

## The Sam Rayburn Papers: A Preliminary Investigation

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**S**PEAKER OF THE HOUSE Sam Rayburn died on November 16, 1961, ending a long and distinguished political career. Rayburn became Speaker in 1940 and served in that position for seventeen years, longer than any other man in history. He was particularly influential in the Democratic Party and acted as Chairman of the Democratic National Convention in 1948, 1952, and 1956. He represented his district well for over two generations and, along with Senator Lyndon Johnson, gave Texas a strong voice in national affairs. Former President Johnson is remembered in Texas by his Presidential Library in the capital city of Austin, but Rayburn is remembered by a small, privately funded library in Bonham, his home town, in tranquil, rural northeast Texas. These libraries symbolize the public life of the two men: Rayburn, with a quiet and humble political style, preferred a career in the House, whereas Johnson, with a more energetic style, rose to the Presidency.

After serving as Speaker for a few years, Rayburn wanted to build a small, unpretentious library in his hometown. He hoped to make it both a permanent depository for his official and personal papers and a center for the study of congressional history and affairs. In 1948, using the Collier Award of \$10,000 he received for distinguished service in Congress, the Speaker started a library fundraising campaign which brought contributions ranging from school children's pennies to sums of \$50,000 donated by friends and admirers.

Dedicated in 1957, the Sam Rayburn Library includes the Congressman's correspondence, his scrapbooks, his personal library of 10,000 volumes, his personal mementos, and taped interviews with his associates. The collection, which measures 200 shelf-feet, is kept in filing cabinets in a fireproof vault. Only the correspondence with Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, Cabinet members and prominent

The author, a member of the Department of History at Texas Christian University, has used the Rayburn papers extensively in his work on rural electrification. His taped interviews with many of the Speaker's associates are part of the Rayburn Library holdings.

individuals has been separated and cataloged. The rest of the material is arranged by subject and year in filing cabinets, in the same way Rayburn stored it in his office. It is hoped that the collection will be completely cataloged by summer 1972. There are no restrictions on the use of the papers.

The papers span Rayburn's career as a public servant, from his first term in the Texas legislature in 1906 until his last days as Speaker of the House in 1961. The heart of the collection, however, dates from 1940. Many of the pre-1940 papers were lost in moving them from the House Office Building to the Capitol Building when Rayburn became Speaker.

Only a limited amount of correspondence from the pre-New Deal years has been recovered, amounting to less than five percent of the collection. It consists of letters from constituents and friends, letters on personal and family matters, and some information on his campaigns for reelection. No significant information has been recovered on national legislation during the Progressive era, nor is there anything on World War I; only a smattering of records cover the 1920's. Prospects for recovering these materials are poor. The loss of the early papers has serious ramifications, for it means that the biographer will not be able to analyze Rayburn's interests and affairs during the formative part of his career.

There is a greater quantity of materials covering the New Deal era, but a substantial part of the papers from those years is also missing. New Deal historians will find this loss tragic, because in 1932 Rayburn became Chairman of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. This committee was involved in some of the most dynamic legislation of the 1930's, including the Public Utilities Holding Company Act and the bills establishing the Securities Exchange Commission and the Rural Electrification Administration. An occasional paper throws some light on the workings of Rayburn's committee, but the limited number of them makes it difficult to gain any real insight into the deliberations of the committee. The creation of the permanent Rural Electrification Administration is a case in point.

Quite valuable communications from Rayburn's rural constituents demonstrate the refusal of the electrical industry to serve the farm market despite the desire of these constituents to get electricity into their homes. His records say little, however, about the progress of the REA bill in Congress. The file contains no correspondence with Senator George Norris, who cosponsored the bill, nor is there any exchange of information with Morris Cooke, administrator of the temporary REA set up in 1935. The feelings of the House are nowhere expressed on the crucial question of REA loans to electric

companies, nor do the records reflect any light on the use of farmer-operated cooperatives to carry out the REA program on the local level. Unless more primary sources are found, questions on the role of Congress in the establishment of the rural electrification program are not likely to be cleared up. The case of the REA serves to illustrate that only a very limited amount of potentially valuable information is available on the congressional exchange on epoch-making legislation.

The Rayburn Library staff is conducting an oral history program to offset this unfortunate loss of papers. A small number of interviews have been conducted with Rayburn's colleagues in Congress, his Washington staff, and his friends and associates in the Fourth District. But the reticence or poor memories of Rayburn's friends prevent a vivid recollection of events. Their devotion to Rayburn, moreover, causes the interviews to have a slanted presentation, and thus far they have added little information that is not commonly known or easily found in printed sources.

The materials dating from 1940 account for approximately 85 percent of the collection, but they are not elaborately detailed because of Rayburn's style as a politician and his dislike for the tedium of keeping records. His effectiveness as Speaker of the House was based on his close, personal contacts and familiarity with each member of the House. He conducted business on a face-to-face basis, relying on his persuasive powers and the trust and confidence of his associates. "My experience with the Speakership," he said, "has been that you cannot lead people by driving them. Persuasion and reason are the only ways. In that way, the Speaker has power and influence in the House." He rarely left the chair to speak, and his speeches were short and blunt. He despised reading and writing long explanatory letters, leaving details of his own operations to his staff. The Speaker's responsibilities were many, and he often delegated duties to floor leaders of the majority and minority parties and depended on committee chairmen to handle legislative details. The result is that the Rayburn collection deals with a wide variety of subjects but does not consistently furnish detailed information on a significantly large proportion of these subjects.

Until more researchers examine the papers and pass judgment on them, it is too soon to estimate their value. Preliminary investigation reveals several well-documented areas of Rayburn's interest that might attract scholars. It seems clear even now that the papers will be valuable to political historians who have special interests in two areas: Rayburn's role in the Democratic Party and his political practices and operations in his home district. Other well-documented areas include public power, agricultural improvement, and

foreign policy. In the final analysis the last two may prove to have only peripheral value, for they are too incomplete to stand alone. The personal correspondence, staff memos, agency reports and other data on agricultural improvement and foreign policy, nevertheless, complement other sources in these two areas, and therein lies their value.

The most substantial part of the collection is the record of Rayburn's activities within the Democratic Party, for he was known as "Mr. Democrat." One of the more spectacular examples of these political records is a series of letters between Rayburn and William G. McAdoo recalling their respective roles in securing the Democratic nomination for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. This correspondence and related items imply that Rayburn, though loyal to Texas' favorite son candidate, John Nance Garner, saw Roosevelt as the best choice of the party. If the collection of pre-1940 papers were complete, a thorough investigation of this episode might provide new information on the nomination of Roosevelt.

Students of Texas history will find documentation of the split in the Texas Democratic Party during the Eisenhower-Stevenson campaigns of 1952 and 1956. Rayburn, confronted with the "Shivercrat" rebellion of Democrats for Eisenhower, fought hard to hold state party regulars in line for the national ticket. Supporters of Stevenson faced the same problem outside Texas and wrote Rayburn for suggestions for strategies and tactics to employ in order to hold their own party chieftains in line, especially in the South. For the student of politics these documents in the Rayburn papers might help to answer the question: Did this mutiny within the Democratic ranks undercut the effectiveness of the Stevenson liberal wing throughout the Eisenhower years?

The files of correspondence touch upon a host of other political subjects. "Mr. Sam" readily used his influence to win appointments for his colleagues and political coworkers. He kept in close touch with the watchdogs of the party, who informed him of local and State issues that might affect the success of his party. He consulted prominent Democrats about political strategy. However routine the material may be, it gives a down-to-earth account of how the political system works.

In yet another sense the Rayburn papers are useful to the political historian. They provide an opportunity to examine the processes of American politics on the local level. One is able to get a bird's-eye view of the hometown techniques and style of operations of an influential member of Congress for half a century. "Mr. Sam" believed in the will of the majority and once stated, "I have absolute faith in the American people. I believe that more than 95 per cent

of them have more good in them than bad." Rayburn kept in close touch with his home district, as indicated by the vast amount of correspondence with his constituents. He had key lieutenants in each major town of his district who kept a finger on the political pulse of the area. Information flowed steadily into his office on local prices of crops, on rainfall, on road construction, and on political opposition. Rayburn knew first-hand at almost any given time the political climate in his district. The papers show how he effectively utilized the resources of the Federal Government to aid his constituents and to maintain voter loyalty. This interest is especially apparent in the material dealing with the activities of such New Deal agencies as the Rural Electrification Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and the Farm Security Administration. Though much of the material is mundane, there is a record documenting the sensitivity of a man to human concerns, however small.

Public power is well represented with an assortment of materials on rural electrification, the development of hydroelectric plants, the "little TVA's," and appropriation fights over Federal power projects. Besides co-sponsoring the REA, Rayburn was responsible for the creation in 1943 of the Southwestern Power Administration, an agency which handles Federal power projects in a six-state area of the Southwest. Papers relating to this agency disclose particulars of the contest between public and private interests over water rights in the region. Proposals to develop the Arkansas and Red Rivers as "little TVA's" are clearly documented; included in the records are the efforts of private interests to prevent the fulfillment of these proposals. Spokesmen for REA co-ops in the Southwest looked to Rayburn for help in winning appropriations, fighting utility "spite lines," and the like. These circumstances made Rayburn a regional spokesman for public power.

Speaker Rayburn's papers make it evident that he was a strong defender of public power during the Eisenhower years. By 1952 when many Federal power projects were already in operation, the electrical industry sought to acquire the right to operate these projects or to persuade Congress to cut appropriations for them. The papers show that Rayburn devoted considerable effort to winning appropriations to keep Federal programs alive. Through his steady exchange of correspondence with proponents of public power and conservation, as well as through his jousts with spokesmen for the electrical industry, the Speaker's strong advocacy of power projects is clearly delineated.

One of Rayburn's abiding interests was agricultural improvement, an interest that reflected his rural background. His papers are rich

in correspondence with farmers but have only limited details of legislative battles for appropriations for the Department of Agriculture. There is documentation of his efforts to establish programs in soil conservation, farm-to-market roads, and other improvements to benefit farmers. The files clearly establish Rayburn's love and concern for the dirt farmer, suggesting that, as with many progressives, his aggressive efforts to regulate transportation and holding companies stemmed from agrarian ideals.

Though Rayburn never served on a House committee dealing with foreign affairs, his papers show that he was active behind the scenes in fostering meaningful involvement of the United States with other nations. In his speeches and other papers his frequent role as defender of foreign aid is apparent. The papers also show that he maintained a strong posture on national defense issues. Rayburn's speeches indicate that he was not caught up in the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950's, yet they demonstrate his conviction that the United States should participate actively in international affairs. The sources of his views of foreign policy, however, are not as clear as they are in the case of his thinking about agriculture.

No plans are in progress to microfilm materials in the National Archives, the Library of Congress, or the Presidential Libraries that would supplement these two areas of the collection. The library is privately funded, and the endowment will not permit a program of microfilming in the near future. As papers of Rayburn's colleagues in Congress become available, however, the gaps in his collection dealing with agriculture and foreign policy may be filled. Even in their present state, nonetheless, the Rayburn papers serve to complement other materials dealing with these two topics.

This discussion points to several of the stronger areas of the Rayburn collection. The variety of topics and the long span of Rayburn's career will undoubtedly entice scholars to examine other areas. At this point, however, the full significance of the collection has not been established; the loss of that part of Rayburn's files dealing with the period prior to 1940 limits their significance. While in some respects the papers have a regional quality, they also have a significance for national affairs; they can serve as supplementary source material for a number of subjects. As more and more scholars become aware of them through use, the overall significance of the Sam Rayburn papers will gradually become clear.