



The Louisiana State Capitol: Leander Perez's home away from home.
(Courtesy the Louisiana Office of Tourism).

CHAPTER ONE

A Most Important Matter

A damp grayness hung over the Louisiana state capitol on the morning of October 19, 1951, as Leander Henry Perez glided down the marble corridors of a modernistic building that seemed somehow more Latin American than American.

Already the hallways were thick with people, but Perez, a nimble man in a smartly cut tailored suit with a white silk handkerchief peeking out from behind his breast pocket, easily saw his way through to a pair of mammoth, twin-paneled doors that opened onto the busy House chamber.

Inside, all was chaos.

Precinct and ward heelers, reporters, lawyers, reformers, and Old Regulars fought for air in an atmosphere thick with smoke as they maneuvered their way through a snake's nest of cables and wires.

Microphones bearing the insignias of the radio stations that owned them prominently decorated a long wooden table soon to be occupied by a young, darkly handsome do-gooder from the big city: Hale Boggs, a loud 37 years old, who arrived to a fantastic clamor of support with his wife, Lindy, serenely vivacious, and their children, Barbara, 12, Tommy, 11, and Corinne, already known to everyone as "Cokie," age 7.

By any measure, this was a quintessentially American family; successful, determined, bouyant, instinctively patriotic and devotedly church-going. "They were just charming and delightful people," said Helene de la Houssaye, the daughter

of prominent New Orleans attorney Arthur de la Houssaye, “and they had made a lot of friends.”¹

The de la Houssayes were most certainly Hale and Lindy’s friends. That’s why they made the morning drive from New Orleans to Baton Rouge that day, to appear in the House chamber with dozens, if not hundreds, of other Boggs devotees, gathering in small, agitated groups or sitting in stunned silence as they anticipated the beginning of the proceedings.

Altogether there were hundreds of people trying to pack into the House chamber—people who were summoned on a moment’s notice from every corner of the state—and seats were at a premium.

Powerful and polished members of Congress who had served with Representative Boggs over the previous decade came out. So, too, did the big money crowd from Uptown New Orleans, people who had worked with him as he fought against a city choked with corruption.

Even Boggs’ former classmates from Tulane University were there, girls and boys somewhat older now and more the world-wise who had engaged him in passionate debates of wide-ranging ideological persuasions that were then the rage on campuses everywhere.

It was an irony lost on few that in the span of the fifteen years or so since they had sat under Tulane’s shady trees and dreamed of storming barricades, they had become the very establishment they once railed so compellingly against. There was a judiciously healthy sprinkling of lawyers, doctors, and leaders of commerce and industry now shining in their ranks.

Photographers from the local papers, meanwhile, were ecstatic; everywhere they looked sat another Louisiana legend. Suddenly Earl Long, the current governor and a man of excessive appetites who was wearing a colorful tie with the image of a hand-painted, bright-red Confederate flag, galloped into the chamber.

Most of the people who saw him clapped. Some whooped and cheered. And still others—even people who instinctively disdained Uncle Earl—could not help but somehow laugh.

Long smiled widely, shook hands all around, took a drag on a cigarette, and searched for a place to sit. He took a quick swig from a small bottle he kept stuffed inside his suit jacket.

From the House floor, in the midst of the surrounding carnival, silver-haired Capt. William Bisso, an ever-present rose decorating his lapel, unsuccessfully tried to stifle a smile.²

Bisso was a tough man, the owner of a thriving tugboat company based in New Orleans and one of the last warhorses of the Old Regulars, the fading political machine of the city that still stubbornly held sway with some voters.

In his nearly fifty years in politics, Bisso had known them all: the powerful and the petty. He had fought and made peace with Huey Long, a national folk hero who rose out of the red clay of Louisiana's north country, and had followed that with a similar romance with Huey's younger brother Earl.

In between, Bisso patiently endured the administrations of a series of well-intended but mostly inept reform governors who now and then sought to rescue the state from the excesses of Longism. Inevitably, after four years of water, the state put a Long back in office, thirsty again for whiskey.

Now Bisso, observing the massive crowd around him and quickly grasping that once again he was in the middle of history, a place where men and dreams are broken, exhibited the discretion that had made him one of the state's wiliest politicians. Whatever he thought of the unfolding carnival before him, Bisso discreetly kept to himself.

Here, too, was the wiry and diminutive Dudley LeBlanc, Acadiana's answer to P.T. Barnum, slapping backs and lighting cigars in the chamber like a man running for office, which he was. LeBlanc had slipped in and out of Louisiana politics for more than two generations now. Sometimes, after he had delivered a poetic, humorous speech about his concerns for the poor, people in Louisiana actually got the idea he was serious about public office.³

But LeBlanc was much too energetic and excitable, and far too much of a showman to settle for politics alone. Across America, nearly anyone who had a radio in the 1930s and

1940s could tell you who Huey Long was. And certain of the lonesome cowboy songs of Jimmie Davis, who would eventually succeed Long, were also famous.

But mention the word “Hadacol” and suddenly, almost violently, Dudley LeBlanc’s name sprung to life, the creation of one of the greatest advertising campaigns in American history. No one could precisely say what Hadacol was, but LeBlanc, through his endless promotions, had convinced a fantastically large number of people across the country—millions of them, in fact—that Hadacol could cure whatever ailed them.

And surely it did not hurt in a country enamored of celebrity that people such as energetic and multi-talented Mickey Rooney, bandleader Tommy Dorsey, and the captivating actress Ava Gardner had all endorsed Hadacol. Even more, they travelled across the country with LeBlanc in a star-studded caravan touting the amazing, elusive benefits of his product.

Happily hailing reporters and politicians—no one could long resist LeBlanc’s restless charm—he bounded to the front of the House chamber to greet a woman he had known for decades.

Her name was Lucille May Grace, and this was not one of her better days. Tense, uneasy, alternately smiling—if only briefly—at long-time friends and then staring sadly at the floor, “Miss Lucille,” as she was known to virtually everyone, was today the center of rapt attention for reporters, photographers, and onlookers.

People strained to get a better view of her, to see what she wore—Miss Lucille was always classy—and study her face.

For her part, Miss Lucille wished she could be anywhere than the crowded House chamber.

She wished she could simply be back home.

Until now, Grace had enjoyed a brilliant career that defied convention. As the only woman in a smoky world dominated by morally elastic male politicians, Miss Lucille thrived. Her efficient handling of the state land office as its long-time register



On the steps of the state capitol, Miss Lucille endures. (Courtesy John Dominis/TimesPix)

had won her the respect and envy of everyone. She won election after election for twenty years and bouquets from both reformers and the press who admitted she did her job well.

Finally, it looked as though Lucille May Grace was about to become the next governor of the state of Louisiana, and the first woman in charge of things. But then she made a mistake that she would come to regret for the rest of her life; a mistake that, indeed, would eventually contribute to the end of her life.

And now Miss Lucille sat in the House chamber with a saddened sense of futility. She felt like a spectator at her own execution, waiting for a dreaded end she could do nothing to prevent.

Wearing a conservative black suit offset by a bright red blouse, Grace was so lost in thought that she barely recognized LeBlanc when he approached her.⁴

This was not going to be a good day for Lucille May Grace.

There were cheers and applause when Boggs and his young family appeared, and laughs and hoots when Earl Long waved his big ten-gallon hat.

But no one hooted or laughed at Leander Perez, known to those who both feared and revered him as the Judge.

Surveying through delicate rimless glasses the chaos and confusion around him, Perez looked pleased, an expensive cigar defiant in the corner of his mouth, a shock of iron-grey hair swept to a pompadour on his head.

“Hello, Judge! Hello, Judge!” Perez’s earnest admirers yelled out. Perez thinly smiled in return and sat confidently at one of the small wooden desks normally reserved for legislators. A man—there was always someone around Perez, handing him things, lighting his cigar, opening pesky doors—presented him with a huge stack of papers.⁵

Forever meticulous—not for the Judge the sweat-soaked, rumpled shirts and withered ties of the classic Southern politician—the Judge first made certain that the desk he sat at was clean before stacking the documents before him.

He is a napkin flapper, one journalist observed of Perez, a “brusher of imaginary crumbs and tobacco ashes from the table cloth. And whenever there is the slightest hiatus in the conversation, he gives the table top a smart slap.”⁶

New Orleans reporter Rosemary James was one among many who did not particularly like the Judge, but found herself succumbing nevertheless to his charms. “He was very intelligent,” James, who interviewed Perez, would later recall. “He could be funny when he wanted to be. But he could also be mean.”⁷

Perez, for his part, viewed himself as a tolerant man of abundantly good humor, and he freely explained what made him so: “One easy way to relax, you know, is to always have a joke at somebody’s expense, maybe, and have a good belly laugh,” Perez explained in a low voice that seemed to drip with honey. “That’s the best way to relax.”⁸

Perez also enjoyed nothing more than a good quip: “I smoke a given number of cigars,” the Judge dead-panned, “usually as many as are given to me.”⁹

Raucous laughter followed, mostly from Perez.

By 1951 Leander Perez was a millionaire. He had not always been rich. In fact, he was born almost poor, the son of a rice and sugarcane planter who was always just a step ahead of his bills. But Leander Perez was rich now, immensely rich, perhaps even a billionaire, and like so many self-made men whose empires stretched across the boundaries of imagination, Leander Perez always got what he wanted.

Now, sitting at the table, his guards, secretaries, and assistants offering him subservient attention, Perez knew what he wanted.

He wanted to destroy the young man sitting at the table in front of him. He wanted to destroy the likeable, attractive, man-with-a-future who had only recently been voted by a pool of gushing secretaries as the most charming congressman in Washington.

Leander Perez wanted to destroy Hale Boggs—not just best



Leander Perez, the King of Plaquemines Parish, crowns the Queen of the Orange Festival. (Courtesy Special Collections Division, Tulane University)

him in a political election or outmaneuver him in a court of law. He wanted to decimate Boggs in a way that would make any future in politics almost impossible for the young reformer, to finish him off completely as a public man.

And in 1951 there was no better way of doing that than by calling someone a Communist.

Actually, there was *one* better way, and that was to prove it.

And the proof, Perez knew, as he lovingly surveyed the papers before him, was here in irrefutable black and white. "Look at these *Hullabaloo*," Perez had said, referring to the student newspaper at Tulane University that Boggs had written for years ago when he was fired with the far-left passions of a young man. "We're going to tie him up so that he won't be able to move," Perez proclaimed.¹⁰

Hale Boggs was a Communist, Perez insisted. But even worse, Hale Boggs was also a candidate for governor, with a very good chance of getting elected. Therefore, Perez concluded, he was doing Louisiana a favor by saving it from its first Red leader.

There were one hundred members of the Democratic State Central Committee who had now filed into the chamber. Perez needed to convince only fifty-one of them of the charges against Boggs, requiring them to then drop Boggs' name from the gubernatorial ballot. And if they did that, everyone agreed, Boggs' career would be over. Whether or not he really was a Communist wouldn't matter; if the DSCC pushed Boggs out of the race it would at least *seem* to everyone that Boggs must have done something wrong. And that would be damaging enough.

A terrific din filled the chamber as the DSCC members tried to find their chairs. There were now several hundred people milling about, and empty seats were at a premium. DSCC chairman Henry Sevier, a long-time Perez ally, in a handsome double-breasted suit, looked around the huge room with dismay as he reached his perch near the front of the chamber.

Meanwhile, sitting next to wife Lindy, Hale Boggs began to

contemplate where things had gone wrong. Up until now, he had admittedly led a charmed life. A Tulane graduate with honors, Boggs was elected to Congress on a reform wave at the age of 26, the recipient of very deep Uptown New Orleans pockets who helped him finance his winning campaign. Young, but intelligent, Boggs had a way of prompting people with more power or money than he to like him.

“He was a very impressive person,” Joseph C. Myers, Jr., who graduated from Tulane with Boggs, would remember, “the kind of person that people automatically felt, as we used to say back then, was ‘going to amount to something.’”¹¹

“Hale was truly and genuinely interested in life and problems,” Boggs’ sister, Claire Boggs Morrison, would later recall. “And I don’t think he was just listening to people’s problems to listen to them—he really wanted to help. That was the kind of person he was.”¹²

Hale Boggs was a crusader. A reformer, “a joiner and a bleeding heart,” two cynical reporters would label him.¹³

He was also an intellectual. “I had scads of dates, and while I was maneuvering my late date so the early date wouldn’t find out, there was Hale writing editorials about Social Security,” remembered Lindy, who fell in love with him when they were both students, eventually declaring: “I believed in him so much that I would have been working for him if I hadn’t been married to him.”¹⁴

Above all, Hale Boggs was a young man with an irresistible attraction to utopian dreams, visions of how things could be, how the course of fortune and fate could change men and nations, and what he could someday do to make the world better.

When he first ran for office, he frequently displayed his interests in things far away, talking about poverty in China or the pound in Britain or the power of Russia. It often confused precinct captains in the blue-collar bars of New Orleans’ Irish Channel.

Lindy, meanwhile, her feet firmly on the ground, ran his

campaign and office, writing lovely notes to friends and voters and introducing her husband—who rarely had a dime in his pocket during the Great Depression—to blood that flowed very blue in the salons of Uptown New Orleans.

Once elected to Congress, Hale, with Lindy by his side, was surprisingly successful in Washington for such a young man with no previous congressional connections. Sam Rayburn, the powerful but lonesome bachelor Speaker of the House, took a liking to both Hale and Lindy, and even invited Boggs to his “Board of Education” sessions. There he and Lyndon Johnson and Harry Truman and any number of other Southern and border-state powerbrokers wiled away the late afternoons drinking bourbon and branch water and making decisions that would alter the course of the nation.

“I listened in fascination as these powerful men talked of issues and personalities, of the Congress and the presidency,” LBJ aide Bobby Baker later said of the small room on the ground floor of the Capitol crowded with a worn sofa and easy chairs where Boggs, Rayburn, and the other men gathered. “They were living examples of the necessity of having in government men with just plain good common sense.”¹⁵

Soon Hale and Lindy had also charmed John F. Kennedy, elected to Congress in 1946, as well as the carousing LBJ and his flowery wife, Lady Bird, who together would become two of Hale and Lindy’s closest friends. Even the erudite and stiff Walter Lippmann, the most powerful columnist of his day, a man of great pretensions who regarded even the president—Harry Truman—as a commoner, liked Hale and Lindy, too. It was an affection without precedent, considering that Boggs was, after all, still nothing more than a decidedly junior member of Congress.

And New Orleans, as well, loved Hale and Lindy. They were a team and voters yearned to see them together, particularly with their children, as if their very presence suggested that the old city was younger and more full of promise than it really was.

“To get a photo in the newspaper of Lindy campaigning, par-

ticularly with one of the children, was great stuff for us,” said Laurence Eustis, who was Boggs’ official campaign manager in 1940. “They were just so attractive and friendly and young—you couldn’t help but like them.”¹⁶

Although Boggs actually lost in his bid for reelection in 1942—his opponent, crusty old Paul Maloney, whom Boggs beat in 1940, later admitted that he came back just to teach his cocky young foe a lesson—Boggs was back to stay in 1946 and won thumping reelection victories in both 1948 and 1950.¹⁷

“Never in his wildest imagination did he consider running for governor,” Lindy later exclaimed, when wealthy Uptown reformers first broached the idea of Boggs’ taking a stab at the statehouse. Even a whirlwind tour of the state, in which Boggs was met with enthusiastic promises of support and money, failed to sway him. Baton Rouge! He wanted to stay in Washington, where he was near the center of power, confidante of Rayburn and Kennedy and Johnson, glowing in Lippmann’s parched sun.¹⁸

“Well, Lin, tell me—what do you think?” Boggs asked Lindy as he steered their sedan to the side of the road on the outskirts of New Orleans after their upstate tour, hoping at that very moment to get back to Washington.¹⁹

“I hate to tell you this,” the wise wife counseled the indecisive husband. “But I don’t think you have any choice. I think you have to run.”²⁰

It was obvious that if Boggs did not run for governor, he would be in more trouble than if he did—even if he lost. The Uptowners had bankrolled him for years. They were the old money in the old mansions, and the one thing they would never forgive was ingratitude.

And besides, the Uptowners were on a roll. In both the 1940 and 1944 state elections a reform candidate backed by big Uptown money had won the statehouse. And just as exciting, if not improbable, in 1946 they had even elected one of their own—deLesseps S. Morrison, a diffident attorney with

aristocratic pretensions—as mayor of New Orleans, the last province of the blue collars and Old Regulars.

But, the Uptowners' also knew, voters needed constant supervision. In 1948 they fell back on their old ways and returned Earl Long to the statehouse. His inauguration was an unseemly affair, confirming the Uptowners worst suspicions: a hillbilly jamboree stocked with Confederate flags, twenty thousand pounds of hotdogs, and one hundred gallons of buttermilk, all of which was voraciously consumed.²¹

Sick stomachs followed.

In his four years as governor, Earl Long seemed to go out of his way to offend the sensibilities of the reformers. He expanded state-run health care and the free textbook program his brother Huey had introduced. The amount and number of state pension checks jumped by more than a quarter. He poured millions of dollars of state money into contracts for new roads and bridges. And the Uptowners, seeing the dollars flow everywhere else, felt very much out of the action.

Perhaps most disturbing of all Long had remained loyal to the National Democratic Party, including President Harry Truman, who was just then advocating civil rights for blacks and free medical care for everyone else.

They clearly needed to regain control of Baton Rouge. And the man who could do it was Hale Boggs. Save the state and you save yourself, the Uptowners essentially told Boggs.

Reluctantly, he agreed.

By the early summer of 1951, Boggs had announced his candidacy. By September he was traveling through a hazy succession of tiny logging and farm towns across northern and central Louisiana, trying to sell a tired state a dream. He gave loud, long speeches from the rugged ends of flatbed trucks in the middle of sparsely populated town squares and on the dusty front steps of boarded-up movie houses in places that time and history had passed by.

He was going to be their next governor! Boggs yelled. Eventually even he came to believe it.



*On the floor of the Louisiana House, Hale Boggs (right) formally registers as a candidate for governor.
(Courtesy Special Collections Division, Tulane University)*

“He made a great effort,” judged *Times-Picayune* political columnist James Gillis, who jumped into his sedan and traveled the same routes Boggs did, in and out of little drugstores and bars and gas stations throughout the northern and central swaths of Louisiana where Boggs, as a Catholic from New Orleans, most needed to find votes. “He was beginning to catch on. People said that they liked this young man from the big city. He was very optimistic, and people liked that.”²²

Soon Boggs, far ahead of his competition, had busy campaign offices up and running in every medium-size and large city in the state. Most of the working press was writing about him, calling him the frontrunner, in a field that included conservatives Robert Kennon and James McLemore, not to mention Miss Lucille and Earl Long’s entry, Carlos Spaht.

Then, on the evening of October 15, 1951, everything changed.

Boggs was sitting in the French Quarter television studios of WDSU—owned by Edgar Stern, a son in the fabulously wealthy Stern family, who were among Boggs’ most important financial supporters. Boggs liked the new medium of television, which would transform in ways the Uptowners could hardly imagine the variety and culture of Louisiana politics.

Suddenly, earthy men like Earl Long could be absurdly reduced in front of a camera in a quiet studio. Uncle Earl always needed a hot crowd.

But Boggs, erudite and contemplative, was enhanced by television. He appeared to viewers as a calm man of principle. He could have sold soap or cars and made a killing. Instead, he was selling himself, and doing nearly as well.

Boggs was at WDSU for another half-hour broadcast. It was only three months until the election, and it looked for certain that Boggs would win the primary, and then, it was assumed, finish off any competitor in the runoff.

Suddenly Boggs was handed a message that had been sent to him by courier from the secretary of the DSCC. The DSCC in 1951 was an important group of people on the front lines

of Louisiana politics—assessors, sheriffs, Old Regulars, even a smattering of reformers. And without their approval, no candidate could get his name on the ballot, at least as a Democrat.

And, in 1951, Louisiana's voters rarely voted for anyone else.

Boggs read the message. A brief was being filed that night before the DSCC, the message informed him, arguing that he was not qualified to run for governor, nor was he fit, and could not even be called a Democrat.

The reason, the brief held, was shockingly simple: Hale Boggs was a Communist.

"The big lie!" Boggs derided the claim as soon as he met with reporters outside WDSU's studio. The brief, he noted, was filed under the name of Lucille May Grace. Miss Lucille, the same woman who had a sterling reputation for fair play in Louisiana politics, the same woman who knew both Hale and Lindy socially, had been entertained in their Washington home and had never exchanged an angry word with them.²³

Now here was Miss Lucille calling Boggs a Communist. Boggs' eyes swept over the papers in his hands. But it was almost as though he did not see Grace's name on them at all.

"This protest is a typical tactic of Leander Perez," Boggs divined. Perez had put Grace up to it, Boggs was certain.²⁴

Bravely, Boggs vowed to fight for his name and reputation in front of the DSCC, which would, he also learned, take up his fate in just a short seventy-two hours.

If Boggs lost, it would be the probable end not only of his candidacy but his career as well. This was 1951, a dark era when Communism to most Americans was a dreaded disease that killed and deserved to be killed in return. Any American politician even remotely connected to such an enemy ideology was risking destruction.

But if Perez lost, the Judge's kingdom, that swampy empire he had so lovingly built through the years removed from pesky state noses, might just possibly be threatened by an earnest do-gooder like Hale Boggs. Boggs not only could be

one of the few incoming governors not indebted to Perez, but someone who, because of the Grace challenge, would actually have a reason to hate and seek revenge upon the Judge.

Somewhere in between was Lucille May Grace, who had imagined for herself such a better campaign. A bumper sticker that fall had said it all. Next to a drawing of a sun bonnet being tossed into the ring were the words: "Lucille May Grace for Governor."²⁵

Now her future depended upon the darkness of someone else's past, of the real and imagined things that Hale Boggs had once done, so many years ago, that would prove he was a menace to his state and country.

There wasn't room for one more person in the House chamber. A faintly cool October afternoon was turning ominously thick with the closeness of the crowd.

Hale Boggs, Leander Perez, and Lucille May Grace had the best seats in the house. Earl Long was nervously pacing, his eyes full of mischief, darting across the room.

Suddenly the clamor was pierced by the heavy gaveling of DSCC chairman Sevier who took note of the big audience and remarked: "I realize this is one of the most important meetings that has ever been held by this committee and one of the most important matters ever brought before it."²⁶

A quiet fell across the room.