 years of public service by the man who, to this day, calls Weatherford his home town.

Although the actual number of years Jim Wright lived in Weatherford are but a fraction of his life, his experiences in the small town west of Fort Worth had a major impact on his philosophy as a state legislator, Weatherford Mayor and member of the United States Congress.

As a child, then later a college student and businessman, Wright had early experiences with racism, business, controversy and leadership.

He found mentors who would influence his philosophy - and whom he still quotes, 50 years after first meeting them.

Born Dec. 22, 1922 in Fort Worth, Wright first lived in Weatherford from 1930 to 1932, when he was a boy. He went to high school in Dallas, but returned to Weatherford and attended Weatherford College. After service in World War II as a B-24 bomber pilot, he came back on

a train that arrived at 6 a.m. and began a career that would take him to the Texas Legislature, the job of Mayor of Weatherford and ultimately to Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

There are many words and phrases that describe Wright - fighter, champion of the underdog, storyteller, salesman, pioneer - and the list can go on.

Wright's family has deep roots in Parker County. Jim Wright would be a trailblazer in politics. His maternal grandfather was a trailblazer of another sort. Born in Australia, he was the head of a survey team for a railroad, finding a path to the west coast. He was a Lyster, of English aristocracy, a graduate of Heidelberg University. He died of undulant fever while in New Mexico territory. Wright's mother was born in New Mexico territory and was an infant at the time of her father's death. She would be raised in Weatherford.

His grandmother, who was born in Dicey, returned to Weatherford and in 1902, married Will Walker, whose family owned a plantation on the Brazos River.

The news account of the wedding described Walker as a "clever, big-hearted fellow" - a phrase which didn't quite tell all.

"In those days he had a reputation as a rounder," Wright said in an interview.

"His old friends would tell me how he would get drunk and go into the Weatherford saloons and light a cigar with a five-dollar bill. They were land rich at the time. Will drank his way through it and yammered his way through it.

"When he asked my grandmother for her hand in marriage, she said, 'No, Mr. Walker, I will not marry you. The man I marry will be someone who does not gamble and does not drink and does not smoke. And Mr. Walker, you cannot be that man.'"

But he became that man.

"He quit drinking, he quit smoking and he quit gambling - immediately - bang - cold turkey - and became the dignified man I knew, who was entirely different from the free-wheeling image cast by that wonderful, euphemistic phrase, 'a clever big-hearted fellow,'" Wright said.

Wright's paternal grandparents were from Western Virginia and Eastern Tennessee, and some from the township of Cierley in Ireland. Wright's paternal grandmother had been a Johnson, "and the best they could claim was a tailor named Andrew and a young fellow in the Texas Hill Country named Lyndon, who hadn't been heard from yet," Wright wrote.

Wright's parents married in 1916 - in Valentine, Texas.

An account of the wedding survives in a 1916 news clipping in the Weatherford Public Library. Dr. S.L. Rieves, a Presbyterian minister, went all the way to the Big Bend Country to Valentine, driving a horse-drawn wagon.

Rieves wrote an account of the story which covered two full columns in the Weatherford newspaper in which it was published.

At the time, Wright's father, James C. Wright, Sr., was captain of the National Guard unit in Weatherford. The unit was federalized to go down and keep Pancho Villa's bands from crossing the border into Texas during the time of the Mexican revolution.

James C. Wright, Sr., had that small role in Central American politics. Almost 70 years later, his son would have a major role in bringing peace to Central America.

Wright's father had a difficult life, by today's standards. He finished only the fourth grade of formal schooling, since his father had died in his early childhood. His mother had been paralyzed from the waist down by what probably was polio. The elder Wright was forced at an early age to find work in the cotton fields.

Wright wrote, "Almost wholly self-educated, Dad had scaled a ladder from grocery clerk to tailor, to owner of a cleaning and pressing establishment. He made his first real money as a middle-weight boxer, the vocation which then seemed to offer the quickest route to financial security for an improvident youngster from Texas, and one which drew him professionally to such places as Detroit, Chicago, and even once to New York.

"Abetted by my mother's unremitting insistence, he showed the good judgment to quit the ring in his mid-twenties, accepted a commission in the Texas National Guard and served in France as an Infantry Captain during World War I. For all his poverty of academic pretension, I have never outlived the conviction that my father was among the few very best-educated men that I have ever met," Wright wrote.

James C. Wright, Sr., was born in what was then called the Shady Grove community, but until he was in his 60s, thought he had been born in Alvarado.

"When he was in his 60s, my dad went down to the county courthouse and said, 'I've got to have a birth certificate.' So he wrote down where he had been born and the name of his father and mother and all and he

had to have a witness. Well, Uncle Will was the only witness - he was his older brother," Jim Wright said.

"Everybody else who had witnessed the event was dead by then. So he brought Uncle Will with him and Uncle Will said, 'No, Jim, I'm not going to attest to an untruth. You were not born in Alvarado. You were born in the Shady Grove Community in Parker County. And your father's name was not John Claude Wright, your father's name was John Calvin Wright.' And so my, dad, in order to get Uncle Will to sign as a witness, had to change it," Wright said.

Personal stories such as that one are what Jim Wright says make Weatherford so endearing to him.

"Those are reasons why I always have such a totally warm and filial feeling toward Weatherford. There's no other place, which to me, is quite the same as Weatherford, with all of those memories and those family ties which go back so far into the past."

Childhood in Weatherford

The time which Jim Wright spent as a child in Weatherford spanned little more than a year. But the impact was proportionately greater than the calendar time.

Of that time, Wright has written, "Weatherford, Texas, in 1931 could not have been much different than hundreds of other small towns throughout the South and Midwest, but for me it contained a distinctive magic, a deliciously ineluctable elan. It provided my introduction, that

year when I was eight going on nine, to an entirely new lifestyle, a private cornucopia of sights and sounds and feelings, of relationships intensely personal, secrets jealously guarded and hopes closely held.

"It irresistibly shaped my way of thinking and planted indelible marks in my psyche, forming lasting preferences for the way things ought to be. I didn't know any of this at the time, of course. I was too busy absorbing it and wholly preoccupied with its enjoyment. In retrospect, it seems ironic that I should have discovered so many treasures in that particular year when our family finances took their most precipitate drop."

Wright's father had resigned a well-paying administrative job with the Southwestern Divisional Office of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to try to create a nationwide company which would install and sell street signs for small cities. The timing was not good, for the Great Depression spelled doom for the venture.

The family had left behind a big, two-storied house in Dallas where they had a live-in-maid. The young Jim Wright didn't understand just what his father was attempting.

"One day while he and I were walking around the town square," Wright wrote, "I spotted a wooden sign hanging over a door that led into a one-room office. Weatherford Chamber of Commerce, the lettering proclaimed. 'Looky there, Dad! I bet you didn't know they have a Chamber of Commerce right here in Weatherford! You didn't have to leave your job to move back here. You could've worked right in there.'"

When the Wright family first moved to Weatherford, they lived at 312 E. Lee Street. A large house across the street was occupied by R.K.

Phillips, then publisher of the Weatherford Democrat.

Phillips, a crusading newsman in his youth, had been threatened with his life. He opened the first newspaper in Eastland after the oil boom started. He happened to hire a reporter from New York, who wore eastern style clothes. The young reporter was Boyce House, later to become a noted Texas author and raconteur.

Wright said that word got out that the reporter actually was a gunman - a hired gun from New York. "People were scared to death of him," Wright said, and no effort was ever made to carry out the threat against Phillips' life.

The big Phillips house was the site of one of Wright's early business ventures. One Saturday, Wright and Robert Phillips, son of R.K. Phillips, encountered a farmer returning from a sale with a load of unsold watermelons. The boys pooled their resources and bought six watermelons for 40 cents with the plan of selling them.

They stashed the watermelons in Robert's barn and spent Sunday preparing their watermelon stand. On Monday, they confidently opened for business and sliced their first watermelon.

By 8 a.m., no customers had come by, so the boys decided to call on prospects. Robert sold slices to each of his parents and one to his older sister, Mildred. Wright sold one to his father, one to his mother and a third slice to be divided between his two younger sisters, Mary Nelle and Betty Lee. They had twelve cents to show for their first melon, which they figured had cost them between six and seven cents, as best as they could figure it. "Triumphantly, we sliced the second melon," Wright wrote.

But sales dropped off. "About mid-afternoon, we neared panic. There were four and almost a half melons left. Not certain how long a melon would stay fresh, we began to fear that the remainder might go bad if something weren't done. Unwilling that they should be wasted, Robert and I decided to eat them. Our zeal began to flag about halfway through the second melon, but by determined effort we finished it and the third. Somehow, we just couldn't summon sufficient enthusiasm to cut into the last one," Wright wrote.

That night, the boys suffered the ill effects of eating their inventory. Dr. McAnnally, Wright's next-door neighbor, treated him and gave him a slightly amused lecture about the maximum recommended consumption of watermelon in a given day. He also bought the boys' last watermelon for 10 cents.

Wright couldn't stand to eat watermelon for years.

Wright, Robert and Danny White, another neighbor, had a refreshing diversion. In those days, a horse-drawn ice wagon went through the town, stopping wherever a window placard indicated a demand for ice. The iceman would dismount, come to the rear of the wagon and chip out the desired quantity of ice from the big 100-pound blocks. He'd carry it with his tongs to the house.

The ice pick would flake off a few stray slivers of ice, for which the boys dived, then popped into their mouths. "They were cooling solace against the Summer's heat, and the iceman never seemed to mind," Wright wrote.

A game which the iceman did mind was a form of freezeout. The object

was to see which of the boys could sit the longest on a big block of ice before jumping off. The iceman stopped the game, saying it was not a good idea, seeing as how it was melting out little valleys from the ice for which people were paying good money. "We could've been in the Olympics if he hadn't stopped that game," Wright said, laughing.

Another pastime was swimming in Curtis Creek. There, the boys had a swimming hole equipped with a rope and an old tire.

The creek ran just south of a section of town in which part of the town's black population lived. One day, two black boys came and stood silently on the bank to watch the boys swimming. Neither spoke, initially. Wright wrote:

"Finally, Glen Quante took notice of them. 'Hi, Leon.'

"'Hi, there, Mr. Glen,' replied Leon. And, after a moment: 'Mind if we swim too? We won't tell nobody.'

"'Don't see why not.'

"At that, the two shucked their clothes and dived in.

"Later, as Leon sat drying his dark hide in a spot of sunlight that filtered through the trees at the water's edge, I said 'Hi' and sat down beside him. No introductions were necessary since obviously he was known to Glen, and last names were unimportant anyway. Leon and I talked for awhile, and then it was time to go, since some of the boys didn't dare risk being missed by the matriarchs from whom they'd gone to such elaborate plans to conceal their absence.

"As we walked back along the road, kicking up little wisps of dust, Jack Burkhart sidled up beside me with a smirk on his face.

"Are you a nigger lover?' he demanded.

"A what?' I'd never heard the term, but I knew from Jack's expression and from his tone of voice that the intent was pejorative.

"A nigger lover,' he repeated. 'I saw you talkin' to Leon, back there.'

"I chose deliberately to ignore the challenge. 'Naw, we were just talking about game chickens.' It was only a slight exaggeration. Actually, we had been discussing bantam chickens. Leon had six, but his mama had told him he'd have to 'get shed of 'em.'

"To my relief, Jack was distracted by a road runner which sped across the path ahead of us. Jack ran to find a rock to throw at the bird.

"Steve, the friendliest of the Burkhart trio, came up beside me. 'Jim, don't pay no attention to Jack. He knows you're no nigger lover. He just likes to aggrivate people.'

"He ought to keep his big, fat trap shut," I said in mock bravado.

"Steve, to my surprise, agreed. 'That's just the way he is, Jim. Jack's mean as hell.' It was the second time that identical expression had been used to describe Jack Burkhart."

Bantam chickens were a pastime for the young Jim Wright in Weatherford. He originally wanted game chickens, but the cost and his parents' apprehensions about them resulted in the compromise of

bantam chickens. Wright would take his two adult roosters to other chicken owners and watch them fight. Others brought their chickens to Wright's back yard.

Chicken fights were not the only kind to get Wright's attention. One of his prized books was Jack Dempsey, Idol of Fists, a birthday gift from his father, who was a former middle-weight boxer. One of Wright's bantam chicken fighters was named after Gene Tunney, a well-known fighter of the time.

Wright found himself having to emulate his idols. Jack Burkhart, a classmate at the Fourth Ward school, constantly goaded Wright and a showdown was inevitable. It came over a backpack which Wright's mother had made for him. He wrote:

"We were returning from school one afternoon when Jack ran up from behind to volunteer that 'nobody but a sissy' would carry such a book satchel.

"'You take that back,' I commanded.

"'Let me look at it,' Jack taunted.

"'First you gotta take back what you said.'

"Ignoring the stated condition, Jack lunged quickly past me and snatched the case from my hands. Most of the books went flying into the street, one losing its brown paper cover in the process. Carrying the almost empty satchel on one arm, after the manner of a woman with a purse, Jack pranced ahead in mincing mimicry, calling aloud for others to observe; 'Look at me with Jim's sissy book satchel!' It was

more than outraged endurance could stand.

"I lurched ahead and tackled him, throwing him as hard as I could to the ground. Then I got up and stared down at him. His face wore a look of stunned surprise. In spite of myself, I could not bat back the tears of wounded pride which emerged in my eyes, and this imparted false encouragement to Jack.

"Look at him!" he shouted. 'He's already crying.' A dozen or so kids gathered around us in a circle. Most of them were calling out encouragement to me.

"Jack sprang for my waist as if to grab me in a bear hold, but I caught him flush on the cheek with my left fist, and followed with a right to the mouth. Jack stumbled and fell to one knee, and I was quickly on top of him, pummeling him with both hands. Even as I pounded him, my eyes kept welling up with tears, but Jack was no longer calling attention to it.

"Finally, he said he'd had enough.

"Say calf rope,' I ordered.

"Calf rope,' Jack mumbled. And so I let him up.

"That incident earned me a certain notoriety around school, particularly among others whom Jack had intimidated from time to time. Steve and Red (Jack's brothers) said Jack had it coming to him. And Jack, far from harboring resentment, now began to seek my company and strive for my friendship, a phenomenon almost incomprehensible to me. After that, I no longer worried about anyone's thinking me a city boy, nor was I quite so apprehensive that someone might learn the truth about my age - that I was really only eight and not yet nine like the others in the

class."

As a young adult in Weatherford, Wright's boxing interest resurfaced through coaching Golden Gloves. One of his boxers was Larry Hagman, who went on to fame as a television actor.

Wright had been advanced a grade. His family moved to Weatherford in the late spring of 1931, and he missed the last two weeks of second grade in Dallas due to chicken pox. So, he was required to attend summer school. His teacher decided that his ability merited a jump to fourth grade, not third grade. Following that change, Wright was constantly afraid that someone would find out he was a year younger than his classmates.

Wright's feisty nature found another expression - football. After his family had moved to 316 West Water St., he found himself in the second ward school (now Travis Elementary School).

Wright attended the school when the building consisted of a two-story structure with a slide on the second story, which was used as a fire escape. Two of Wright's children would start their education at the same school, when it was known as Travis.

Already a year young for the fourth grade, Wright took pride in the fact that he was allowed to play with the sixth-graders.

"It was here that I first really learned about football. The coach was a man whom I greatly admired. I thought he was the greatest guy in town - Royce Guerry. He was only in his 20s. In the fourth grade, I thought I was great because I was competing and playing with sixth-grade

students on the football team. We thought we had a great football team until we played the KP Home (Texas Pythian Home). The KP Home beat us 60-0. They had the best football team in town. And even in those days, they had a high school team."

At the time, the Pythian Home provided 11 years of schooling and had several hundred students, making it the largest student body in Parker County.

At the smaller student body at second ward, the students found they also couldn't outplay the principal, a woman called Granny Byrom, who wore her hair tied into a large bun at the back.

Wright wrote, "Once when she was at the board with her back to the class, a fifth grader named James Bodiford folded a piece of notebook paper into a glider and sailed it in her direction. The point of the glider landed right on target and stuck in the bun of her hair. Without even turning to look, she called James by name and ordered him to the front of the room. James exited by the window, took the fire-escape slide to the ground, and mounted a donkey he'd ridden to school. The teacher pursued by way of the stairs. James had a head start, but the burro was recalcitrant and teacher overtook beast and rider within a short distance. Soon James returned, held firmly by one ear, and was subjected to the crowning indignity of sitting Mrs. Byrom's lap for the remainder of the class period.

"When we act like little children, we must be treated like little children," she said sweetly, then turned her attention unperturbed to class recitations while poor James sat motionlessly across her knees and scorched in silent humiliation. With that invincible witchcraft, some

teachers could petrify the most rebellious tongues and transform comic artists into dunces!"

The special time in Weatherford had to come to an end. Wright wrote:

"It was early summer when Mother told me we would be leaving Weatherford. I was heartbroken. We would move to Fort Worth, she said, for reasons of family finances. My grandfather, after 23 years with a large nationwide company, had lost his job in a massive lay-off. The company, trying to reduce overhead and cut future outlays, had arbitrarily dismissed all employees with 20 years or more of service. In only two more years, my grandfather would have qualified for a company pension. Now he had nothing. He was 62 and jobs were scarce. There was no such thing, in 1932, as Social Security.

"We would move in with my grandparents and pay rent to them, Mother told me. This would help both families. The news was hard for me to digest. The idea crashed upon my consciousness, shattering well-established mental concepts. So long as I could remember, the Fort Worth household of my mother's parents had been a sort of family anchor, the festive place of weekend returnings and family reunions, of platters brimming with fried chicken, of cousins from such distant climes as Oklahoma and Tennessee and Arizona. It had been to me a rock of unchanging stability, a port of sometimes entry, but not a place to live.

"It was a difficult adjustment to think of my grandparents as needing help. They had seemed always so secure, consummately self-sufficient. And to leave Weatherford? A lump arose in my throat. We had been there only a year. But the little town had become part of

me."

High School and College

The young Jim Wright was indeed saddened by his family's decision to leave Weatherford.

But it wouldn't be long until he returned and made Weatherford his home ... for good.

After leaving Weatherford, his family lived in Fort Worth, then Oklahoma. Later, they settled in Dallas, where Wright attended high school.

It was there, while pursuing the love of football that originated in Weatherford, that he formed his lifetime ambition.

"When I was a junior in high school," Wright said, "I had the ambition to be a football coach. That was the apex of my ambition. Early in the football season that year, I suffered a knee injury - had water on the knee. I had to wear a cast and that, of course, knocked me out of playing football for the rest of that year.

"The coach was named R.B. Harris and the other coach was named Pop Noah. They encouraged me to represent the school in debate. That's what the school really needed, they said, and the best contribution I could make with that cast on my knee. I got involved in that ... Mr. Harris was my world history teacher, and I was eager to please and impress him," Wright said.

Wright began studying for his debates and became interested in World

War I, in which his father had fought.

"I became imbued with the belief that Woodrow Wilson had been right - we should have joined the League of Nations and participated in trying to create peaceful solutions to the world's problems. By this time it was 1938 and I could see that the world was headed for another world war because we had failed to do that. Hitler had invaded the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia and Austria. Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia, the Japanese warlords were taking over Manchuria and much of Asia. I decided that year that the best thing a person could do with his life would be to get into Congress and help create the basis for the peaceful world."

With their financial situation improved, the Wright family bought a house in Weatherford at the corner of Waco and Oak streets in 1939.

"This (the Oak Street house) is the first home we owned in my lifetime. My grandparents owned a home. But this is the first house we occupied which was our own home. I was so proud and pleased and loved it so much. My parents lived here until their death. My mother died in 1959 in an automobile accident. My father died in 1962. Following that, my sister Mary lived here."

"When I was a boy in the formative years of college - in Weatherford College, at university, away at war - this was my parents' home," Wright said.

The house now has several large pecan trees - another Jim Wright legacy. "These pecan trees were little bitty saplings when we moved in. I remember diligently watering the pecan trees to see that they didn't die, and to make them grow."

With his goal of becoming a Congressman set, Wright nonetheless pursued other interests in his college days in Weatherford. Among them was journalism.

The house which now is known as Out to Lunch Tearoom, at the corner of Oak and Houston streets, was owned by a lady who taught piano lessons and played organ for the Presbyterian church. Her husband was a photographer.

"I bought from him a great big press camera when I was interested in journalism as a student at Weatherford College," Wright said.

"I was covering sports for the (Fort Worth) Star-Telegram and I bought this great big huge godawful camera. - impossible for a kid to learn how to manipulate properly. I took a jillion pictures with it and only a few of them turned out. I sent them to the Star -Telegram occasionally. One of them got used, I think. I was paid by the line - not by the line I wrote, but the line they used. I would send my copy in after football games on the weekends, for example, by Western Union (to the state editor of the Star-Telegram)."

"I made pocket money. When I was editor of the college paper, the advertising editor and I would sell the ads to pay for its publication, which cost \$30 an issue. That's all it cost to publish it, and all the proceeds from ads we sold, over and above that, we got to split. My first profitable enterprise, I guess, after the days when I was really a kid and delivering circulars, was in journalism," Wright said.

He also encountered some of the challenges unique to journalism. Wright ran into the problem of not having enough news copy for one edition of the college newspaper. He solved the problem by leaving every fifth column of type blank except for the handset phrase, running

vertically down each page in large type, "There will be no fifth column here!"

There also was some mischief that Wright recalled. The 20th Century Club, a ladies and women's club, often was used for receptions. Weatherford College was located across the street from the club when Wright was a student.

"When I was a student at Weatherford College, we had a homecoming reception, a parent's day, or something of that sort, and they had punch.

"Weatherford College was a Methodist Church Institution and therefore didn't hold to drinking and carrying on like that. But Robert Phillips got some grain alcohol and slipped it in the punch," Wright said.

Wright was active at Weatherford College, serving not only as newspaper editor but also as president of the 1941 graduating class. His college career at the University of Texas would be interrupted by service in World War II. He flew B-24 bombers in the southwest Pacific.

Wright also began to find men who would become his mentors. Among them was Conrad Russell, former Mayor of Weatherford.

"Conrad was a little bit like I was....In fact, Conrad, in his youth, might have been more of a radical than I was in mine, because it was Conrad, and his leadership, that organized the municipal water and light department. He canceled out the franchise of Texas Public Utilities and built their own water and light system here in Weatherford in the early to mid 1930s.

"Conrad was mayor when I was in college," Wright said.

"He was a mentor to me. I sought advice from him and followed him around. He was probably in his 40s and I was in my teens.

"I remember one event in 1941. At the football field there was a game between Weatherford and Ranger that broke up in a riot, a fight. There was some controversial call by a referee and a shoving match ensued between the players. They got into a fight. Fans from the stands poured out onto the football field and the officials just called the game off.

"Conrad, then mayor, sent the police out to round up everybody who was brawling and bring them to city hall, where we had two cells in the jail.

"Wisely, Conrad put all out-of-towners in one cell and all of the brawling Weatherford people in another cell. And he was not going to let the Weatherford people out until first he had got all of those other people on their way back home out to Ranger.

"He would go in there and take them one at a time, or two at a time or however many were riding together - he'd say now 'give me a car load' and 'I'm going to talk to you and I want you to promise me, we'll take you to your car and you get in it and and leave, not stick around. It's too hot, We want it to cool off.'

"Finally, there's only one man left," Wright said. Russell made him give the same promise as he had elicited from the others.

"This fellow said, 'Mister, I've heard of these tough Texas towns. I'm from Michigan. I was driving through and I saw that nice-looking little cafe on the Square and I thought, 'Here's a good place to stop and get

me something to eat. I pulled up there and no sooner did I get out of my car than I was hit on the head with something and knocked down in the gutter, and then the police had me and threw me here in this jail. Will I leave? Yes sir, I'll leave. And I'll tell you something else - I won't be back.'

"That was one of the country-wise things that Conrad Russell could come up with. Faced with a crisis, he always had some way to get out of it - to figure out ways through it. I learned a great deal from Conrad. I admired him very much. He was one of my dearest and best friends."

Champion of the Underdog

By design or by nature, Jim Wright acquired an unofficial title in his political career: "Champion of the Underdog."

Many actions during Wright's service in the Texas Legislature and as Mayor of Weatherford support that title. At times, he went to extraordinary lengths to help the oppressed.

Wright's philosophy is best summed up in his statement, "I always felt that a public official had the responsibility to take up the battle for those who didn't have the capacity or the knowledge or the money to do the battle for themselves."

In one case, the tactics he used to help the oppressed included a falsehood - or, perhaps parable is the better term.

Wright tells the story:

"In those days, the black students did not get to go beyond the eighth

grade of school in Weatherford. Just as late as 1951, 52, 53, There was one school ... and it went up through the eighth grade. After that, there was no schooling in Weatherford for black children.

"When I was Mayor, the theory was that they (black children) could go to Fort Worth and attend I.M. Terrell High School. I.M. Terrell High School indeed did let them attend - if they could get there. But how they could get there? It was 30 miles east and most of their families didn't even own a car. If one of them did own a car, the parents needed it for their work. So, hardly anyone was able to go to high school - hardly any of the colored children.

"So I worried about it and fretted about it. Finally, I concocted a story to tell the City Council. It wasn't true. I made it up. I guess I defended it on the ground that it was a parable. But I must confess to you it was sheer invention.

"I said that I had been talking to some of my friends in Fort Worth, and they had told me a secret - that some of the colored people there who were friends of mine had warned me that the NAACP, at a meeting, had decided that they were going to target Weatherford and make it a test case and take us to court because we didn't give the black children a chance to go to school beyond the eighth grade. I told this with a straight face to the city council and said, 'Fellows, I think we've got to do something, and the only way we can protect ourselves, in my judgment, is to buy us some school buses, make a daily round trip and take everybody who wants to go to school at I.M. Terrell every morning, free, and bring them back every evening.'

"Stimulated by the apprehension of the embarrassment and everything else of being called into a federal court, they all voted to do this.

"If I were wholly untruthful, I'd say, 'Oh, I knew that Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education was coming down the pike. (Brown vs. Topeka was a Supreme Court decision that outlawed segregation in public schools) I didn't have the faintest idea. But within a year, in 1954 of course, the Supreme Court did rule that segregation in itself constituted discrimination, which was not as egregious a problem as ours here, because these kids really didn't have the opportunity until we voted to take school buses and take them to Fort Worth.

"Viewed from the present perspective, I think most folks would say, 'Well, old Jim wasn't very courageous. He should have said, 'Why don't we open up our schools in Weatherford and let the colored children go to school with the white children?'

"The truth is, I didn't have courage enough to do that. I could not have sold that. That would not have been agreed to in 1952 and 1953 in Weatherford. I would have been willing to do it, of course myself, but those in Weatherford who at that time would have thought that a good idea were in a distinct minority. It wasn't that they were evil-spirited or cruel - it was simply the tradition, the mores and the habits of our whole southland had been founded upon segregated schools. I could tell you many stories of the various strong and violent threats and angry, vicious letters I received after going to Congress after I voted for the civil rights bill in the later 1950s.

"Politics is the art of the possible. I, at least, concocted a story, which while not literally true, was, I think, in a sort of cosmic sense true. We did do something that was proper and right that we should've done."

Earlier in his political career, while serving in the Texas Legislature, Wright became a champion to another group of Parker

County residents.

"One of the biggest battles I engaged in in those early times was on behalf of the Parker County dairy farmers," Wright said.

"The county had a lot of dairy farms, small family-owned farms that would have small herds of anywhere from 60 to 300 dairy cows. That was a big supplement to their income. Probably more money was made in Parker County in those years from dairying than from any other agricultural pursuit," he said.

In the summer of 1947, Wright received a call from a dairy farmer. Several milk distributors had arbitrarily imposed, simultaneously, what they called a "surplus" on the dairy farmers.

"This was summer time - spring," Wright said.

"Cows had calved, the calves had been weaned and the cows were ready for milking. So, the dairy farmers had their only chance of the year, really, to make some money. They would milk and put the milk in these great big round 100-pound cans. In any event, they would be picked up by the distributors and they would pay \$5.30 for a hundredweight. A pint weighs a pound. So, a pint was like 5 cents. They got a bonus for extra butterfat. It was desirable to have more butterfat content in milk.

"But now, for everything over a certain amount, they (the distributors) decreed, at the same time, they they would give only \$3.30 (per hundredweight). At the very moment when they (the dairy farmers) could have made money for their year's work - in that terribly demanding and confining job of producing dairy products - they were being squeezed out of their potential profits by the collusive efforts on

the part of the dairy distributing houses, who wanted the last dime of profit for themselves," Wright said.

The dairy farmers didn't know what to do about it. Wright told them it was an obvious case of collusion and restraint of trade.

Wright said, "They said, 'That all sounds good, but what does it mean?' I said, 'It means they can't do that.'"

Wright wrote the attorney general, Price Daniel, who agreed with Wright. The distributors eventually pleaded nolo contendere to the charges and paid a fine.

"So I became the champion of the dairy farmers," Wright said.

"I was always taking up for some underdog - all my life. I guess I got the reputation of being a populist," he said.

As Mayor, he took up for many groups of people, in addition to the black schoolchildren.

"The north side (of Weatherford) always felt a bit neglected," Wright said. "They always felt as if they were a stepchild of Weatherford.

"One of the things that I was eager to do was to make them feel that nobody had any reason to feel neglected or left out."

Wright took on the city's natural gas franchise holder in the winter of 1951, and in doing so, helped the north side residents. Wright said:

"One very, very cold winter there was not enough gas in the lines to serve the community of the north side, because they all had their burners turned up, trying to get some heat and warmth in the house.

There were very small lines. It wasn't coming through. They could get just enough for a pilot light, but not enough to warm their homes."

"I got these calls and I went over there. They were really upset, and obviously understandably so. I went into homes and I could tell how cold it was. I became outraged. I went over to the gas company and talked with the managers and owner.

"I said, 'You're going to have to do it - you're going to have to fix it, and you're going to have to fix it before the next cold spell comes. Get over there immediately and put in enough pipe of sufficient width to satisfy the needs of those people, because we're not going to have citizens of Weatherford freezing to death because the company we gave the franchise to is not providing service. If you can't provide service, we're going to find a company that will.'

"So they did it," Wright said.

It wasn't his only fight with utility companies. Southwestern Bell Telephone Company and Wright tangled on one occasion.

"They came in in '52 or '53 wanting a rate increase. Ours was a very old rate and had not been increased for a very long time. They gave us their rates as though that was all we had to do as a city council - just approve the rate they had given us. We didn't think that was the case. We said 'No, the city council has a responsibility to negotiate a rate with you'. They were very angry about it.

"They said the city had a responsibility under our agreement to provide them with a normal rate of return. I said, 'All right, we will see what is a normal rate of return. You're making a satisfactory return statewide,

aren't you?' They said, 'Yes, but not in Weatherford.'

"I said, 'We're going to find out what an average city of our size in Texas is paying you. If the average city paying the average amount is giving you a satisfactory rate of return, that's what Weatherford will pay you.

"'Oh, no, no,' they said, 'Each city has to stand on its own.'

"And we bargained and argued and debated the issue, finally resolving it, after they had come in and hired the highest-priced lawyers in town.

"Finally, we said, 'All right, here's what you're going to have to do. We're not going to price telephones out of the range of any citizen of Weatherford. And you're going to have to respect the lowest rate we'll give you. For first class, single-party service, we'll give you a higher rate and we'll give you the rate you request. But you're going to have to compromise with us and settle for the party line rate as it is and not increase it.'"

The city ultimately settled with Southwestern Bell on that basis.

"Through all of this, I guess I was developing a reputation as a guy who looked out for the little guy. And I liked that. That's what I felt a Mayor ought to be."

His Highest Office

Of all of the honors which Jim Wright earned in his political career - member of the Texas Legislature, Congressman, Speaker of the House - he considers the title of Mayor of Weatherford as his highest office.

He explains:

"In a community like Weatherford, to be elected Mayor is to be given the approval of people who know you and who work with you day in and day out.

"Quite possibly, a person could be elected Mayor of a huge metropolis and many have been elected to statewide office solely on the basis of adroit public relations and well-financed campaigns in which voters are impressed by image rather than substance.

"This would not happen in the town of Weatherford. People know you - faults and all - and to have their approval and their sanction to be the leader of their community is therefore a great honor."

Wright, who was 27 when elected, was sometimes called "Weatherford's boy mayor." But if anyone thought the the "boy Mayor" would not be effective, they would be greatly surprised.

After losing his bid to be re-elected to the Texas Legislature, Wright became mayor in an election to fill the unexpired term of Willard Sadler, who resigned Sept. 15, 1949. Wright defeated E.B. Buffington in a special election, 490-175, in January, 1950. He was elected to his first regular term as mayor April 4, 1950, running unopposed. He joined Byron Patrick and Burette Hobson on the city commission.

A June 21, 1951 speech to the Weatherford Lions Club showed Wright's priorities. He told the club, "Paramount on the list is the matter of a permanent water supply."

"I have no hesitancy whatsoever in predicting that it will not be a great

many years before the town which has an adequate water supply will be in a more advantageous position than the town which has oil, or gold, or uranium or any other natural resource," he told the club.

In same speech, he said sewer was the no. 2 priority.

To address those issues, the City, under Wright's leadership, bought Sunshine Lake from the T&PW Railroad for \$20,000. In early 1952, Wright publicly supported the passage of a \$440,000 bond issue for the construction of a new sewage treatment facility. It Passed by a 9-1 margin in February, 1952, by a vote of 768-85.

They also sold a bond issue to build Lake Weatherford.

"At a time when most towns were having very great difficulty getting the public to vote for a bond issue, it was such a notable thing that people in the state asked me to write an article for the Texas Municipal League about how to sell a bond issue to the public," Wright said.

But Wright joked that a major factor in passing the sewage plant bond issue was the bad odor given off by the old plant.

Improvements were not limited to bond issue projects. "We found money in our revenues without voting bond issues to extend the water and sewer lines. There was no increase in taxes at all while I was Mayor. We did the things we did without increasing the tax rate," he said.

He also had to deal with the north side residents. "The North Side always felt a bit neglected. They always felt as if they were a step-child of Weatherford. I was anxious to see to it that they had a park on the north side."

To that end, the city built McGratton Park on North Main during Wright's administration.

The city also did other projects, including extension of utilities and expanding the city's boundaries. Wright said, "We also extended water and sewer lines without raising the taxes. We extended the city limits, east and west, to cover the area out on the old Fort Worth Highway, the Bankhead Highway.

"Though we were a home rule city with a charter that permitted us to extend our city limits at our will, whenever we desired, we asked them (the people who were to be annexed) to vote. I had a little plebiscite because I didn't feel that we should extend city limits and require people to pay city taxes unless most of them wanted it ... the vote was overwhelming 7-1 to be voted in."

A major problem the city faced during Wright's time and later was the drought.

Wright said, "The first seven years of the 1950s were years of drought. A very arid, dry season smote most of Texas, particularly all of West Texas. We had to ration water. We were depending exclusively on underground wells.

"First, we said only those on the north and east sides of the streets may water on Mondays and Thursdays, and only those on the south and west sides of the streets may water on Tuesdays and Fridays. And that worked pretty well for a while. But it still wasn't solving the problem and our underground water tables were falling. And we became fearful at one point that if there were a big fire, we might not have enough water to fight the fire.

"So, we had more severe rationing. We said you may water only your shrubs, but not your lawn. You shouldn't wash your car. And so a dirty car and a toast-brown lawn became badges of good citizenship. And everywhere you went, you saw lawns that looked like an old piece of burned toast.

But the situation was not without humor.

"Wherever people had private wells, as some of them did, of course, they were not bound by the ordinance. They would have a green lawn, but they would put up a sign in the front of their lawn saying "private well," or some would just say "well." And in fact, a visitor was in town one day and I was driving him around on the south side, showing him the Killion addition, where we were building new houses, and some houses would have a sign up in their yards saying "well." And he finally said, "'Mayor, 'Well what?'"

Wright's administration oversaw the transition of the Municipal Power Plant from diesel fuel to natural gas in October, 1950, and the addition of two new generators in 1952.

Wright also worked to reduce the city's budget deficit by instituting strict budgeting, re-evaluation of property for tax purposes and encouraging new industry and other new sources of revenue..

Wright also advocated civil defense, including the building of bomb shelters, introduction of civil defense in local schools and establishment of auxiliary firefighting and rescue squads.

Wright became president of the Texas Municipal League while Mayor. Former Weatherford Mayor and Wright mentor Conrad Russell helped

him in his campaign.

"He (Russell) was elected president of the Texas Municipal League in 1941. And immediately after I became mayor here in 1949, Conrad started plotting and planning to get me elected president of the Texas League of Municipalities. And we did! I was elected president of the Municipal League, and he was my campaign manager," Wright said.

Wright found that in Weatherford, citizens expected much from the Mayor - more than addressing sewer, water, playgrounds and other issues.

"The town was small enough that you knew everybody. Weatherford was a town where the mayor would get phone calls," Wright said.

"A lady called and said some wicked little boys with BB guns were shooting the songbirds in her yard. I told I would see what I could do. A lady on the north side then called and said there were sparrows in her house making a racket. She thought the City ought to do something to get rid of the sparrows. So I just transferred the boys. I drove up to the corner of Oak and Davis, (where the boys were shooting birds) and said, 'You guys want to shoot some birds? Let me show you where there are birds.'"

"In those days, Weatherford was such a totally trusting town," Wright said. People would leave their keys in their cars. For example, when they went to the movies, the first drivers to arrive would park diagonally in the parking spaces. Then others would park parallel to the curb, outside of those cars, in effect blocking them in. But they would leave their keys in their cars, so if someone was blocked in, they could simply move the car that was blocking them.

That practice of leaving keys was not limited to the theater parking. Many people, including Wright, left their keys in their cars all of the time. That practice gave Wright a surprise one day.

"Once I left my keys in the car - I always did. I woke up the next morning - I was living over on Harcourt Street - and the car was gone," he said.

"They found it in Abilene. The keys were in it. There was a sign, a note, attached to the steering wheel. It said, 'Thanks Mayor - I needed to have it to get to Abilene.' I wasn't signed." Wright didn't consider it a case of car theft. "He had borrowed - he didn't steal - he borrowed," Wright said.

Wright found various ways to use diplomacy when he was making changes. One instance was the installation of parking meters.

"We installed parking meters when I was here because it was absolute bedlam around the Square on the busy days. On Saturdays, First Mondays and other busy days, it was utterly impossible to find a place to park. People would park and stay there all day. People would park in front of the building where they worked and stay there all day. So we did install parking meters, finally."

Wright wanted to ease the transition.

"I had printed some little cards, bearing my name as Mayor. They looked exactly like a citation. I would have them put up on the windows of a car that I found overparked and I would put a nickel in the meter. And the card would say, 'I noticed that you inadvertently overparked, and you're probably not accustomed to the idea of parking meters and I surely didn't want you to get a citation, so I took the liberty of putting in

a nickel for you. Hope you enjoyed your visit to one of our merchants. Very best personal regards, Jim Wright, Mayor."

Wright would get a large amount of nickels and go around putting money in meters of overparked cars and putting the "citation" on the windows. Later, he found a boy to do that work for him. Wright said that practice helped put citizens in a good frame of mind for the idea.

"The Merchants and Farmers Bank on the corner of the Square (now Texas Bank) had an even better arrangement than that. For a time they maintained a great big bowl on the counter nearest the door, where people would come and write their checks, for cash and so forth, and the bowl contained a lot of pennies and nickels and assorted change. It had a sign, 'If you need change for the parking meter, make your own change here.' And people would come and make their own change. If they didn't have a nickel, if they had a quarter, they would put a quarter in the bowl and get their own change out and put their money in the parking meter. So these were sort of user-friendly devices that we employed to get the public accustomed to the onerous necessity of the parking meters," Wright said.

Service as Mayor took its toll on Wright, however. He and his father were partners in a successful business and the time spent on his Mayoral duties was hurting the business.

In a speech to the Weatherford Rotary Club on Dec. 29, 1953, Wright announced that he would not run for re-election in the April, 1954 elections.

"It is as much the duty of a citizen to step down from a public office when his contribution has been rendered, as it is for him to serve in

public office in the first place," he told the club.

When asked about his future plans, Wright said, "The last four years as mayor has cost me a great deal financially, and in fairness to my family, I must do either one of two things - get into public service on a full-time basis or get out of it and devote full energies to my business."

The decision, it would turn out, would be to pursue public service full-time. That would lead to a run for the United States House of Representatives.

Congress

Jim Wright may be out of Congress, but he continues to serve.

One day recently, Eddie Brown, a retired Fort Worth resident, needed some information about a national park. He looked through the Fort Worth telephone book and finally tried to reach two of the Congressmen listed. But at the time he called, late in the day, there was no answer.

He saw the name of Jim Wright, who maintains an office in the Lanham Federal Building. One of Wright's staff members was still in the office and took the call. She cheerfully gave Brown the information he needed, but cautioned him that it was from a 1982 publication.

As 12th District Congressman, Wright and his staff spent years responding to such requests, as well as taking care of the major issues facing the United States.

While Mayor of Weatherford, Wright once told a local civic club that he

needed to either get out of politics and concentrate on business or go into politics full-time. That led to his bid for Congress, an attempt to realize the goal he first set as a high school student in Dallas.

Wright made his bid for Congress, spending \$32,000 - half of which came out of his own pocket. He raised funds with donations of no more than \$100 per person.

He opposed an incumbent who had the backing of the powerful Amon Carter, publisher of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram - the newspaper for which Wright once had worked as a sports correspondent.

Wright used the then-untried medium of television. He also took out a full-page advertisement in Carter's own newspaper, challenging Carter, telling him that Wright was not afraid of him.

Wright won, launching a stellar career that would take him to the position of Speaker and make him second in line of succession to the presidency.

Lessons learned in Weatherford were a part of that success.

"My experience in Weatherford was an experience with people - learning how to work with people of all sorts," Wright said.

"The first time I ran for the state legislature, there were a few men in town whom I had rubbed wrong because I was just too assertive. I was almost abrasive, I suppose, in my insistence upon taking stands on all kinds of controversial issues.

"My dad said to me, 'Jim, instead of cherishing enemies and building up a list of enemies, you really would be better served if you would just take it upon yourself as a challenge to make each of those people a

friend.'

"So I undertook to cultivate some of those people who had been on the other side of me on certain issues. One of them was J.R. Fleming and one of them was Fred Cotten and one of them was Jess Hall, Sr. I took it on myself to make each one of them a friend and I believe that I did.

"The same lesson is one that I tried to follow in Congress. I was successful to a fairly large degree for a good many years.

"It got to a point when I was Speaker where the individual and personal experience of cultivating people was no longer a sufficient or even possible alternative, because I had too many responsibilities and too much to do, and in my last few years in Congress, was not able to give the same amount of time and attention and individual effort to making peace with each of the people that I had somehow crossed or defeated in a political battle or skirmish. But for the most part, that lesson was a good one.

Wright learned an important lesson from losing his bid for re-election to the Texas Legislature in 1948:

"I think another lesson I learned came from my experience in losing an election. I thought, wrongly of course, that I was absolutely invincible. I thought the rightness of my position would be so triumphant and my espousal of it so persuasive and overwhelming that I was not capable of losing. That was hubris. It probably was a good thing for me that I lost by, I think by 29 votes, a bid for re-election to the legislature in 1948. That lesson taught me not to take any election or any vote for granted, but rather to work until the very end on every matter of legislation or political endeavor to which I was committed, to make certain that I not only won, but won by a sufficient margin that there

wouldn't be any doubt.

"So when I became Speaker, I formed a system of counting votes which employed the assistance of a whip organization task force on each major issue that I scheduled for the House. In nine cases out of 10, we had enough pledges to know that the bill would pass before I ever brought it up for a vote. That's one reason, no doubt, that we were as successful as we were in the 100th Congress."

How successful was the 100th Congress, over which Wright presided as Speaker?

"We passed a landmark education bill, reversing a seven-year trend of decline in funding for the public schools," Wright said.

"We revived the commitment to the nation's roads and highways and transportation facilities with a bill that restored the level of activity necessary to maintain the system in top order. We overrode a presidential veto on that bill to make it come to pass.

"We passed a major clean water bill, reviving at a level of two and a half billion dollars annually a program which had been allowed to slip and fall behind during the early years of the Reagan Administration. And we overrode a veto on that bill.

"We began the first initiative to try to help the homeless by assisting communities to provide shelters and emergency feeding programs. We passed the most far-reaching trade reform bill since the 1930s, and made that come into effect despite a veto. For the first time in 49 years, we passed all the appropriation bills on time and had them on the president's desk for signature before the start of the new fiscal year

to which they applied.

"In the face of hostility, both overt and covert, we brought peace to Central America. We opened up the dialogue with the Soviet Union and began the process that led to the end of the Cold War," Wright said.

But Wright's success would be short-lived. Congressional opponents mounted a campaign against Wright, which resulted in an ethics investigation. Under fire, Wright resigned as Speaker and left Congress.

In the speech in which he offered his resignation, Wright, ever the master speaker, coined the phrase, "mindless cannibalism," to describe what happened to him and what was happening to others. As Wright puts it, the phrase still is relevant.

"It (mindless cannibalism) has not ended. It is a blight upon the Congress and on the institutions of government. There are unfortunately some in the Congress and many in the media who thirst to wreak revenge or destruction upon the reputations of other people. Negative campaigning involving character assassination and insulting attacks upon one's political opposition has become more nearly the rule than the exception.

"I deplore it. I think it does a great injustice to our system of government. I think it insults the intelligence of the American people. So far as I'm personally concerned, this tendency, more than anything else, has reduced the high calling of political service to a low esteem and taken most of the joy out of what once was a joyous avocation," he said.

But Wright had his share of joys in his years of service. Just what are

the joys of public service? Wright answered:

"The joy comes from the thrill of addressing a human problem and solving it. The joy comes from building a road where a road was needed, providing a job for someone who needed a job, making educational opportunity a reality for little children and in whatever way one can, making a town or a country a little bit better. There is a real thrill in that kind of achievement."

These days, Wright maintains that office in Fort Worth, teaches a popular class at Texas Christian University and is active in many other activities. He lives in Fort Worth.

But the postal address belies where the heart lives. Wright said that when his family bought that house on Oak Street in 1939, Weatherford became his home.

And it still is.

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