



TOUCHING HISTORY

Gene Krane

Jack Hightower's collection combines two of his main interests: books and politics. As for his love of books, Hightower said that might be genetic. "My father prized his books and read a lot. As a young man, I remember asking for books when it was time for gift-giving." He continued, "One of the first ones I asked for and received was *Our Presidents at a Glance*." Over the years, that love of books has grown, and Hightower estimates that he has now gathered hundreds. His collection has grown so large, in fact, that his wife says that he belongs to the book-of-the-day club. Many of the volumes that Hightower has in his library are signed by either the author or the subject.

So if the love of books was in his blood, could one assume that the interest in politics was also genetic? "I'm less sure of that," laughed Hightower, who was elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1952, the Texas Senate in 1964, and who served five successive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, after first winning in 1974. As he offered a story to explain his love of politics, Hightower pointed to a photograph of a handsome man on the wall:

"While I was in Congress, my daughter became curious about her eligibility in a historical organization, so I told her I'd do some research. I went into some old papers that had belonged to my father," Hightower said. "I found a handwritten letter addressed to a woman I

knew as his aunt, signed by a man who described himself as her uncle. The letter told about his grandfather who had been a member of Congress. Well, that just stopped me cold and opened my eyes wide! Even though my father often shared stories

of our family, I had never heard that I had an ancestor who was a member of Congress." Hightower was able to discover that his Congressional relative was Richard Stanford, who represented an area of North Carolina from 1796-1816; his photograph now hangs proudly in Hightower's office. "I found out that Stanford succeeded his father-in-law, who was my fourth great-grandfather, a member of the Third Congress that met in Philadelphia. So all these years I've been in politics, and I've never known I

had that in my background. So maybe that's genetic too!"

Hightower's two loves, books and politics, converged in 1953 when he was in the Texas Legislature. While visiting an Austin bookstore, he came across a leather-bound book that was signed "E.M. Pease" (Texas governor 1853-1857, 1867-1869). "I paid \$10 for it, thought it was pretty interesting, and from that point on started looking for other signed books," said Hightower. Today, his gubernatorial collection of more than 200 books includes volumes signed by, among others, O.M. Roberts (governor 1879-1883); Richard Coke (governor 1874-1876); and the current state leader Rick Perry. Another book is



from the library of Governor James S. Hogg (1891-1895) when he practiced in Tyler.

Full of stories that a long career in politics brings, Hightower told how another prized book from his governor's collection was acquired, "When I was in Congress, we lived in the north Texas town of Vernon, and I returned there from Washington every weekend. One Saturday, I saw a large crowd gathered in front of an old house, and knowing that the elderly couple who lived there had recently died, I figured that there was an estate sale in progress. After parking the car, I walked up, and the auctioneer was selling boxes of books. I greeted someone at that moment with the wave of my hand, and the next thing I knew, the auctioneer says, 'Sold to Congressman Hightower for \$1!' Everyone laughed, and for a dollar, I figured I'd go along with that joke.

"So I took my box home and began to unload it, discovering that it was filled with old *Reader's Digest* magazines. At the bottom of the box, though, I found an old, thick book; the covers were gone, but the spine was there. I opened it up, and found it was a Government Printing House Publication from the 1880s about the U.S. territories. Across the top of the front page was written, "J.W. Throckmorton," who I knew to be a Texas governor. Well, I slapped that page on my copier machine and sent the copy down to the state library to determine if the signature was authentic, and it was. So for \$1, quite by incredible luck, I had acquired the one item in that estate sale that was of interest to me – a signed book by Texas Governor J.W. Throckmorton."

While his signed Texas books are a centerpiece of his collection, Hightower says it is his presidential books that are probably his favorites. Thirty-one of those volumes contain the signatures of the men who have led this country, including some of

whom Hightower has worked alongside of in Washington. "I've been lucky through the opportunities that my career has afforded me to obtain books that were inscribed to me by many presidents, including Johnson, Carter, Ford, Nixon, Bush, and Reagan."

"My Lincoln collection alone probably numbers close to 200," says Hightower. "I am a great admirer of President Lincoln, and my pursuit has not been an effort to collect the books that Lincoln owned, but the books about Lincoln that I want." One of Hightower's most prized possessions in that grouping is a book signed by Lincoln's grandson, who died when he was 14, and who was the last male progeny of the president. Also included in that collection is another book signed by William H. Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield, Illinois.



Photo: III, James G. Dougherty, Austin, Texas

In room after room, Hightower displays works signed by other national and international figures: Winston Churchill, Indira Ghandi, John Glenn, Mikhail Gorbachev, General John J. Pershing, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, to name a few. Explaining his interest in signed books, Hightower explains, "If you have an autograph of a person on a card or a piece of stationery, it will eventually fade, but when the signature is inside of a book, it's always protected. Besides, I like knowing that at one time or another, the person who signed the book held it in their hands. This gives us a chance today to touch history."

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