

Fred Harris. *Does People Do It? A Memoir*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), pp. 226. \$18.21
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The folksy title comes from Harris's favorite uncle, Ralph, who would ask the question, "Does People Do It?" whenever he faced a challenge. "If people does it, I can do it," he would say. Harris adopted that quotation as a guiding philosophy for his extremely rich, and ever-changing life. Richard Lowitt's biography of Harris painted a portrait of a man who never fully lived up to his potential; in contrast, Harris writes a narrative of triumph, arguing that he has been able to succeed in several major careers including as a practicing attorney, an elected politician, a political activist, the leader of a major policial party, an academician, and most recently a writer. As he says, one career "has led to the other. They've sometimes overlapped. And I've enjoyed them all" (p. 214).

Fred Harris is a national treasure. I've been fascinated by the life of the former U.S. Senator from Oklahoma ever since hearing him present at one of the early OPSA conferences. Five years ago, I wrote a book review of Richard Lowitt's biography, *Fred Harris: His Journey from Liberalism to Populism*. Overall, I enjoyed that book very much and learned a great deal about the man. My only significant criticism was that Lowitt very deliberately avoided speaking or corresponding

with Harris directly. Lowitt's strategy was to not be biased by the man himself. I likened that notion to "Walter Isaacson writing his biography of Benjamin Franklin and turning down the chance to travel back in time to interview Ben in person" (2003, p. 111). Lowitt thought that he could more fairly represent the story of Harris's life by just taking advantage of available written records. My colleagues in our history department assure me that Lowitt followed an accepted professional convention. I remain skeptical. The good news is that Fred Harris's memoir greatly complements Lowitt's treatment. Furthermore, *Does People Do it?* is actually a pleasure to read. Harris is a gifted writer and is noted for his works of fiction. His first novel *Coyote Revenge* even won the prestigious Nero Wolfe Award.

Harris's biography draws upon some of his previously published works, which creates an interesting dynamic. I noticed it most closely when he talks with the freshness of a recent memory about his first wife, Ladonna, and their adventures on the campaign trails. It wasn't until the final chapters, that I even realized that not only had Harris ended his thirty-three-year marriage with LaDonna but that he had been married for over twenty-five years to his "new" wife, Margaret Ellison. The book is filled with similarly revealing insights from an eyewitness to history coupled with the wisdom and perspective of a mature political scholar.

Along the way, Harris comes into contact with a host of characters—many of whom are historically significant. My favorite chapters are the ones that cover his relationships with Lyndon B. Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, and Robert Kennedy. Reading these sections, you begin to understand the political tightrope that Harris had to walk having befriended these powerful political rivals. Harris reminds us that *Time* magazine once reported that he "was the only person in Washington who could have breakfast with President Lyndon Johnson, lunch with Vice President Hubert Humphrey, and dinner with Senator Robert Kennedy" (p. 96). At one point Harris and his wife "were weekend guests of Robert and Ethel Kennedy at their Hyannis Port home" when President Johnson called simply to ask, "How're you doing, Fred?" After some small talk they hang up. As Harris relates, "Johnson clearly wanted nothing in particular except to let me know that he knew where I was." His description of the "Johnson Treatment" confirms the legend in classic fashion. After seeing the president engage Oklahoma's senior U.S.

Senator at the time, Mike Monroney, with a “rough and overbearing” manner, Harris thought to himself, “I would never let anybody talk to me like that, not even the president of the United States.” Harris later learned “that the Johnson Treatment involved varying approaches for different people.” Johnson “seemed to have an intuitive feel for human nature and for what would work with whom. He was like an effective basketball coach, say, who knows which players he can motivate only by yelling at them and chewing them out publicly and which ones he needs to throw an arm around and talk to gently, mixing a little quiet criticism with a lot of warm encouragement” (p. 89).

The most fascinating part of the book is Harris speculating on President Nixon actually authorizing the Watergate burglary. That part was never proven, and Nixon was driven out of office more for the lies and cover-up. What I had never heard before was that Harris experienced three different incidents which foreshadowed the actual break-in of the Watergate Hotel. The first was during his first presidential campaign when his press secretary “found her desk drawers had been rifled and left open” with files and papers scattered around (p. 176). Two years later when he had left the Senate and was working a brief stint as an attorney, he found his locked file cabinet opened and the only thing taken was the records that documented his 1972 federal income tax return. The third such incident occurred around the same time. He had returned to his office in the newly formed “New Populist Action” organization. Someone had opened the office safe and spread papers “out on the floor in front of it like a fan, as if someone had arranged them to be photographed” (p. 176). Harris came to believe that “the Nixon crowd” was “responsible for these odd break-ins” and it was as if they wanted Harris to know that they had information on him or could get it. The former senator also took credit for advising Howard Dean’s attorney to tell his client to tell the truth which Dean ultimately did.

Senator Harris has done a great service in writing his personal history which also coincides with a significant time in American history. As he says, “making history and writing it do not have to be mutually exclusive” (p. 209). I highly recommend this book for those interested in Oklahoma state politics and especially those interested in following the life of an Oklahoman on the national stage. Fred Harris ran for the presidency twice, and he might have succeeded in his second attempt if

his rivals had not so quickly adopted his increasingly popular ideas as their own. He has led the life of a renaissance man. He is a good role model for everyone including this state's political scientists.

Brett S. Sharp
University of Central Oklahoma

References

Sharp, B. S. 2003. "Fred Harris: His Journey from Liberalism to Populism by Richard Lowitt." Book review. *Oklahoma Politics* (12): 109-111.