

Archive | NHPRC Women in Alabama Politics 1PHWXSHASHQJC55FE30G1T2GHM

DULCIE LAWRENCE: When the results are in from the Alabama primary election today, there will have been 29 delegates elected to the National Democratic Convention in Miami. Alabama hasn't received much national attention because I think it's been assumed that the delegates pledged to George Wallace would be a shoo-in.

Well, not so, says Mrs. Louise Moody Shields, a 25-year-old woman who is one of about 200 candidates running for those 29 delegate slots. She represents the 16th district in the city of Tuscaloosa, where my husband and I spent part of a spring vacation last month.

Not so very long ago, Louise Shields would have maybe been called a Southern Belle. Driving around Tuscaloosa, you see her picture smiling down from billboards. And when you meet her, you learn that she attended private schools and the University of Alabama, is married to a radical young law student, and comes from a long and prominent line of Native Alabamians, as they call themselves. I remarked that it was strange for a native Minnesotan to find herself in a place where you had to mount a public campaign to run for delegate.

LOUISE SHIELDS: This is the first time there's ever been a real election for this position in Alabama. The reason that-- well, one of the reasons that the Alabama State Democratic Party is interested in conforming with the McGovern-Fraser reform standards is because they're fighting George Wallace for control of the state party structure.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: Both Mrs. Shields and political analyst Milo Dacon, who writes in the *Atlanta Constitution* this week, say that Wallace's hand-picked National Convention delegates really have been running scared against the so-called party loyalists, of whom Mrs. Shields is one. She's supporting George McGovern. In his own state, Wallace is said to be less popular than any other Southern state. One factor that's making it hard for Wallace are recently redrawn districts which combine some rural areas with less pro-Wallace urban areas.

LOUISE SHIELDS: They, several months, ago divided the state into districts that supposedly represent an equal number of people. Because they wanted to meet the guidelines that the delegation would reflect your Black population, they're districts that are clearly Black majority districts. Now, I think one of the reasons there's a real race for the position this year is because of the various moves that were sponsored regionally and nationally by different people.

I went to a conference in Nashville, called Women's Delegate Selection Conference or something like that. The point being to encourage and promote women candidates.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: Was that a branch of the National Women's Political Caucus, or wasn't it?

LOUISE SHIELDS: They were involved in it. They were very much involved in it. But it was a different-- it was a coalition of various organizations. Several of us went. Seven or eight from Tuscaloosa went. And we decided that we wanted a woman to run in this district.

And what happened was that some people were too busy and some people-- and I said that I was willing to put some money into it. And I have a-- being a native Tuscaloosan, I have some sort of base to work from. So it sort of fell to me.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: What is the story about women in politics in Alabama? It seems to me that it might be a little different from what it is in Minnesota.

LOUISE SHIELDS: I'm told that it is different from most of the rest of the country. But a lot of people believe that Alabamians are quicker to vote for a woman than other people.

DULCIE Do you think that's true? You don't have this-- in other words, you don't have a stigma against women in politics

LAWRENCE: here.

LOUISE Well, there's only one woman in Alabama legislature right now. And now that is like other state legislatures. So

SHIELDS: that you can't-- it's hard to say. But having had a woman governor, I think that had something to do with. This woman was the governor, and she did run the state, pretty much.

DULCIE I was talking to someone this morning who said she was just a figurehead, that George was running the state.

LAWRENCE:

LOUISE That's true. But she did a lot of official representation for the state. She could get in front of a television camera

SHIELDS: and hold her own. And I'm sure she was besieged with people, like any governor is, saying, do this, do that. I want this contract with the state. This is what-- you know, you've got to go visit the mental institutions. They're in terrible shape. And I think she handled it very well. And I think she had something to do with some decisions that were made, which were good.

DULCIE Do women in Alabama go into politics in order to affect some kind of change in the social structure, or do they do

LAWRENCE: it for the same reasons that men do?

LOUISE I think, generally, they do it for the same reasons men do. I do think that Lurleen Wallace, here again, because

SHIELDS: she was a woman, I think, that had the most to do with why she did get so involved with the mental institutions. Now, because George Wallace had most of the power while she was governor, the legislature continued to fail in its obligation to provide enough money to run the mental institutions of Alabama.

But she visited all of them. She visited each hospital several times. Every time she went, she took reporters with her. And I think she might have provided some sort of impetus to the changes that are happening right now in Alabama about state-- the mental hospitals. She focused some interest on those institutions that no male governor had done before that.

DULCIE I asked Mrs. Shields how the Fraser-McGovern guidelines were going to affect the Alabama delegation.

LAWRENCE:

What if the delegation doesn't elect 50% women or doesn't collect enough Black people that are representative of the population of Alabama? What then? Will they be challenged?

LOUISE The Alabama delegation is going to be challenged at any rate by the National Democratic Party of Alabama. But I

SHIELDS: think that it's going to be a difficult challenge because in Alabama, as I said before, in almost every district, it's a real contest. I mean, this will be a person elected of the people, by the people, and it's hard to overturn that.

DULCIE I know. Do the Black people take any interest in this Alabama delegation?

LAWRENCE:

LOUISE Yes, they do. There's--

SHIELDS:

DULCIE How many Black people are running for delegates?

LAWRENCE:

LOUISE SHIELDS: I'm not sure about that. But I do know that they took part of the city of Tuscaloosa and put several of the major Black voting boxes into a district with a Black majority. I think that the state party leaders were pushing the panic button shortly before the deadline for qualifying because the Black people had not qualified in every district. But they scurried around and encouraged some people. And I think the delegation could be representative.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: And if it were representative, then there would be no basis for the challenge.

LOUISE SHIELDS: I think that's right. I don't quite understand the NDPA strategy, although I, as well as many other people who are now involved in the Democratic primary, have supported the NDPA, and probably will continue to do so.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: Well, Louise, you've been involved in Women's Political Caucus here. And I keep getting back to that because this is what interests us in Minnesota a lot. But you have such a different makeup of your women here. Do Black women take part in this? Are they beginning to take part in political process as women?

LOUISE SHIELDS: Greene County, where there's a Black sheriff and a Black probate judge, there's also a Black woman who ran for an office and was elected on that same slate. Joan Cashin is a very influential woman in Alabama, both with white and Black and men and women.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: You hear about the husband a lot.

LOUISE SHIELDS: But women just aren't as visible. They aren't any more visible here in elected positions than they are anywhere else.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: And Black women are not either.

LOUISE SHIELDS: No. In fact, no. And as far as the Alabama Women's Political Caucus, I don't think there'll be a great many Black women who will be involved. There will be some. They'll tend to be urban Black women.

DULCIE LAWRENCE: Are Alabama women different from northern women in the way that they look at their role?

LOUISE SHIELDS: Lots of people have been trying to figure that out for a long time. I went to-- I spent a year in the state of New York and visited my roommate's family frequently. And one of the things that struck me was how hard her mother worked in the home.

They had no servants, whereas a woman in Alabama whose husband had that same income would have servants. And part of her role as a woman would be how well she organized and got her servants to work. So that is different. However, that in the South is becoming less and less frequent. Black people are refusing to work for those kinds of wages anymore. So that's going out. I think that's dying.

I also think that Southern women who have money, Southern women of means, may see themselves as hostesses before they see themselves as anything else. And that, to me, seems to be different somehow. It's hard to say how long that will last. I think the impact of television and the impact of travel is just making us all so much closer, although we still have our Southern accents.

DULCIE

That was Louise Moody Shields, a young Alabama woman who is running today as a delegate to the Democratic

LAWRENCE:

National Convention talking about Alabama politics and the Southern woman. This is Dulcie Lawrence.