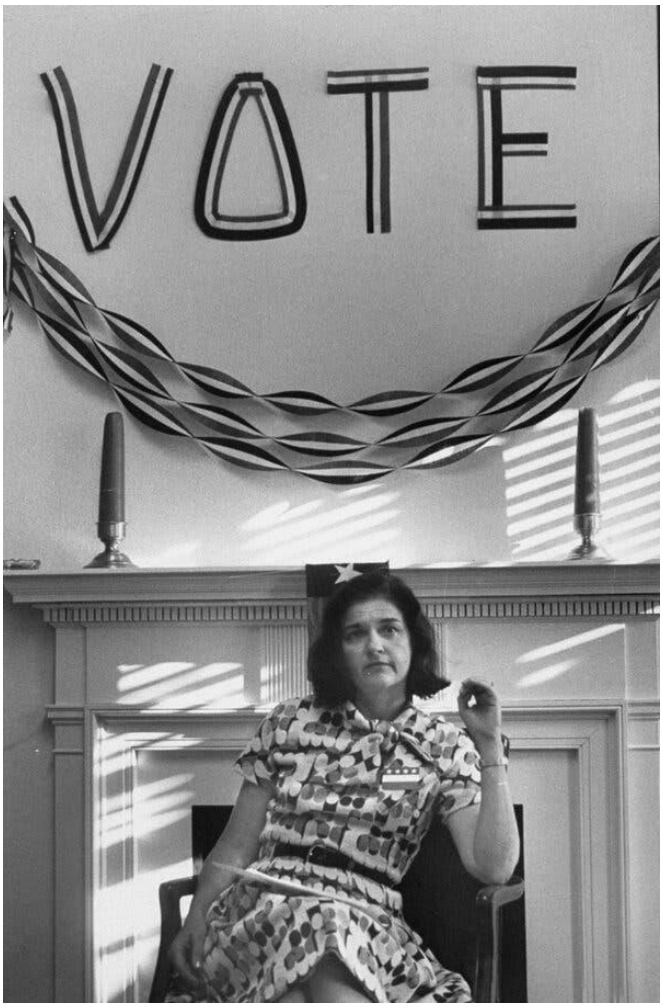
Frances T. Farenthold, Liberal Force in Texas and Beyond, Dies at 94

Known as Sissy, she was an advocate for racial parity and women's rights, and her name was placed in nomination for the vice presidency in 1972. Tragedy trailed her.



Frances T. Farenthold in 1972. "Even by Texas standards, she is something big," the Washington Post columnist David S. Broder wrote. Credit...Leonard Mccombe/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Shutterstock

By [Margalit Fox]

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The year was 1968, the place Corpus Christi, Texas. The scene was a victory party for a Democratic candidate, elected to the Texas House of Representatives the night before.

At the party, a man approached Frances T. Farenthold, a prominent local resident.

“Mrs. Farenthold,” he said, “I had the pleasure of voting for your husband yesterday.”

“Thank you very much,” she replied. “But I think you’ll discover that you voted for me.”

“Well, hell,” the man said, “if I’d known that, I never would have voted for you.”

Ms. Farenthold, a politician, feminist, lawyer and human-rights advocate who died at 94 on Sunday at her home in Houston, became quite accustomed to incredulity on her election and long afterward during her half-century on the national stage.

The victory that night of Ms. Farenthold, widely known by the childhood nickname Sissy, had been no small trick. On her election, she became the only woman in the 150-member chamber and one of just two in the Texas legislature. (The other, in the State Senate, was the Democrat Barbara Jordan, the eloquent Black lawyer who went on to serve in the United States House of Representatives from 1973 to 1979.)

Throughout her career, Ms. Farenthold met with casual condescension — the news media perennially described her as a mother of four — and overt discrimination: As a legislator she was shut out of committee meetings held at an all-male private club in Austin.

Yet during her two terms in the Texas House, from 1969 to 1973, she helped improve legislative transparency in the wake of a government stock-fraud scandal and spearheaded the passage of a state equal rights amendment.

Nurses Are Burned Out. Can Hospitals Change in Time to Keep Them?

Ms. Farenthold being applauded after she was voted the first chairwoman of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1973. Credit...Associated Press

She would earn renown far beyond her state, becoming, The Texas Observer wrote in 2007, "a near-cult symbol of the Texas that might be."

Ms. Farenthold was a two-time candidate for the Texas governorship, the first chairwoman of the National Women's Political Caucus, a college president and a nominee for the vice presidency of the United States a dozen years before Geraldine A. Ferraro became the first to be chosen for that office by a major party.

In 1975, a Newspaper Enterprise Association panel named Ms. Farenthold one of the 50 most influential women in America, along with Coretta Scott King; Gloria Steinem; Katharine Graham, the publisher of The Washington Post; and the congresswomen Bella Abzug and Shirley Chisholm.

"Even by Texas standards, she is something big," the Washington Post columnist David S. Broder wrote in 1972.

Ms. Farenthold's characteristic self-confidence seemed born of charmed circumstance: A child of privilege, she was educated at an elite private high school and an elite college; flourished in law school, where she was one of three women in a class of 800; successfully resumed her legal career after rearing her children; and was long married to a European nobleman.

But as news articles often noted, she also exuded an air of sorrow. A "melancholy rebel," the Texas journalist Molly Ivins called her.

She had reason to be. For all her advantages, Ms. Farenthold had also known repeated, almost unfathomable loss.

Daughter of a 'Southern Belle'

Mary Frances Tarlton was born in Corpus Christi on Oct. 2, 1926, to an eminent Democratic family. Her paternal grandfather, Benjamin Dudley Tarlton, had been a member of the Texas House and chief justice of what was then the Second Court of Civil Appeals, in Fort Worth.

Her father, Benjamin Dudley Jr., was a district attorney; her mother, the former Catherine Bluntzer, was, as Ms. Farenthold described her, a "Southern belle."

Owing to the efforts of a slightly older brother, Benjamin Dudley III, to pronounce the word "sister," the infant Mary Frances would be known to the end of her life as Sissy.

When Sissy was 2, and Benjamin 3, he died from complications of surgery to remove a swallowed coin. Her parents' grief suffused the household ever after, she said.

Sissy had her own childhood struggles: She suffered from undiagnosed dyslexia and did not learn to read until she was nearly 10. “I’ll never forget wearing the dunce cap in the corner of the classroom,” Ms. Farenthold told People magazine in 1976.

But exercising the forward momentum that would be a hallmark of her adult life, she made herself into a scholar. After attending the Hockaday School, a girls’ preparatory academy in Dallas, she entered Vassar at 16.

At 19, having earned a bachelor’s degree in political science there, she enrolled in law school at the University of Texas, where her eyes were opened to gender inequality.

“I had never heard of differences in income between men and women for the same work, or of women having difficulty getting into grad school,” Ms. Farenthold told The Christian Science Monitor in 1973. “But there the students would make bets on how long it would be before I would be married, and whether I would make it for six weeks.”

She received her law degree in 1949 and joined her father’s firm in Corpus Christi. The next year she married George Edward Farenthold, a Belgian-born baron who became a Texas oilman.

She forsook the law for more than a decade to rear their five children. Her father, however, continued to pay her bar association dues: He knew she would be back.

In 1960, Ms. Farenthold’s 3-year-old son Vincent bled to death after a nighttime fall that went unheeded. Like several of the Farenthold children, he suffered from von Willebrand disease, a clotting disorder.

“For years after that, if I heard a child cry, it would just tear me up,” she told Texas Monthly in 1992. Yet she was determined, she said, not to reprise her parents’ perpetual mourning.

She returned to work in 1965, becoming the director of legal aid for Nueces County, of which Corpus Christi is the seat. The class and racial inequities she encountered there, she said, would catalyze her political career.

“In our society we believe in attacking the powerless — punishing people for being poor and dependent and having to be supported by public funds, while powerful men are embezzling public money to make themselves rich,” Ms. Farenthold told The Guardian in 1973. “I want equal justice.”

Voters Sent a Woman

Her first House campaign was run on the slimmest of budgets. She refused to advertise on billboards in any case, because she believed they ravaged the landscape. Instead, her supporters fashioned campaign signs from coffin lids and affixed them to the roofs of cars.

An opponent’s sign, meanwhile, read “Send a man to do a man’s job.”

“No race could be as difficult as the one in ’68 was,” Ms. Farenthold told The Chicago Tribune in 1973, “because I was breaking the ice. No woman had run before in the south of Texas.”

Yet on the strength of her reformist populism — she decried the business interests that she felt were running state government — she won

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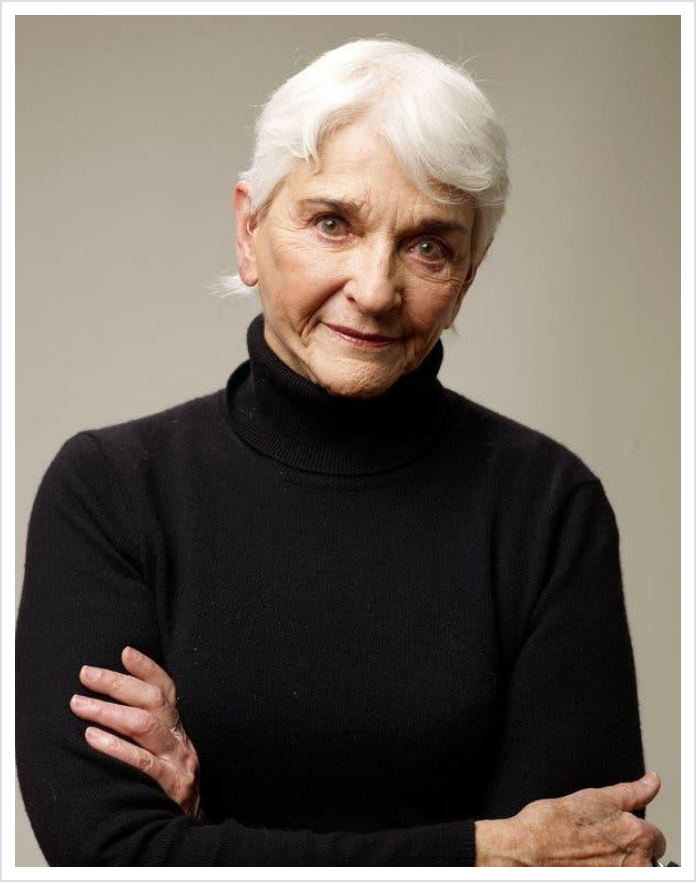

Ms. Farenthold in 2009. The Texas journalist Molly Ivins called her a “melancholy rebel.” She had reason to be.Credit...Matt Carr/Getty Images

In her second term, Ms. Farenthold became known as a member of the Dirty Thirty, a bipartisan reformist group of state legislators convened in response to the Sharpstown scandal of 1971-72. In that scandal, senior government officials — among them Gus F. Mutscher Jr., the Democratic speaker of the state House, and Governor Preston E. Smith, also a Democrat — were accused of being allowed to buy stock under highly favorable terms through a Houston banker, Frank Sharp, in exchange for political favors.

The Dirty Thirty (the name, proudly adopted, was an epithet hurled by an opponent) helped bring about greater transparency in state government proceedings, which had

often been held behind closed doors with capricious record-keeping and little formal debate.

In 1971, with Ms. Jordan and a House colleague, Rex Braun, Ms. Farenthold sponsored the Texas Equal Rights Amendment. The bill, which prohibited discrimination based on "sex, race, color, creed or national origin," passed in both chambers. It was approved by voters in 1972.

Ms. Farenthold unsuccessfully sought the governorship in 1972 and again in 1974. (The first woman to hold that post in Texas was Miriam A. Ferguson, in the 1920s and '30s; the second was Ann W. Richards, from 1991 to 1995.)

Ms. Farenthold earned 28 percent of the vote in the 1972 Democratic gubernatorial primary, finishing second to Dolph Briscoe Jr., a wealthy rancher, who failed to earn a majority. He prevailed in a runoff, went on to win the governorship and was re-elected in 1974.

Three days after Ms. Farenthold's runoff defeat, the body of her 32-year-old stepson, Randy Farenthold, from her husband's prior marriage, was found in the Gulf of Mexico near Corpus Christi. His hands were bound and a concrete block was chained round his neck.

The younger Mr. Farenthold, described in the press as a millionaire playboy, had been scheduled to testify in the federal trial of four associates alleged to have defrauded him of $100,000 in a money-laundering scheme reported to involve organized crime. (One of them, Bruce Bass III, was indicted in the murder in 1976 and received a 16-year sentence in a plea agreement the next year.)

Her Name in Nomination

In July 1972, at the Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach, Ms. Farenthold's name was placed in nomination for the vice presidency by Ms. Steinem. The nomination was seconded by Fannie Lou Hamer, the African-American civil-rights activist.

It was not the first time that a woman had been nominated for the vice presidency by a major party: Lena Springs, a Democrat, had her name placed in nomination in 1924, as did the Democrat Nellie Tayloe Ross four years later.

But Ms. Farenthold was the first to garner significant support, earning votes from more than 400 delegates, enough to finish second, ahead of notables like Birch Bayh, Jimmy Carter, Edward M. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy.

"That was the first time I was supported because I was a woman," she later said. "I had always been supported despite the fact."

(The winner was Thomas F. Eagleton, who would step down as George S. McGovern's running mate after it was learned that he had been treated for depression. He was replaced by R. Sargent Shriver Jr.)

Ms. Farenthold left electoral politics after her 1974 gubernatorial loss.

"What I discovered," she told The Texas Observer in 2007, "was that political office was a life of constant moral compromise. And I didn't enter politics with the purpose of compromising my morality."

In 1976 she became the first woman to serve as president of Wells College, a small liberal-arts college, then for women only, in Aurora, N.Y. During her four-year tenure, she balanced its budget, expanded student recruitment and founded the Public Leadership Education Network , a national organization that prepares women for vital public-policy roles.

As if in fealty to her Texas roots, Ms. Farenthold also studied the feasibility of enriching Wells's coffers by tapping the vast reserves of natural gas that lay beneath the campus. In late 1980, after she had left, Wells College heeded her recommendation: It drilled — and struck gas.

Returning to Texas, she practiced law in Houston and taught at the University of Houston and at Texas Southern University, a historically Black institution in the city.

In 1989, her youngest child, Jimmy, disappeared, at 33 . Jimmy, who was Vincent's identical twin, was said never to have gotten over his brother's death; by the time he was a young man he was addicted to drugs and drifting around Texas. Despite extensive searches, he was never found and is presumed dead. (The family held a funeral for him in 2005.)

Ms. Farenthold's marriage ended in divorce. She is survived by her son George Farenthold II, who said the cause of death was Parkinson's disease; another son, Dudley; a daughter, Emilie C. Farenthold; a sister, Genevieve Hearon; three grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and a step-grandson, Blake, the son of Randy Farenthold. A younger brother, Dudley Tarlton, was killed in a helicopter crash in 2003.

(Blake Farenthold is a former Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas who did not seek re-election in 2018 after it was revealed that he had paid $84,000 of taxpayers' money to settle a sexual harassment suit against him.)

Ms. Farenthold's many laurels include a lifetime achievement award, named for Ms. Ivins , from the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas.

Her work in later years included agitating for gay rights and against South African apartheid, the Iraq War and the torture of detainees at the United States military prison at Guantánamo Bay. She served as chair of the Institute for Policy Studies, a progressive think tank in Washington, and as a human-rights observer in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Iraq and elsewhere.

There remained much to do — enough for a lifetime, as Ms. Farenthold made plain in a 2009 public-television interview.

"I've always said," she declared, "on the way to my funeral, if we passed a demonstration, I'll probably jump out."