Private Trials of a Public Man: Jimmie Allred and the Vicissitudes of Family

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By L. Patrick Hughes*

Not unlike the blue northers that assaulted his native Montague County with little or no warning, Jimmie Allred exploded onto the political scene in 1930. His ascent was breathtakingly rapid. After just four years as Texas' crusading attorney general, Texas' voters sent the young Northeast Texas to the Governor's Mansion. Once there, he aggressively sought and procured federal monies to cope with Depression-era conditions, spearheaded reform efforts to modernize state government, and presided over Texas' Centennial celebration. In Mid-1938 he accepted an appointment to a federal judgeship, which offered both financial security and life tenure. However, he voluntarily relinquished that security to wage an unsuccessful effort to oust isolationist W. Lee O'Daniel from the United States Senate in 1942. Despite the electoral defeat, Allred remained a political force through decade's end—rallying loyalists against the "Texas Regulars" in 1944, actively campaigning for gubernatorial hopeful Homer Price Rainey in 1946, and he helped to craft and implement Lyndon Johnson's successful senatorial bid in 1948. Another presidential appointment returned Allred to the federal bench in 1950 and brought an end to his active participation in the political arena.

For two decades, Allred lived a public life in the glare of a spotlight, one that saw numerous political and governmental accomplishments. Quite naturally, his public life has been the focus of the academic reports, theses, and dissertations that form the existing body of Allred historical literature. It is, however, the heretofore-ignored trials and tragedies of Jimmie Allred's private life that make such feats all the more remarkable from the human perspective.

In the best of times, for Allred family was a healing balm, a refuge from the ceaseless tensions of his public existence. But all too often, Allred returned home only to deal with gut-wrenching crises: medical emergencies and tragic automobile accidents, dysfunctional relationships necessitating physical separation and constant mediation, and the protracted psychological struggles of a parent, a mate, and in-laws. The manner in which Allred dealt with these vicissitudes of family reveals much about the man. It is, in the end, a story of quite phenomenal human caring and endurance.

While denied many of the advantages of his political contemporaries, Jimmie Allred benefitted from the riches of family. Born March 29, 1899 on a small produce farm north of Bowie, he was the fourth of the seven surviving children of Renne and Mary Magdalene Henson Allred. His elder siblings, all boys, included Oran, Ben, and Raymond. A younger brother, Renne, Jr., arrived two years later, followed thereafter by sisters Maurine and Hazel. Through the decades, theirs proved a remarkably tight-knit clan. Whether clawing their way up from near poverty, providing the opportunity of education for each child, or aiding one another's efforts in the job market, the

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Allreds approached opportunities and challenges as a team. Never was family solidarity more apparent than on those occasions when Jimmie ran for statewide office. Politically active lawyers themselves, the four brothers helped formulate strategy, monitored conditions in their individual locales, and spoke on the candidate’s behalf at every opportunity. As noted years later by Ralph Yarborough, they were a nearly unstoppable force. Opponents simply found themselves overrun by Allreds.

The family young Allred began after he married Joe Betsy Miller of Wichita Falls in 1927 was no less a political asset. The recent graduate of Southern Methodist University seemed, despite her almost painful shyness, an ideal mate. A classically trained pianist six years his junior, she was strikingly attractive, like Allred an active churchgoer, and exuded culture which complimented his outdoorsman’s persona. Joe Betsy’s parents, Claude and Daisie Miller, welcomed Jimmie into their family, treating him through the years more as son than son-in-law. Indeed, they were, in many ways, closer to Jimmie than either Claude, Jr. or Tom Mike, Joe Betsy’s brothers. The newlyweds adored one another and rejoiced in the arrival of sons James, Jr., known as “Jim Boy,” in 1929, David in 1933, and Sam Houston in 1937.

Occupying center stage in Texas politics between 1935 and 1939, the state’s first family radiated youth and vitality. Allred, the nation’s youngest governor, was an activist chief executive, garnering both attention and praise for his efforts to reform state government. He gained further national visibility as he promoted the state during its Centennial Celebration in 1936. The United States Junior Chamber of Commerce named him “Young Man of the Year” and his political prospects appeared limitless. Joe Betsy proved a gracious hostess at the Executive Mansion, entertaining ordinary citizens, lawmakers, and visiting dignitaries. When her crowded official calendar allowed, the diminutive first lady immersed herself in local cultural affairs, such as the founding of the Austin Symphony, and as an active member of Central Christian Church in the capital city. On Saturdays and Sundays, the Allreds spent as much time as possible with their young sons, often riding horses at Camp Mabry, swimming at Barton Springs, or picnicking at one of Austin’s numerous municipal parks.

Life for the extended Allred family, however, was not without crisis and tragedy. Two days following his brother’s inauguration in January 1935, Renne, Jr. awoke in the middle of the night unable to move his legs. Governor Allred flew immediately to Tyler to be at his brother’s bedside. Testing revealed osteomyelitis of the spine, a condition doctors informed the family was almost certainly fatal. If through some miracle the patient survived, they warned, he would never walk again. With encouragement and financial support from Jimmie, O.H., Ben, and Raymond, the youngest Allred son fought for life. His weight plummeted from 175 to just over 90 pounds over the course of his nine-month hospitalization, while morphine and codeine dulled the pain as he first struggled to his feet and then learned to walk all over again. To the astonish-
ment of his physicians, Renne made a complete recovery, although it would be years before he put his law practice and finances back on a solid footing. 2

Even as the Allred family coped with Renne’s medical crisis, it joyously celebrated its youngest member’s marriage. As the baby of the family, Hazel occupied a special place in Jimmie’s heart. He was particularly proud to make the Governor’s Mansion available for her wedding to W. B. Stokes, Jr. in March 1935. Tragedy struck once more but one short year later when Hazel became the victim of a senseless traffic accident outside Mineola. Truck driver Bob Johnson, transporting gasoline from the East Texas oil field to Dallas at $3 a trip for the F. and E. Company and making his second trip of the day, fell asleep at the wheel, lost control of his vehicle, and forced the Stokes’ automobile into a concrete bridge pillar. Hazel died in her injured husband’s arms before reaching the nearest hospital.

While he and family members grieved Hazel’s passing, Governor Allred sought to bring something positive out of the tragedy. He forgave Johnson, who readily admitted his culpability, pled guilty to negligent homicide, and received sixty days in jail along with a $500 fine. Magnanimously, Governor Allred remanded the remainder of Johnson’s sentence and fine. In his remission proclamation, Allred wrote:

“While I cannot condone the driving of a truck by a man who falls asleep and thus loses possession of his faculties, I am of the opinion that the system whereby he was compelled to work for such long hours for such miserably low pay is really at fault and primarily responsible for this lamentable tragedy. To further confine him in the county jail will not bring back the dead to her sorrowing relatives or comfort them in their grief, nor will the ends of justice be furthered thereby.”

Over the next twelve months, Allred once again used his personal tragedy for a positive result when he called attention to the problem of highway and traffic safety to both the public and the legislature. He requested that the legislature enact stronger state regulation of trucking, double the numbers of Department of Public Safety officers, and he also called appealed for the creation of the Texas Safety Association. Hazel’s death no doubt saved the lives of other Texas motorists. 3

Renne, Jr.’s illness and Hazel’s death notwithstanding, most citizens of the state would have described the Allreds as a family with few problems. However, there were tribulations that only the family and a small circle of intimates were ever aware. Research fails to indicate whether or not reporters of the state’s newspapers and radio stations knew of Allred’s difficulties. If so, they chose not to report them to their readers and listeners. It was, quite simply, a different era. Before television, round-the-clock news broadcasting, and journalistic feeding frenzies, the Allreds dealt with such matters in private. Each situation, nonetheless, was a major element in the life of one of the state’s leading public officials and deserves closer scrutiny. Jimmie Allred’s response to the problems of family reveals much about his character, his patience, and his unbreakable commitment to those he held most dear.
One such crisis came in early 1937 when long-simmering problems in Bowie between Renne and Mary Magdalene convinced family members that a physical separation of their parents had become an unpleasant necessity. The head of the Allred clan distrusted doctors and had for decades suffered from deteriorating health. His maladies were many: pellagra, prostate difficulties, repeated skin cancers, crippling bouts of insomnia, severe intestinal cramping, and hardening of the arteries. Senile dementia now produced delusional fears that his wife of over four decades was systematically poisoning him to death. The children intervened in March 1937 when their father threatened their mother with physical violence. Raymond and Renne, Jr. removed Mary Magdalene from Bowie, while Jimmie persuaded his father to return with him to Austin and the Governor's Mansion. With the exception of one brief reunion, the governor's parents never again shared a residence.4

Doting on newborn grandson Sam Houston and puttering around the Onion Creek fishing camp (which Jimmie purchased) kept Renne occupied and distracted, but not fully free from the delusions of his illness. Within months, the return of "wakeful spells" along with nightly stomach pains left him testy and suspicious. Though himself a committed dry when it came to alcohol, Governor Allred, in consultation with Renne's physician, convinced his father to drink several beers each evening, all in hope that it would help him sleep more soundly. It worked, if at all, only marginally.

Renne's presence in the Governor's Mansion added to the demands upon the governor's time and energy, but Allred shouldered the responsibility without complaint. To his mother, Governor Allred counseled acceptance and patience. "Rather than unduly worry about it, we should be happy that I am in position to take care of him in the manner I am. He needs to be looked after... We must bear in mind that he won't be with us much longer, and we owe it to him to do everything we can to make his last days as comfortable and happy as possible."3

Allred's father's condition did not improve, and the situation became increasingly tense for both father and son. The elder Allred pleaded with family members that he be allowed to return to Bowie and Mary Magdalene, something attending physicians counseled the governor could well result in tragedy. Renne, Sr.'s frustration, as well as his delusions, grew worse. By 1938, the senior Allred complained of being a virtual prisoner in the Executive Mansion and imagined a sinister conspiracy existed between Jimmie's physicians, security guards, and cooks to murder him. In vain, Governor Allred repeatedly sought to convince his father that such fears were irrational and that the threats existing only in his troubled mind. Doctors warned the governor that Renne's continued presence in the mansion constituted an imminent danger to Joe Betsy and the children, Jimmie resisted the alternative of institutionalization throughout the spring and summer.5 Only in October, when his father brandished a knife and stole a security guard's revolver, did Governor Allred yield to the painful duty that faced him. He had no choice but to commit Renne to Brown's Sanitarium in Austin for treatment.7 Doctors hoped
forced rest and Vitamin B6 injections would alleviate both the elder Allred's pellagra and mental distress, but the treatment seemed to only heighten Renee's paranoia. To wife Maggie he wrote:

"My God, my God—Save my life. I have appealed many times but no word from you. I'm in the Death room where they will hold me and pump the deadly poison in my veins before Sunday. I have asked for a preacher and even he has been denied me. They are poisoning me by degree. Now I can feel it in my flesh. They may get by for a while but the time will come when all connected with this deliberate cold-blooded murder [will be revealed]."

Despite such delusions, his stay at Brown's was exceedingly brief. Pressed financially and convinced by Renee's promises of better behavior, Jimmie welcomed his father back to the official residence in mid-November. Renee was now a permanent member of the Allred household, joining in its relocation to Houston early the following year when his son's gubernatorial responsibilities ended and those of the judiciary began.

A vicious cycle characterized the family patriarch's care and management over the next eighteen months. In periods of stability, he lavished attention on his grandchildren and tended the lush shrubbery at the Allred's rented home in an exclusive Montrose neighborhood. Such periods of relative tranquility invariably gave way without warning to months of paranoid irrationality. During such episodes, Renee refused both food at the Allred table and prescribed medication fearing he might be poisoned. He pled with his wife for release from what he described as "the Horrors of Hades": "I know there has [sic] been attempts on my life...it will be nothing short of a conspired, premeditated, cold blooded murder." Sleepless nights spent pacing back and forth across his bedroom floor like a caged animal robbed him of needed rest and heightened his anxieties. Gripped by unreasoned fear, the old man was never without a sharpened rasp file to defend himself from assault. The cycle would start anew following shouted confrontations between father and son in which Jimmie, his patience sorely tested, threatened institutionalization if the situation did not improve.

Following several months of relative calm, Judge Allred reluctantly acquiesced in August 1940 to his father's return to Bowie and Mary Magdalene. The attempted reconciliation, that Jimmie perhaps naively hoped would allay Renee's fears, lasted but four months. His delusions of poisoning once again focused upon his wife and Renee became unmanageable. He warned Mary Magdalene and the children that he would kill anyone who attempted to remove him from his home and slept with a large pruning knife at the foot of his bed and another on the nightstand within easy reach. The situation by December 1940 became impossible to any longer ignore. With remorse, O. H., Ben, Raymond, Jimmie, and Renee, Jr. all agreed commitment was the only alternative. When their father pulled a knife and slashed at Raymond during the removal process, any doubts as to the wisdom of their decision vanished.

Renne's forcible commitment to the Austin State Hospital took an emo-
tional toll on all involved over the next two and one-half years. Predictably, he lashed out at family members, bewailing the conspiracy of loved ones that in his mind had without justification kidnapped and abandoned him in Austin. Judge Allred's assurances that his father would be welcomed back to his Houston home following treatment failed to ease the feelings of persecution that dominated Renne's days and nights. "This life is next to no life," wrote father to son, "and, if it wasn't for the transition, I'd gladly accept and call it a day and quit."

"It would take a Demosthenese [sic], yeu a Solomon with all their wisdom and mastery of words to describe [sic] what I have went through both body and mind and they would find themselves far afield should they attempt to interpret my dreams. I have read Dante's picture of Hell and I have thought it might be a blessing compared to my suffering."

At times, Renee's mental condition and behavior were more than even his seemingly ever-patient son could handle.

"I don't want to come to see you if you are going to continue to accuse me as you have in the past. I have tried to be very faithful about writing to you. I dare say you have received more letters from me than from all the other boys put together. All the reward I have received from trying to help you since you first got into this mental illness is for you to accuse me and make intimations against me. This breaks my heart...

Consultations with his father's doctors deepened Judge Allred's despair. "His brain," wrote Dr. Rennie Wright after a visit in April 1941, "was afire with bitter, acrid hallucinations of misunderstanding, persecutions, victimized [sic], etc." Recovery for the seventy-six year-old patient, physicians and hospital personnel wrote, was impossible; his physical deterioration was simply too far advanced to reverse.

Under the circumstances, Jimmie did the best he could by his father. An account he established at Moore's Drug Store in Austin kept his father in beer and his favorite Max Sellers cigars. He wrote regularly and visited as his hectic schedule allowed. Jimmie took comfort where he could, in his father's enjoyment of poker and checkers games with fellow patients and attendance at softball games held regularly on the hospital grounds. When Renne demanded to sleep with the light on in order to ward away the demons, refused hospital food for fear of poisoning, resisted x-ray treatments for recurrent skin cancers, and pled that he be allowed to go to South America where he might be free, Judge Allred fell back on his hope that things might yet improve with sufficient time.

That time came in May 1943. Renne's condition improved to the point that his paranoia was less severe than in times past. The possibility of violence appeared increasingly remote. He repeatedly expressed the desire to join Jimmie, Joe Betsy, and his three grandsons in Houston and promised to behave himself. Jimmie's circumstances had changed as well since 1940. His resignation from the federal bench, failed attempt to unseat Senator W. Lee O'Daniel, and entry into the private practice of law meant fewer trips away from home and greater time to assist in his father's day-to-day care. Accordingly, Jimmie
brought Renne to the Allred's new residence in Bellaire, where he lived the remainder of his life. Though calmer and more rational than in previous periods, only death in 1949 brought the octogenarian final release from his mental and physical torments.20

While of a completely different nature, Joe Betsy’s psychological struggles further complicated the already complex dynamics of Jimmie Allred’s private life. His wife’s fragile health and susceptibility to depression first surfaced in 1932 when a difficult pregnancy ending in miscarriage and deprived the Allreds of the baby daughter for which they yearned. Understandably, the young couple was devastated. Jimmie coped by throwing himself ever more deeply into his duties as attorney general, focusing on his sweeping antitrust suit against seventeen of the state’s largest oil companies. His wife’s recovery was more problematic. Impatient with the bed rest prescribed by doctors and obsessed with her duties as parent and spouse, Joe Betsy cut short her convalescence and plunged prematurely back into her normal routine. She would overtax herself and collapse from exhaustion, forced back to bed for days and sometimes weeks at a time before the cycle began anew.21 Her pregnancy with son David the following fall complicated the situation. Confronted with Joe Betsy’s reluctance to get adequate rest and her gloomy despondency when she did, Jimmie turned for assistance to his mother-in-law Daisie Miller.22 Daisie watched over her daughter and helped manage the Austin household during much of the third trimester, and family members celebrated with relief David’s arrival in late November 1933.

Surprisingly, family correspondence reveals no such episodes during the gubernatorial years when demands upon Mrs. Allred’s time and energy were the greatest. Her problems returned with a vengeance in 1939 following the family’s departure from the Governor’s Mansion. Medical specialists provided treatment for a bewildering variety of conditions including mysterious infections, dental pain, sciatica, and the early onset of arthritis. Serum injections and three weeks of mineral water treatments at the Buie-Allen Hospital in Marlin, to which both husband and wife would return regularly over the next twenty years, had only minimal temporary effect. Jimmie was convinced that Joe Betsy’s physical complaints were legitimate, but he believed the underlying cause was her refusal to either limit her schedule of activities or get adequate daily rest. Equally troubling was Joe Betsy’s tendency to become morose when physically exhausted, fixating on problems both real and imagined. Admonitions that she take better care of herself fell upon deaf ears.23

Miller family tragedies the following year rocked Daisie and Joe Betsy’s world and created an emotional co-dependency between mother and daughter that forever altered the Allred home. First came word in March from far away Chicago that Thomas Miles Miller, youngest of Claude and Daisie’s children, had taken his own life. Still reeling from the sudden and inexplicable loss of their beloved “Tom Mike,” Joe Betsy and Daisie were further saddened when Claude, Jr. suffered a nervous breakdown and hospitalization in Wisconsin three months later. “Claudie,” as he was affectionately known to family mem-
bers, recovered completely with treatment and the passage of time, but Joe Betsy and Daisie did not.\textsuperscript{24}

Since the onset of her daughter’s physical ills, Daisie had been a frequent long-term visitor in the Allred home. She supervised and cared for Jim Boy, David, and Sam Houston, which eased the demands upon Joe Betsy’s time and energies. After Tom Mike’s death, David and Sam Houston frequently accompanied their Grandmother Miller when she returned to her home in Big Spring, remaining, hundreds of miles away from their parents, for up to six months at a time. Following Tom Mike’s suicide, Daisie plummeted into despair and became emotionally dependent on the children. Sam Houston in particular became the object of her affection, a substitute for her departed youngest child.\textsuperscript{25} When her son-in-law would begin to push for the child’s return, Daisie would plead her desperate need for him. In one such letter to Jimmie, Daisie wrote:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“I know you all are getting anxious to see him but please don’t take him away from me. You cannot know what it has meant to me to have him. I have tried so hard to carry on and not make my family unhappy, but there has never been any sorrow like this and the wound in my heart is just as deep as it was seven months ago.” “When I can’t sleep at night, it is such a comfort to hold his little hand, and feel like he couldn’t do without me.”}
\end{quote}

Lavished with the attention they craved that their mother was either unwilling or incapable of providing, the boys forged a unique and enduring bond with Daisie that survived to the end of her days. If, from her perspective, they became substitutes for Tom Mike, she became, from theirs, the caring and loving mother they lacked at home in Houston. Nearly sixty years later, Sam Houston stated: “Daisie showed me more about human kindness than any other woman I’ve every known, including her daughter, my mother.”\textsuperscript{26} Increasingly frustrated with arrangements robbing him of his sons, Jimmie endured their absence as best he could. To have done otherwise, he was convinced, would have shattered Daisie emotionally while simultaneously adding to Joe Betsy’s burdens and risk her fragile health.

School age brought Allred’s sons home to stay until their departure for college and career, but the tensions and dysfunction that had come to characterize his private life remained constant to the end of his days. Joe Betsy’s health issues, both physical and psychological, waxed and waned throughout the 1940s and 1950s but never ceased to be his greatest concern. Her increasing religious fanaticism became a never-ending source of friction. His insistence, as well as that of her physicians, that she limit her activities and husband her strength went unheeded whenever job responsibilities took him away from home. Given the opportunity, Joe Betsy would plunge ever more deeply into church activities, religious training programs, and revivals until, physically spent, she succumbed to exhaustion, arthritic pain, and emotional despair. At such times, she obsessed on family troubles such as Jim, Jr.’s troubled marriage, sinking ever deeper into the abyss of depression. Each episode required months of gentle care and loving reassurance to slowly return Joe Betsy to relative normality. Inexorably, the cycle began anew the next time Judge Allred’s court docket required his absence from home. For him, it was torture without end.
Only after his death in 1959 did doctors at long last successfully diagnose Joe Betsy's condition as manic-depressive disorder and stabilize her behavior.28

Over the course of his six decades, Jimmie Allred lived life both high on the mountaintops and deep in the valleys that constitute the human condition. His contributions as attorney general, governor, political activist, and two-time federal judge were both significant and enduring. It was, however, the challenges of family life that more completely tested the mettle of the man. Throughout, he displayed loyalty to and patience beyond measure with those he loved the most. He was a man of remarkable political talents who, under different circumstances, might well have scaled the political ladder to the United States Senate and perhaps beyond. More importantly to those most completely dependent upon him, Jimmie Allred was a man whose fidelity to family never faltered. Given a choice, it was almost certainly the legacy he would have chosen.

NOTES


James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, Feb. 20, 1939, letter. File: “Family and Personal Jan.-March 1939,” Box 2; James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, March 24, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, March 29, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Maurine Christian, June 25, 1939, letter, misfiled in File: “Family and Personal Jan.-June 1939.”; James V. Allred to Maurine Christian, March 31, 1939, letter, File: “April-July 1939.”; James V. Allred to Renne Allred, Jr., July 27, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Maurine Christian, July 27, 1939, letter.; O. H. Allred to Renne Allred, July 28, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Renne Allred, n.d. [but apparently Aug. 5, 1939], letter, File: “No Date – 1939.”; Mary M. Allred to James V. Allred, n.d., letter.; James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, Aug. 5, 1939, letter, File: “August-December 1939.”; Renne Allred to Mary M. Allred, Aug. 19, 1939, letter. (quotation); Renne Allred to James V. Allred, Aug. 22, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, Oct. 14, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, Oct. 23, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Mary M. Allred, Dec. 18, 1939, letter.; James V. Allred to Renne Allred, Jan. 31, 1941, letter, File: “Family and Personal (1941),” Box 3; James V. Allred to Maurine Christian, May 31, 1940, letter, File: “Christian, Mrs. T. J. (Maurine) Correspondence (1940-1942),” Box 5. See also James V. Allred to Renne, Allred, Jr., March 25, 1939, letter, File: “Family and Personal Jan-March 1939,” Box 2 in which Judge Allred vented his frustration with his father: “As you know, I have not only had troubles of the Governor’s office on my back, and your troubles also, but Dad has been a constant worry and strain on me. I have had him in my home for two years now ... During those two years, I have put him back and tried to try to get him over his crazy fears. I have had to shout and worry and the constant drain on me I have not only had troubles of the Governor’s office on my back, and your troubles also, but Dad has been a constant worry and strain on me. I have had him in my home for two years now ... During those two years, I have put him back and tried to try to get him over his crazy fears. I have had to shout and worry and the constant drain on me


5Daisie Miller to James V. Allred, "Thursday" [1940], File: "Miller, Mr. and Mrs. Claude Correspondence (1934, 1939-1940)," Box 5.

6Sam Houston Allred to L. Patrick Hughes, March 30, 2003, letter in author’s possession.

Allred, Dec. 22, 2002; Sam Houston Allred to L. Patrick Hughes, March 30, 2003; Sam Houston Allred to L. Patrick Hughes, April 9, 2003; L. Patrick Hughes to Sam Houston Allred, July 27, 2003; Sam Houston Allred to L. Patrick Hughes, Nov. 25, 2003.
