

Surprise of the Century

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Skipper Bowles didn't lose his 1972 gubernatorial campaign *only* because he said something about a chicken. But what at the time seemed like an innocent, throw-away comment was a factor--some say a significant one-- in cooking his political goose. It was one of many slip-ups that helped cost him the election.

Democrat Hargrove (Skipper) Bowles lost to Republican James Eubert Holshouser Jr. by just a hair over 38,000 votes out of a total of almost 1.5 million ballots cast in the general election. The outcome has been labeled the "Surprise of the Century" because hardly anyone, especially the two candidates until at least a week before the election, expected Holshouser to win. The last Republican to be elected governor in this state at the time was 76 years earlier, in the previous century.

It was an historic election that breathed new life into the North Carolina Republican Party and laid the cornerstone for creating a viable two-party state. A lot of the credit—or blame—can be traced to mistakes by the Bowles campaign, which was once considered unbeatable.

Bowles' defeat came after two bruising Democratic primary victories over then Lt. Gov. H. Patrick Taylor Jr., the heir apparent for that party's nomination. Taylor had been the state's second highest-elected Democrat for four years, just like his daddy before him, was a former Speaker of the State House of Representatives and had the party establishment on his side. A lot of old line Democrats considered Bowles an upstart who was denying their preferred candidate, Taylor, his earned chance at the crown. Many Tar Heel hard-line Democrats in the early 1970s still held onto the stodgy method of choosing their nominees as much on friendships and pedigree as on ability and ideology. Bowles pretty much ended that practice. He came into the campaign with a series of new and innovative ideas, a television blitz never before seen in North Carolina, a seemingly unlimited advertising budget and a continuing display of digs on his own party leaders. And then came the chicken comment.

It was at the Red Carpet Inn in Charlotte between the first and second primaries with Taylor that Bowles made what he might have intended to be a flip comment about political spoils. In a roomful divided between Taylor supporters and his own backers, Bowles let slip

the needless phrase that would haunt him throughout the campaign. He said: “There is going to be enough chicken for everybody, but the Bowles folks will get the white meat and the Taylor folks will get the dark meat.”¹ Bowles campaign staff members said that was supposed to be a joke. Maybe so, but nobody laughed. Taylor Democrats were offended and didn’t forget.

The chicken comment came a few weeks after Bowles had said at a campaign rally in Lumberton that he was going to pave all the dirt roads in the state, but he planned to pave Democrats’ roads first, then get to roads of Republicans later.²

It was the chicken talk that got all the attention. Taylor supporters were incensed, calling it the latest in a series of unfair and arrogant snubs by the Bowles crowd. Among those most upset at Bowles were Gov. Bob Scott, his wife and dozens of influential Scott partisans. The Scotts were strong Taylor supporters and took the view that much of Bowles’ campaign was an attack on Scott’s administration, a point the Bowles campaign didn’t deny. That friction festered from the spring primaries through the fall election. There is still speculation that the Scotts were so angry with Bowles that they may have even voted for Holshouser. More on that in a moment.

Some Taylor people, of course, continued to support Bowles out of party loyalty. But much of the enthusiasm for Bowles was gone. A lot of Scott and Taylor supporters did little, if anything, to help Bowles, and some flipped over to vote for Holshouser.

That view seems validated 40 years after the election when vote totals are analyzed and remaining party activists on both sides are still talking about the chicken comment. Bowles folks concede the quote helped defeat him. Holshouser says he appreciates it, and still eats a lot of chicken.

With all the interest in the election of 1972, with Richard Nixon and George McGovern as presidential candidates and Jesse Helms as the Republican Senate candidate, there were almost 62,000 fewer total votes for governor than four years earlier. Among Democrats, Bowles polled 92,000 fewer votes than Democrat Bob Scott did in the 1968 election. Clearly, a lot of Democrats simply sat out the 1972 campaign or gave their vote to Holshouser.³

Nixon and Helms won easily. Holshouser just barely made it over the hump with help from divided Democrats and the perceived Bowles missteps.

Bowles' son Erskine, later a two-time U.S. Senate candidate, chief of staff for President Bill Clinton and president of the University of North Carolina system, called that chicken comment "probably the dumbest thing" his father ever said. He surmised that his dad was either trying to be funny or parroting somebody else, both out of character. "The Republican tide that year was a factor with Nixon and Helms on that side and the disdain for McGovern on our side," Bowles said of his father's campaign. "But it is also fair to say that the divisiveness in our own party was a major problem. That has always been an opinion of mine. We made big mistakes after the divisive primaries by tying Taylor to the Scott administration and by not reaching out as we should have. A lot of Taylor supporters voted for the other side."⁴

Among the more than two dozen personal interviews and from researching a dozen written documents for this presentation, the impact of the Democratic divisions in the 1972 gubernatorial campaign are mentioned in virtually every one. Some list it as a primary cause of the Bowles defeat.

Whether the popularity of Nixon and Helms and the dislike of McGovern alone would have been enough to carry Holshouser to victory is problematic, of course. But the disarray among Democrats cannot be discounted, a point the remaining Bowles supporters and campaign staff speak much more freely about today than they did 40 years ago. They readily concede that their party was in disheartening disarray, and they also acknowledge the perception among Scott and Taylor Democrats that at least a few of the Bowles insiders displayed arrogance and disdain for their fellow party members and spoke condescendingly toward them.

"I think that maybe Bowles might have been able to survive the Nixon popularity if the Democratic Party had been united," former state legislator and Supreme Court justice Willis Whichard said. "That white meat/dark meat comment resonated with Democrats, and Skipper's people made a lot of mistakes. They just thought they didn't need anyone else. They didn't even listen to Terry Sanford (Bowles' political mentor) in the fall campaign. You know, I've always wondered if Taylor might have been a better candidate to defeat Holshouser because Taylor was such a charming fellow and the party might have come together for him. The party split was not articulated much at the time, but it was there. Certainly what happened in that campaign was transforming because it was the beginning of the two-party system in this state."⁵

Divisions among Democrats that year, however, should also be leveraged against the makeup of the Republican Party in 1972. As a candidate, and then governor, Holshouser was a moderate, not an ideologue. He also had something of an appealing country boy charm and an unceasing work ethic. Furthermore, North Carolina voters also have historically chosen a centrist candidate for governor, even as they supported more extreme candidates for national office. Holshouser was clearly a candidate who appealed to members of both parties. Democrats disenchanted with Bowles didn't have much difficulty moving to a calming Republican like Holshouser.

Interestingly, by 2012, a Republican in the moderate mold of Holshouser likely would never have been taken seriously because the Republican Party has moved much further to the right than it was in 1972. Timing and the political winds of 1972 were clearly blowing Holshouser's way while the Bowles campaign was fighting what has been called a "Nixon/Helms tsunami" piled atop their own intraparty bickering. In truth, the Scott family was so put out with Bowles that they were not real unhappy with the outcome. More on that later.

Partisan sniping and chicken comments aside, the 1972 gubernatorial election produced a lot of firsts for this state with an abundance of unexpected twists and turns. It was the well-oiled Bowles campaign, once considered a shoo-in, that imploded. It was the first time in the state's history that Republicans needed to have a runoff primary. The anticipated Republican nominee lost in his primary and the man who almost no one gave a chance of anything except losing won the whole enchilada and collected accolades for how he handled the job. It was the most expensive campaign in the state's history at that point. More than \$2.6 million was reported as being spent by the four leading candidates. The loser spent the most (\$1.4 million) and the winner spent the least (\$306,008). Those totals do not include untold dollars spent and not reported because disclosure rules were lax, at best. Four years earlier in the gubernatorial election, the combined candidate spending was less than \$338,000.⁶

In the first Republican primary, Jim Gardner and Holshouser each had 49 percent of the votes. But Gardner was a fractional hair width ahead with 49.77 and Holshouser had 49.03. In one of the ironies of that primary, if there had not been for two "warm body" Republican candidates who combined polled less than a scant one per cent of the votes, chances are the eventual winner Holshouser would not even have made it out of his party's primary.⁷ Those two lesser candidates drained off a mere total of 2,040 votes. If Gardner had received even half those votes, which seems likely, he would have won the nomination outright with 50 percent of the vote and Holshouser would have been sent home to worry about paying off his campaign debts.⁸

In one of his frequent homespun understatements, Holshouser summed his campaign circumstances up this way: "Timing is the key to everything....If you are at the right place at the right time, you may not be the best fellow for the job but you might find yourself getting elected anyway. I thought in 1972 that I was the best guy running but I thought there was also a lot of other people that would make better governors."⁹

Holshouser's timing, however, was not sheer happenstance. He had carefully calculated when his best time might be, despite the odds. It was clear that his party's statewide candidates had done progressively better each election in the 1960s. He also knew that in

1972 Richard Nixon would be his party's nominee and likely more popular than whoever the Democrats might choose. The fact that Democrats picked McGovern was a sweetener for North Carolina Republicans because the national ticket always influences the outcome of this state's balloting.

In the general election, Holshouser defeated Bowles by only 38,366 votes from a total of slightly less than 1.5 million ballots cast. The winner had 50.65 percent of the votes and the loser had 49.36 percent.¹⁰ It is conjecture whether the dysfunctional Democrats pushed Holshouser over the top or if the Nixon/Helms coattails pulled him over. It may have taken both. Whichever, the timing was on target.

The Beginning

Bowles and Holshouser each started their campaigns from essentially the same point, deep in political dark holes. Bowles was a state senator from Guilford County, a successful businessman and entrepreneur known for a generous heart who had been a member of leadership team of Gov. Terry Sanford a decade earlier. But he had little following across the state. The first voter survey he conducted showed him with a dismal eight percent name recognition.¹¹ He resigned his state Senate seat a year ahead of the election to work full time on his campaign, carefully massaging virtually every aspect of how to succeed, even down to the kind of car to drive. Bowles was advised not to drive a Cadillac because that would make him appear out of step with the average voter, and not to drive a Chevrolet because a governor's race was worthy of more than a blue-collar vehicle. He chose a Buick as his campaign car of choice.

Holshouser was a state legislator from Watauga County, a leader among the thin Republican ranks in the General Assembly, and had been state Republican chairman. But hardly anyone knew him outside his party and he was challenging his party's gubernatorial nominee from four years earlier who had also served a term in Congress. The first poll Holshouser took showed him down better than two to one.¹²

Clearly in the beginning, neither candidate had long lines of supporters cheering them onward. So they both went to work.

The Bowles campaign had far more sizzle because he had more resources. Until that time, no statewide campaign had even come close to blanketing the airways or having the staff he had. But Holshouser may have put what little he had to better use.

Bowles focused on his new ideas and stressed his ties with the much of the state's perceived leadership network. He had, he said, what it takes to lead in the Sanford

tradition, moving toward innovation as opposed to tired and often not true tradition. And he was smooth as silk in presentations, always sounding knowledgeable. His media adviser Bob Squier said Bowles was a political consultant's dream. "You could take any slice of any conversation he had and put it on TV unspliced," Squier told a reporter.¹³

Holshouser lacked that pizzazz and polish. But he was convincing and believable, focusing more on issues than on himself. He also carefully laid out a plan, especially in the primary, to place his priorities to get the biggest bang for his buck. He concentrated on where the Republican votes were and how to get them to the polls. Rather than having the well-greased smoothness of his Democratic opponent, Holshouser just tried not to make mistakes.

Despite some philosophical divisions, Bowles and Holshouser were not really that far apart on what they wanted to achieve. Their differences were as much on approach as policy, and they offered similar views on how best to administer government. Both conducted themselves in an orderly fashion. Each ran what was called a "gentleman's campaign."¹⁴ Instead of glib catch phrases designed for TV sound bites, both regularly provided detailed, well-researched position papers and speeches. "It wasn't so much philosophy for me," Holshouser later said, "but rather that there needed to be a second party and the Republicans made it easier for that to happen."¹⁵ Bowles, born in Monroe, was 52 and Holshouser, a Boone native, was 38 when the campaigns began. The strongest and most direct personal attacks came during the primaries with both candidates focused within their own party differences. Bowles had to fend off five primary opponents, although the only serious one was Lt. Gov. Taylor. Among his other opponents was the head of the state's rotund labor union, Wilbur Hobby, and a maverick black Charlotte dentist Reginald Hawkins who had a loud bark but not much bite.

Prompted by his advisors, Bowles went after Taylor, a congenial but not very aggressive Wadesboro lawyer and veteran state legislator. Taylor had an earned reputation as an entertaining storyteller with a penchant for preferring good times with friends in lieu of depth analysis of issues or controversies. He disliked campaigning, dreaded spending money and hated it when his advisors required makeovers of his suits and even his teeth. Former U.S. Senator Lauch Faircloth, in 1972 a Taylor supporter, said of his friend: "He's a nice fellow, but a weak politician. Trying to inspire him is like pushing a dead bug."¹⁶

Taylor was part of the old line Democratic hierarchy in the state with close connections to the then incumbent Bob Scott administration, a mold that Bowles was determined to break. Bowles went hard after perceived weaknesses and ethical lapses in the Scott term, suggesting Taylor would lie in the same political bed.

Scott later made known his disdain for Bowles' approach. "He was running against me more than against the Republicans," Scott commented in an interview with historian Karl E. Campbell 13 years after the election. "That's the way my folks perceived it. After the primary there was an effort to get the two factions together but it didn't work because the Skipper Bowles faction felt so strongly that they wanted to be totally in charge. They were not willing to bring Pat Taylor's faction into the fold. As a result of that, together with the fact that the Skipper Bowles' folks had had so much to say about my administration, there was a definite coolness....Our folks frankly just did not get out there and work for Skipper Bowles....They just didn't get out there and hustle for him. That together with the tide of Richard Nixon's effort to bring Holshouser in, I think brought him into being."¹⁷

Scott's wife, Jessie Rae, was even more direct in some of her comments after the general election. Scott never publicly admitted voting for Holshouser, but suggested he was tempted after Bowles was so critical of his leadership. A number of Scott's friends think maybe he and his wife both voted Republican in the general election. They may be right.

"The (Democratic) party has been good to me and my family, and I believe in loyalty," Scott told historian Fleer. "It has afforded my father and me and others in my family an opportunity...I'll be a Democrat. I may not think philosophically...if my family had not been involved, I expect I would've been one of those folks who'd split my ballot."¹⁸

Taylor plodded through the primary against Bowles, always with a distaste for the barrage of criticism against him. His campaign against Bowles was the first serious opposition he ever had and he never really adjusted to it.

Issues of race emerged at one point late in the primary. Black Democratic leaders were divided between Bowles and Taylor, but Bowles had the majority, a point that the Taylor campaign leaders tried hard to overcome with promises. Respected black Democrat Howard Lee, former Chapel Hill mayor and a later statewide candidate, confirmed that Taylor insiders pretty much promised him the moon if he could swing the minority vote their way. "I was told I could have an unlimited budget, whatever it took, if I could bring the blacks solidly around to Taylor," Lee said "Black Democrats were divided like the others, but I turned down what the Taylor folks were offering. I was for Skipper and I couldn't go against that no matter what they were promising."¹⁹ It is not clear if Taylor personally was part of or even knew of the promises in exchange for the black votes.

The attacks by the Bowles camp had an effect as Taylor saw his early lead slipping away. He reluctantly agreed to hire national campaign consultant David Garth, who had earlier worked for Sen. John Heinz and New York Mayor John Lindsey. Garth cost \$10,000 a month, plus expenses, a figure that made Taylor ill. He felt Bowles was being disingenuous for saying he would never raise taxes even if there were a need.²⁰ On primary day, Bowles led

the ticket with 45.47 percent of the votes. Taylor finished eight points back with 37.73 percent. Bowles led by 62,523 votes. The other lesser candidates split the other 17 percent of the totals.²¹

Short of 50 percent of the primary votes, Bowles hoped to avoid a runoff. There were a few meetings of campaign aides from the two staffs, but the fractured relationships were never healed. There are varying degrees of contention concerning what was sought or promised by either side, but it seems clear from conversations with the few remaining people who participated in the talks that nothing positive ever emerged. It was in those tense sessions, in fact, that the Taylor folks came away feeling more like they were not wanted or needed.

"It was mostly an ego thing," said Jim Sugg, a former state Democrat Party chairman. "I think Skipper was under the influence of lot of campaign folks who thought they didn't need any help from anybody. So the Taylor side understandably said if they were not wanted, they didn't need to help." ²²

Former state Senator Marshall Rauch of Gastonia, a strong Bowles supporter, echoed that same feeling. "The Taylor people were told (after the first primary) that the train was leaving. They could get on board or get out of the way," Rauch said.²³

Taylor's son, Lockhart Taylor, said his dad attempted to reach out, but the Bowles campaign leaders were not interested. "That was a defining moment in North Carolina politics," he said. "It played a role in what has happened since."²⁴

One Bowles staff member said in one tense session it was suggested that Taylor would pass on a runoff if Bowles, assuming he became governor, would agree to name Taylor to a seat on the State Supreme Court.²⁵ No one from the Taylor side would acknowledge such a request was ever made.

The Bowles campaign aide most blamed for his arrogance and attitude against the Taylor campaign was William H. "Bill" White Sr., an eastern North Carolina businessman who made a lot of money through federal trucking contracts with the military and banking. Half a dozen former Bowles aides said White was a thorn in the side of both sides. "Every campaign needs an SOB, and Bill White was ours," one Bowles aide said.²⁶ But White was an astute fund-raiser and was loyal to Bowles in spite of his reported sandpaper personality.

(Bowles kept an ugly Mickey Mouse watch he obtained from White under a glass cover on his desk. He kept that watch, he said, to show that no matter how ugly a person seemed,

there was something good underneath). Fifteen years after the Bowles campaign, White fell in disrepute when in December 1988 he was convicted in federal court of financial irregularities for conspiracy to defraud the government and in February 1989 was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison.²⁷

Taylor asked for a second vote after efforts at cooperation failed. "I was outspent, outpromised and outworked," Taylor said in a statement issued in calling for a runoff. "I may be outspent and outpromised again, but I won't be outworked again." That statement was written by Jeff Greenfield, a Garth staff member, who later became known as a political commentator for both CNN and CBS.²⁸

Bowles attempted to bring his party together, often fighting against his own campaign leaders who stuck to their theory that they didn't need to cater to anyone. The weekend before the second primary, Bowles asked Taylor for a private meeting in Southern Pines. On the day of the scheduled meeting, Taylor called and said there was nothing worth discussing and declined to meet.

The second time around, Taylor finished exactly where he did the first time, eight points behind Bowles, 54 percent to 46 percent.²⁹ That was the end of Taylor's elective office career. He now lives in quiet retirement in Wadesboro, dealing with issues of declining health at age 88.

Holshouser's primary campaigns were much quieter for two reasons: he focused on a limited number of counties where Republicans were concentrated and he didn't have financial wherewithal to do much else. He also clearly outworked Gardner who may have assumed he would win based on his last campaign.

Holshouser made sure Republican voters knew of his party allegiance, history and dedication in contrast to Gardner who had in the past shown he could flip like a pancake if he thought it might help politically. Gardner had a reputation of saying different things in different parts of the state and in 1968 as the party's nominee for governor, he flirted with the George Wallace crowd and strayed away from presidential candidate Richard Nixon, causing distrust among devoted Republicans.³⁰

Holshouser used that Gardner waffling reputation to advantage. He put out campaign material that said Nixon trusted him, and so could voters. Holshouser had worked long and hard in his party over the previous decade and party watchers remembered. He once walked virtually a mile up a mountainside to meet a man who he was told could carry the county for whoever he chose. Holshouser, sweating and breathing hard, spent half an hour with the man—and carried the county on election day.³¹

The Republican primary was close and went to the wire. When votes were counted on primary night, Gardner led by a fraction of less than one percentage point and just short of 50 percent. Holshouser immediately called for a runoff, figuring there was nothing to lose. "Since everyone had expected me to lose, it was almost as if I had won by coming so close," he said in replaying his thinking.³² In the runoff, Holshouser secured 50.65 percent of the vote.³³ His enthusiastic supporters and limited staff were pumped, ready for the big dance with Bowles.

The Main Event

Holshouser admittedly faced an uphill climb in his campaign against Bowles, but he clearly had momentum. Democrats were still smarting over their bitter primaries with Scott and Taylor supporters feeling left out and, perhaps even worse, they had George McGovern as their presidential candidate. Holshouser had Nixon and Helms bulldozing his path. Conservative voters within both parties in North Carolina placed McGovern right up there with a case of poison ivy as they embraced Nixon and Helms with Holshouser hanging on. Bowles was still favored after the primaries, but he was also aware that with his party divisions and problems on the national ticket, he was in no cakewalk even with the commanding lead through the summer and early fall.

Holshouser struggled along as best he could with only pocket change compared to the Bowles reservoir of resources that included top flight advisors with national reputations. Holshouser used a group of consultants recommended by the Nixon campaign, which paid some of the bills. The one recognizable name in his campaign was Roger Ailes, then a national Republican media consultant and later the head of Fox News. While Bowles was piling on television advertising and flying to campaign stops across the state, Holshouser was hunting for gas money for his used motor coach. His young and inexperienced staff pooled their limited resources to secure food and shared living quarters to cut costs. One of the people providing a campaign plane and piloting for Bowles was Robin Hayes, then a Bowles Democrat and later a Republican congressman and current state Republican chairman.³⁴

Both candidates favored changes in the way mental health and highway programs were being handled. Bowles led the way on expansion of public kindergartens while Holshouser was out front on the need for higher teacher salaries. Bowles put emphasis on improved career training programs for community colleges while Holshouser favored a slower path down that road.³⁵

Both candidates promised no new taxes. Holshouser later conceded with a grin that new taxes added by the Scott administration gave him a cushion on that point even though he had traversed the state a year earlier in opposition to those taxes.

There wasn't much affection shared by the campaigns of Helms and Holshouser, but they tolerated each other for mutual benefit. Because Nixon was so popular, the two state campaigns reversed that belief by printing promotional material expounding that Nixon needed Helms and Holshouser even though in fact it was the other way around.³⁶ The three names became virtually inseparable.

Helms actually polled 90 percent of Nixon's votes in the state and Holshouser raked in 83 percent.³⁷ Bowles would later say he had no idea coattails could stretch so far.³⁸

But to get where he needed to be, Holshouser never slowed his pace. Anywhere a handful of Republicans gathered, he made sure he'd shake hands if he could. That is a policy, in fact, that he had followed since his early days in the state legislature and when he served as state party chairman. A mountain politician had once told him that once votes were cast, they were all the same so he shouldn't forgo a chance for all he could get. He said a Democrat vote was as good as any other if it were cast for him.³⁹

The Republican candidate also did something that candidates in his party seldom had done. He sought the minority vote. Explaining his campaign actions in a 2012 interview, Holshouser said he told minority voters while they might not always agree, he would always be willing to listen.⁴⁰ He secured some 13 percent of the minority vote. Those votes, he said, were as good as any others.

Holshouser said he often dreamed about losing an election by five votes, waking up in a sweat and thinking he had not done enough. "I was determined that would never happen except in a dream," he said. "I was never not going to do all I could."⁴¹ The Democratic Party divisions in this state continued through the summer and early fall even as the Nixon-Helms-Holshouser campaigns kept their upward spiral in tact. A month before the November election, Holshouser began to see a surge in his support, but he was still outgunned on staff and outspent on advertising. Bowles was blanketing the state with TV commercials, maybe too many. Holshouser hadn't done much paid advertising because his few early polls showed he was so far behind it would be a waste of money, even if he had the funds, which he didn't.

But Holshouser pulled off one big advertising surprise. To contrast his own low budget campaign with the seemingly endless spending by Bowles, Holshouser rented \$1 million for a television spot in his most memorable commercial. Holshouser filled a bathtub with the one million in cash and filmed it to illustrate Bowles as having a tub full money. The campaign hired armed guards to protect the cash during the filming out of fear of losing some of the bills before they were returned to the lender. Holshouser said that was the only time he ever took such a risk or had ever seen one million dollars.⁴²

Six weeks before the November election and still down in the polls, Holshouser decided to make one last push, figuring it was then or never. After discussions with his wife, he obtained a \$50,000 second mortgage on his home and hired George Little, a gregarious Moore County businessman who also happened to be a Democrat. Little's task: find some money in a hurry.⁴³

When Little joined the campaign, it was essentially bankrupt and in deep debt. The highest paid staff member, Gene Anderson, was making \$78 a week. In a matter of weeks, Little raised \$135,000 to cover what he thought were all the debts only to learn the campaign still owed another creditors \$75,000.⁴⁴

Little shook a lot of money trees from members of both political parties, but he hit a motherlode when he visited with Pat Taylor's campaign finance guy, Charlotte lawyer Allen Bailey. Even Little was surprised when Bailey unsolicited turned over the entire Taylor campaign donor list to him. "It was a doggone good list of prospects," Little said in one of his few understatements. Holshouser said 40 years later he never knew Little had that lucrative list of donors. "I just never told him," Little commented, "but I sure did make use of it."⁴⁵

A mere two weeks before the election, what was once considered unthinkable finally happened. Polls in both campaigns showed the race to be dead even with a small percentage still undecided. For more than a month during the fall, Nixon and Helms climbed some five points a week with Holshouser clinging to that lifeline. With each upward step by Holshouser, Bowles slipped backward.

"I was depressed," said Bowles pollster Walt DeVries, a University of Michigan professor who had come to North Carolina to help direct the campaign. "We had worked too hard to lose. Nixon, Helms and Holshouser were all tied together. The Taylor people were still really angry because they felt Skipper had taken the nomination from one who was due to have it. There was a lot of dissatisfaction down East and a lot of Democrats just sat on their hands. Then there was this guy Bill White who had a lust for power and he was telling people we didn't need them in the primary and didn't need them now."⁴⁶

"Eight days before the election, the polls showed for the first time that Bowles had dropped below 50 percent," DeVries explained. "There were still 15 percent of the voters undecided. I felt like we could get an even break on those, but the break never came."⁴⁷

The Bowles campaign never admitted publicly that they were suddenly behind, but they quickly switched gears with a new and different set of TV ads. Bowles, however, hinted he

could be in trouble in a late October newspaper interview. "If the election were held today, we would win it," he said. "Everyone is cautioning us," he added. "Shucks, anything can happen."⁴⁸

Fearing the worst, the week before the election, Bowles swallowed his pride and privately reached out in desperation to help ward off what he clearly could feel was looming defeat. He sought Jim Hunt's help. Hunt, the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor was running an independent campaign and doing well. Bowles made a personal plea to the Hunt campaign, asking to team up for the final days. His request was denied. Bowles was on his own, win or lose.⁴⁹

As all this was happening, Bowles was doing his best to avoid any contact with the McGovern campaign and even, when the opportunity arose, found himself suggesting a closeness to his boyhood friend from Monroe, Jesse Helms.

Meanwhile, Jessie Rae Scott was keeping a daily diary of the political happenings in the state. Of the May primary, she wrote that she and her husband had backed all the losers, but expressed delight that Holshouser had won his primary. She never admitted in her diary that she personally voted for Holshouser in the general election, but one hint is that on election day, her diary page was blank.⁵⁰

While the precise meaning of that blank page is conjecture, of course, Mrs. Scott often told her family never to put anything on paper that they were not willing for the world to see. A week after the election, she wrote of a dinner party at the governor's mansion for twelve friends, noting that even though they were all registered Democrats "nearly all" voted for Republicans.⁵¹

She was even more blunt the next day in her diary. Expressing anger at a Greensboro newspaper story that suggested the Scotts didn't rally around Bowles, she wrote: "Truth of the matter is, (Bowles) never asked for help and when it was offered, he refused. If he had had some of Robert's advisers he might have won the damned office and the power he wanted."⁵²

Holshouser has often expressed his appreciation for the Scotts and still suspects that one or both of them voted for him. "They went out of their way to be nice to me," Holshouser said of both Scotts, now deceased. "I can't actually recall either one of them ever directly telling me they voted for me, but I have always had the feeling that they both did."⁵³

A close 40-year friend of the Scotts, Administrative Law Judge Fred Morrison, summed up the Scott's votes this way: "Let's say they were not grieving when Bowles lost."⁵⁴ Betsy

Hinton, former administrative aide to Gov. Scott, was coy. "Some secrets will go with me to my grave. Let's just leave it at that," Hinton said when asked about the Scott vote for Holshouser.⁵⁵ There is one more hint. Upon returning to the governor's mansion on election night, according to a friend who didn't want to be identified, Mrs. Scott made known her feelings to the security detail. "We won," she said announced with glee to the staff on duty.

A week before the election, Bowles was also hit with newspaper editorials in Charlotte and Winston-Salem that endorsed Holshouser.⁵⁶ The hometown *Greensboro Daily News* endorsed Bowles, but weakly.⁵⁷ Holshouser called those editorials significant. "There may have been a little Machiavellian madness running around with the newspapers," he said. "They were so scared of Jesse Helms that they were afraid that if I lost and Jesse won, that the Republican Party would just take a gigantic swing to the right forever and that it would not be good for the state."⁵⁸ ³⁵ Until that election, editorials in the state's largest newspapers supporting a Republican candidate for governor were as frequent as a July frost.

Election night was a gut twister, back and forth as vote totals came in from across the state. Bowles and Holshouser were up, then down. But the even break on undecided voters from a week earlier virtually all fell the wrong way for Bowles. Shortly after midnight, DeVries advised Bowles that there was only a slim chance that he might hold on. An hour later, DeVries said there was no way. It was over.⁵⁹

In the room at the Sir Walter Hotel when the inevitable was realized were Bowles, DeVries, aide Thad Woodard and Walter Davis, the man who had financed much of the Bowles campaign. They all sat in silence for a brief period. It was a somber setting, befitting the steady rainfall outside.⁶⁰

When Bowles absorbed the verdict, he calmly walked into the bathroom, looked in the mirror and closed the door. He took time to compose himself, emerged and said he was ready to go congratulate the winner. "The majority of the people can't be wrong," he commented softly as he left the room. It was 3 a.m. when Bowles walked into Holshouser's jubilant campaign headquarters at the Brownstone on Raleigh's Hillsborough Street and shook the winner's hand.

Bowles was clearly privately crushed by his defeat, but he never let it show.⁶¹ He was positive with Holshouser just as he had been throughout the campaign. The two were pleasant and thanked each other for conducting a clean campaign on issues and not personalities. "I hope," Holshouser commented, "that this will be a practice in future campaigns."⁶² Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

That night ended the Bowles interest in seeking public office, but not his interest in public issues. Prior to his campaign, he had been instrumental in creation of the Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies on the UNC campus and he later led the effort to raise \$30 million in private funds for the Dean Smith Center on that campus. Bowles, continuing his philanthropic efforts, lived out his remaining years in peaceful retirement in Greensboro until he was stricken with the debilitating ALS disease. That disease took his life at age 66 in September 1986.

After his victory, Holshouser directed Little not to accept any campaign contribution of more than \$1,000 to cover remaining debts, saying he didn't want to be obligated to anyone.⁶³ Unsolicited, however, Texas oil baron Walter Davis, the man who financed much of Bowles' campaign, quietly sent Holshouser a bag filled with \$10,000 in cash to, as Davis said, "help the new governor cover some remaining debts."⁶⁴ That gift secured Davis a seat on the UNC trustees and the newly formed Coastal Resources Commission. Later, he was placed on the UNC Board of Governors.

Holshouser served his term as governor, and received high marks even from some Democrats, especially for his track record on environmental issues. Not long after he left office, he moved from the mountains to join a law firm in Pinehurst where he has continued to work to strengthen the state's university system and Republican Party through moderation rather than extremes. In recent years he has battled a series of health issues. At age 77 in the summer of 2012, he was continuing a slowed-down, small-town law practiced and was still considered one of the nice guys of politics in this state.

Note: In addition to persons quoted directly by name and listed as sources in footnotes, a larger group of people with expertise from the different campaigns were interviewed for this presentation and provided helpful background information and confirmation of intricate details of the primaries and general election. Further, multiple newspaper clippings and editorials from Greensboro and Raleigh newspapers during the campaign season of 1972 were used in the research.

The list of additional resources follows:

- *The Fayetteville Observer, Dec. 1988 and Feb. 1989 (Bill White conviction and sentencing); North Caroliniana Society Imprints, #47, edited by H.G. Jones; multiple Southern Oral History Program interviews by Jack Fleer and Joseph Mosnier, and former Charlotte journalist Jack Claiborne.*
- *Republican sources: Robin Hayes, Carter Wrenn, Gene Anderson, Phil Kirk and Larry Cobb.*
- *Democrat sources: Meg Scott Phipps, Bert Bennett, Jerry Shinn, F. O'Neil Jones, Lindsey Warren, Roy Parker, Mrs. Pat Taylor, Jim Fain, Carol Spruill, Judge Gerald Arnold, Gerry Hancock, Marcia VanHecke, Jim Hunt and Tom Lambeth.*

¹ Thad Woodard (Bowles aide), interview with author, March 29, 2012.

² Ibid.

³ John L. Cheney Jr., ed., *North Carolina Government, 1585-1979: A Narrative and Statistical History* (Raleigh, North Carolina Department of Secretary of State, 1981), 1415. Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequences since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 232-233.

⁴ Erskine Bowles, interview with author, April 25, 2012.

⁵ Willis P. Whichard, interview with author, April 23, 2012.

⁶ "The Gubernatorial Campaign Expenditures Database," compiled by Thad Beyle and Jennifer M. Jensen, accessed November 29, 2012, <http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/guber.html>.

⁷ James E. Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012, and Gene Anderson (campaign manager), interview with author, March 22, 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James E. Holshouser Jr., interview with Jack Fleer, January 31, 1998 (Interview C-0328-1), Southern Oral History Program Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

¹⁰ Cheney, *North Carolina Government, 1585-1979*, 1415.

¹¹ Woodard, interview with author, March 29, 2012.

¹² Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012.

¹³ John F. Harris, "An Insider's Public Ambitions; Clinton's Chief of Staff Weighs N.C. Governor's Race," *Washington Post*, August 13, 1998.

¹⁴ Ferrel Guillory, "Campaign '72 Wrap-Up: For the Governorship...", *The News and Observer*, October 29, 1972.

¹⁵ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 1972.

¹⁶ Duncan "Lauch" Faircloth, interview with author, May 11, 2012.

¹⁷ Robert W. (Bob) Scott, interview with Karl E. Campbell, September 18, 1986 (Interview C-0036), Southern Oral History Program Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

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- ¹⁸ Robert W. (Bob) Scott, interview with Jack Fleer, February 11, 1998 (Interview C-0336-2), Southern Oral History Program Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.
- ¹⁹ Howard Lee, interview with author, April 4, 2012.
- ²⁰ Jerry Shinn (Taylor aide), interview with author, April 2, 2012.
- ²¹ Cheney, *North Carolina Government, 1585-1979*, 1390-1391.
- ²² James R. (Jim) Sugg, interview with author, May 10, 2012.
- ²³ Marshall A. Rauch, interview with author, March 29, 2012.
- ²⁴ Lockhart Taylor, interview with author, May 2, 2012.
- ²⁵ James Lee Burney (Bowles aide), interview with author, April 13, 2012.
- ²⁶ Thad Woodard (Bowles aide), interview with author, June 25, 2012.
- ²⁷ Lorry Wilkie, "3 Convicted in Federal Fraud Cases," *The Fayetteville Observer*, December 7, 1988; Lorry Wilkie, "Fine, Jail Sentence Set in Fraud Case," *The Fayetteville Observer*, February 4, 1989.
- ²⁸ Jerry Shinn (Taylor aide), email message to author, April 18, 2012.
- ²⁹ Cheney, *North Carolina Government: 1585-1979*, 1390-1391.
- ³⁰ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012.
- ³¹ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012; Holshouser, interview with Jack Fleer, January 31, 1998 (Interview C-0328-1), Southern Oral History Program Collection.
- ³² Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012.
- ³³ Cheney, *North Carolina Government, 1585-1979*, 1392-1393.
- ³⁴ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012; Gene Anderson (Holshouser aide), March 22, 2012.
- ³⁵ Ned Cline, "Early Returns Indicate Down-to-Wire Finish," *Greensboro Daily News*, November 8, 1972.
- ³⁶ Anderson, interview with author, March 22, 2012; Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012; Phillip J. Kirk Jr. (chief of staff in Holshouser gubernatorial administration), March 29, 2012.
- ³⁷ Carter Wrenn (Republican campaign consultant), interview with author, March 3, 2012.

³⁸ Devries, interview with author, May 11, 2012.

³⁹ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Holshouser interviews with Jack Fleer for the Southern Oral History Program and with the author.

⁴² Anderson, interview with author, March 22, 2012; Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012.

⁴³ George Little, interview with author, May 3, 2012.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Walt DeVries, interview with author, May 11, 2012.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Bill Lee, "No Changes Planned by Bowles," *Greensboro Daily News*, October 24, 1972.

⁴⁹ James Lee Burney (Bowles aide), interview with author, April 23, 2012. Story confirmed by a close Hunt associate who declined to be named.

⁵⁰ Mansion Diaries, Robert W. Scott II Papers, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.

⁵¹ Entry for November 19, 1972, Mansion Diaries, Scott Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.

⁵² Entry for November 20, 1972, Mansion Diaries, Scott Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.

⁵³ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012.

⁵⁴ Fred Morrison, interview with author, May 10, 2012.

⁵⁵ Betsy Hinton (former administrative aide to Robert W. Scott), interview with author, May 10, 2012.

⁵⁶ "Jim Holshouser for Governor," *Charlotte Observer*, October 29, 1972; "For Governor," *Winston-Salem Journal*, November 5, 1972.

⁵⁷ "Selection for Governor," *Greensboro Daily News*, November 1, 1972.

⁵⁸ James E. Holshouser, interview with Jack Fleer, January 31, 1998 (Interview C-0328-1), Southern Oral History Program Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

³⁵ James E. Holshouser, Jr interview with Jack Fleer, January 31, 1998 (Interview C-0328-1), Southern Oral History Program, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

⁵⁹ Woodard, interview with author, June 25, 2012.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Holshouser, interview with author, May 4, 2012; Little, interview with author, May 3, 2012.

⁶⁴ Ned Cline, *The Walter Davis Story, One Man Who Made a Difference*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Privately printed by Jo Ann Davis, 2009), 148.

Ned Cline, a veteran reporter and editor, has chronicled the lives of politicians and monitored the evolution of public policies in North Carolina for more than forty years. During his long career in newspapers, Cline worked for The Salisbury Post, The Charlotte Observer, and the Greensboro News & Record, where he served eleven years as managing editor. He has also researched and written six biographies of Tar Heel philanthropists and public officials, including Bob Jordan, Jospeh M. Bryan, and Walter R. Davis. Cline is a past recipient of a prestigious Nieman Fellowship for journalists, which allowed him to spend an academic year at Harvard University focusing on Southern politics.

Presented on September 14th and 15th, 2012, the conference "To Gain Attention to Their Various Claims: Historic Political Campaigns in North Carolina" took place at Wilson Library, co-sponsored by the North Carolina Collection and the Southern Historical Collection