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FOUNDING THE DALLAS-FORT WORTH INTERREGIONAL AIRPORT: THE DALLAS PERSPECTIVE

by Mary Anne Norman and James Smallwood

The study of urban history is still in its infancy, and even in the modern age of air traffic, few studies highlight the historical development of the nation's "super" regional airports even though the existence of such facilities is crucial to continued regional and national development. Given the paucity of research in this field, an examination of the founding of the Dallas-Fort Worth Interregional Airport is warranted. This study will focus on the founding of the airport and highlight the "Dallas perspective" while attempting to answer the question of why a voting majority of Dallasites at first opposed the building of the new airport and approved it later.

Mentioning the word "airport" to the average Dallasite in the 1960s would have provoked a reaction in accordance with the connotation he attached to the word. The "AIRPORT," to a Dallasite, was Love Field, and most held this particular field in special regard. The resident of Dallas would likely remember the history of his airport with ease. Love Field began as a base for airplanes during World War II; afterwards, it was converted into a civil airport to handle the increasing air traffic of a growing Dallas. It was moved to new, more spacious quarters near Mockingbird Lane in the mid-1950s.¹

While Love Field served Dallas, intense airport rivalry developed with Fort Worth. Fort Worth had negative connotations for many people in Dallas. Relations between these two large North Texas cities had never been more than politely cordial. For example, the noted Fort Worth civic leader Amon Carter had no love for Dallas. It was said that Carter, when traveling to Dallas, always carried a sack lunch because he refused to eat in any Dallas restaurant. "Cowtown" was the word that was the epitome of what Fort Worth stood for; many Dallasites looked upon Fort Worth in the same way that old monied families looked upon the new rich. Fort Worth was brash and unsophisticated. Amon Carter Field, built half way between Dallas and Fort Worth, was viewed by Dallasites as Fort Worth's attempt to "steal" air traffic and commerce coming into Dallas via Love Field. After World War II, the airport competition divided Dallas and Fort Worth, and the struggle, while at times dormant, had not died out by the 1960s.²

Continued business and population growth in the North Texas region in the 1960s introduced a new aspect into the airport struggle. The new factor was the idea of a regional airport, a facility built not only to serve the Dallas-Fort Worth area but the whole North Texas region. This question of a true regional airport, not just a one-city facility, became a

growing concern of people in both cities and in surrounding satellite communities.³

The initial impetus for co-operation between Dallas and Fort Worth came in the mid-1960s after Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) examiner Ross I. Newmann called for "joint studies on the probable need for additional airport facilities in the North Texas region beyond the year 1970."⁴ Newmann stated that Love Field presented no opportunities for expansion and that the Greater Southwest International Airport at Fort Worth would give "little improvement in service and would cause insurmountable financing problems for the city."⁵ Newmann suggested the rerouting of some air traffic to bypass Dallas and Fort Worth. Spurred by the Newmann report, especially the rerouting proposal, letters were exchanged between leaders of the two cities on the possibility of co-operating in a joint project to build an airport somewhere between them. Dallas leaders proposed a North Texas Regional Airport Study Group to investigate the area's needs and airport facilities. The Fort Worth answer to this letter was immediate and promising:

We will be pleased to meet with you ... to discuss the proposals ... as well as to explore other possible areas of interest in connection with the regional airport problem. As you know, we are committed to the regional airport concept and feel that if this area is to survive as a major air transportation center, immediate plans must be undertaken to establish a true regional airport.⁶

After Newmann's recommendation in 1964, a variety of events occurred. Some parties suggested that the CAB drop the case and let the communities decide the fate of the airport. Some wanted the CAB to reverse its decision, and still others said that the Board should give the communities an opportunity for agreement but retain jurisdiction. The major significance of Newmann's proposal, however, was that the decision acted as a catalyst to promote co-operation of Dallas leaders on the concept of a regional airport for the North Texas area.⁷

A bill introduced in the Texas legislature in November 1966 would allow Dallas and Fort Worth to co-operate in the formation of a board to study the airport issue and to facilitate solutions to the building problems and administration of the proposed regional airport. The bill (1) called for seven members from Dallas and four members from Fort Worth, in recognition that the former had the greater population; (2) gave the board the power to issue revenue and/or tax bonds to get money for the airport and airport land; (3) empowered the board to sign leases with shops and firms who would wish to operate businesses at the airport; (4) authorized the board to acquire Love Field and any other field in the area, but the board would not be liable for the bonds of these airports; (5) stipulated that board members would serve no more than two four-year terms; and (6) provided that the board could set up its own rules and impose its own fines.⁸

A number of problems surfaced in connection with the passage of the bill. Some observers favored suburban representation which would lessen the opposition to the airport in the smaller county towns, and still others wanted more limits on the airport police. Many problems faced the Texas legislators in the preparation of a bill which would be acceptable to all factions. All agreed, in principle, to the theory of a regional airport; the main question seems to have been how the facility would be built and under what conditions.⁹

On Monday, February 6, 1967, the bill passed the Senate in a vote of twenty-eight to one. Two amendments by Senator George Parkhouse were defeated, and three other amendments were accepted. These amendments provided for: (1) the prohibition of discrimination in hiring and/or firing of workers; (2) open board hearings; and (3) the power of the authority to assess fines.⁸ Later in February, the Texas House of Representatives passed the bill for the creation of the North Texas Regional Airport Authority. Ben Atwell of Dallas guided the bill through the House, where it was approved by a vote of 147-0.¹⁰

Voter approval was the next step in the creation of the authority. A campaign to educate potential voters was launched. The airport's cost, its anticipated revenue, and its impact upon the total economy were some of the questions explained to the voting public. The names of five percent of the total populations of both cities were needed on petitions to call the elections, scheduled to occur in each city on the same day. Approval by both cities was required for the creation of the authority. Final legislative and executive approval was gained on February 28, 1967, when Governor John Connally signed the bill. Connally called for co-operation between the cities. He said that Dallas and Fort Worth citizens were aware of the problems facing the airport and asserted that the proposed facility was as important to the entire North Texas area as had been the coming of the railroad nearly a hundred years earlier.¹¹

The election was scheduled for June, allowing time for the acquisition of signatures on the petitions with Fort Worth needing 9,200 names and Dallas needing 17,500.¹² By late March the required number in Dallas had signed the petitions, and Fort Worth also had its quota. Dallas civic leader C.A. Tatum said that he expected a good turn out for the election "due to the tremendous interest." Tatum further explained that the election in June was not to ask for an opinion on the airport, but was an election to determine whether an airport authority would be created and whether it could issue bonds and levy taxes.¹² That Dallas and Fort Worth needed a regional airport was taken for granted by the leadership of both cities. Their major task was to convince the voters.

A public relations campaign was launched. The need for the airport as it was presented in the Dallas newspapers prior to the election of June 6 showed several facets to the many-sided question of the necessity of a regional airport. The "booming economy" of North Texas and a defen-

sive attitude toward Houston were two key issues presented in the papers. The Houston area, which was also in the process of building a facility to serve Harris County and eventually the Southeastern portion of the United States, had long been considered an arch rival of the North Texas area and Dallas for the title of Southwest Trade Center. An editorial in the *Dallas Morning News* two days prior to the election asked Dallas voters if they were ready for the future. This same editorial pointed out that transportation in its various forms had made Dallas what it was, and it asked the voters to consider the impact of the new airport on business and industry. Love Field was about to reach its saturation point and federal officials had announced that traffic would be diverted to fields capable of handling the increases expected. The editorial voiced fear that Dallas might lapse into complacency but also pointed out that the city was in a position to "steal another march on her less alert sisters" (Houston, for example). In a final plea, supporters of the proposed airport told the Dallas voters that the new facility would mean more jobs and more money for Dallasites — all this for a nine dollar per-person investment in the city's future.¹³

In a newspaper interview Dallas Mayor Erik Jonsson stated that at first he had not been in favor of a regional airport. But after the CAB decision to start diverting traffic, he maintained that he had begun to investigate the necessity of a new facility. He recognized that newer, faster airplanes would demand more space for landings and take-offs than was available at Love Field. Furthermore, the threat of Houston played a major role in convincing Jonsson of the desirability of heeding CAB demands.¹⁶ To remain in the "big league," the mayor said, Dallas, needed to keep the "long haul" services of the major airlines, and to do this, she would need a new airport to service the airlines. In effect, the mayor, joined by the newspaper editors, told Dallas voters that in the future airplanes as long as football fields which carried 500 passengers would make Love Field obsolete.¹⁴

Given the above, it is impossible not to concur with those Dallas leaders who pointed out the necessity of a regional airport in the Dallas area to serve Dallas and the North Texas region. Figures, past and present, and future projections seemed to indicate that Dallas would continue to grow. Population figures, estimates, and predictions showed a steady if not marked growth for the North Texas area as well. Big businesses, industries, and conventions had sought Dallas as their home in the past, but they would continue to do so only if Dallas continued to provide incentives to the businesses. Proper transportation facilities were an integral part of the incentives when a corporation was in the process of deciding upon a new home for one of its branches, and an airport was the transportation facility of the future.

Despite their lobbying efforts, Dallas leaders such as Mayor Jonsson was dismayed by the Dallasites' vote on the airport authority. The voters

defeated the airport authority by 2,260 votes, while Fort Worth voters passed the measure by 16,417 votes.¹⁵

A precinct-by-precinct breakdown of the voting pattern in Dallas helped explain the defeat. Only three areas in Dallas County went solidly for the authority. These areas were North Dallas (including Highland Park and University Park), Irving, and Richardson. North Dallas voted in favor of the proposal by a two-to-one margin, while more narrow margins passed the proposal in Richardson and Irving. Very definite reasons existed for the "pro" vote in these areas. The people living in North Dallas, Irving, and Richardson were decidedly in the middle-and-upper-classes and on the average had high incomes; these people saw a vested interest in the building of an airport and in the continued growth of Dallas itself. Bankers, school teachers, university professors, insurance men, business leaders, and civic leaders resided in these three sections, and they were the ones who used the airport; for example, businessmen by the thousands used the airport daily, and they recognized that their numbers soon would make Love Field obsolete. Also, an increasing number of people in North Dallas used the airport and its facilities for non-business travel. Family rates and student rates, introduced by a number of the larger airline companies, made air travel possible for a family with just an average income. Further, North Dallas residents were prompted to vote for the authority out of civic pride. The "pocketbook" was also important. Leaders pointed out that the airport would bring a vast amount of new people and new money to the North Dallas area.¹⁶

The negative side of the issue is one of more vital interest in attempting to understand the initial defeat of the airport authority. Other Dallas County areas (East Dallas, Garland, South Dallas, and South Oak Cliff) voted against the authority and defeated it. Differences existed between these areas of Dallas and the North Dallas area. They tended to be lower income areas. Not many of the inhabitants flew frequently. They were inclined to leave well enough alone and, above all, wanted to avoid new taxes. Small towns in the area surrounding Dallas also voted the authority down. For instance, Rowlett voted against, seventy-two to twelve; Seagoville voted against 160 to thirty-one; Wilmer voted against 103 to five, and finally, De Soto voted against 192, to sixty-four.¹⁷

The Dallas leadership was surprised at the outcome of the vote in the city and in the outlying areas. Leaders quickly began to look for the reasons why the authority was defeated. Four factors, according to many Dallas civic leaders, caused the bill to fail. The first reason was the new tax of \$.15 per \$100 valuation that was to be levied by the airport authority on home values; although the tax was described as temporary, many of the Dallas voters probably did not believe that the tax would be lifted after the airport land had been paid. As some people said, "who has ever heard of a temporary tax?" A lack of understanding on the part of the total population was also believed to have been a factor in the defeat. This was,

of course, not an unusual attitude for losers to take. Perhaps the advocates took too much for granted. The campaign to support the authority had been launched in October 1966, but many issues were forgotten or simply not explained to the populace; for example, Mayor Jonsson of Dallas made one statement that said the whole "show" could be financed by revenue bonds. Such statements made the average man on the street wonder why any election was necessary.¹⁸

More confusion existed about cost: figures varying from \$100 million to \$250 million were advanced as the cost of the airport. A large number of people did not understand that they would not be paying the entire \$250 million but only approximately \$7.5 million for airport land. In addition, the physical location of the airport, on the west side of Dallas just south of Grapevine, probably caused many voters in the eastern and southern portions of the county to vote against. Many of these people may have believed that the inconvenience in driving for an hour or so and the possibility of pulling industry away from their areas was enough to justify negative votes. Moreover, many opponents believed that Love Field was a perfectly good airport; why should the taxpayer, so the argument went, spend hard earned money on a project that was not really needed? The *Dallas Morning News* summed the situation due to the confusion and lack of education of the general populace when it said that the voters were entitled to more answers than they received. The authority proposal, some believed, had a credibility gap among Dallas voters. Apparently, many were not convinced, or they were not aware, of the pressing need for a new airport to serve the North Texas area.¹⁹ Questions as typified by the following are some of the ones the "no" voter in the June 6 election must have considered:

1. Why should the average man pay for projects pushed and supported by politicians?
2. Why should the average man subsidize the airlines?
3. Why should people who never use and never plan to use the services of the airlines be forced to pay for them?
4. Why should the average man pay for a public facility that is not designed for general use? Shouldn't the businessman and prosperous traveler pay for the services they and they alone use?
5. Why should the Dallas taxpayer hand the airport authority a blank check for taxing with the only limit being 75¢?
6. Why should the average man take part in the establishment of yet another (permanent he felt) taxing power?
7. Why not continue to use Love Field? After all, it is an adequate airport.²⁰

After area voters rejected the airport authority, the immediate problem facing Dallas leaders was how to manage the funds for the purchase of the land needed for the regional airport. Approximately \$7.5 million was needed to match the same amount that had been put up by the city of Fort Worth for the purchase of the 20,000 acres needed for the facility. The airport authority would have provided a taxing and administrative

agency for construction of the airport, and according to many Dallas civic leaders, this agency would have been the most efficient method of dealing with the problems involved. The election defeat of June 6 precluded the possibility, at least in 1967, of establishing such an authority with taxing and administrative powers. Nevertheless, Dallas leaders decided to find a solution.²¹

The most important decision on the part of the Dallas leadership was that the defeat of the authority was not going to stop the proposed airport. The past growth and the predicted growth of Dallas convinced leaders that the project could not be shelved if the North Texas area was to continue to grow. On July 9, the airport board, made up of Dallas and Fort Worth personnel, met to discuss what could be done. Mayor Jonsson of Dallas suggested the building of the facility on a contractual basis under a state law passed in 1947.²²

The main problem facing leaders after the election was that of keeping the project in motion; action was imperative. The attitude of the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) demonstrated confidence in the Dallas leaders. The agency stated that it would continue to process the Dallas-Fort Worth request for funds if the leaders of the two cities could come up with an adequate solution for the building of the airport. At this time, the FAA had given \$4 million and was considering another request for \$10 million. The FAA told Dallas leaders that if the cities could provide matching funds for the land, the defeat of the airport authority would have no effect on the project. The FAA stressed the need for immediate action, saying that any delay would be detrimental to the entire North Texas area.²³

While the Fort Worth leaders adopted a wait and see attitude, an investigation was started in Dallas by City Attorney Alex Bickley. His efforts were directed at finding out why the various Dallas areas voted as they did; of the some 200,000 qualified voters in the Dallas area, only about 50,000 voted.²⁴ This investigation by Bickley was among the first efforts to arrive at some solution.

On June 11, Mayor Jonsson called for the two cities to join in the building of the airport with Dallas paying the major portion of the cost. The two cities would have the cost on the basis of population, and board representation should also be based on population. According to Jonsson, Dallas would pay two-thirds of the cost and have a majority on the governing board. City council members who favored the Jonsson proposal suggested a bond election as one method of securing the money for the land purchase.²⁵

With the new proposal came another problem; the Fort Worth leaders feared a Dallas domination of the regional airport board that would be created if the two cities decided to co-operate on the issue. This problem, however, found a quick solution. The 1947 law would prevent Dallas

domination of the regional airport by giving the city councils of both cities a veto over the major board decisions. The law provided for an annual budget and a board which, unlike the defeated airport authority, would not have the power to levy taxes. Each city would pay its share, and each city would have a veto over the board decisions.²⁶

Quick answers to problems were imperative, and a variety of alternatives presented themselves to Dallas leaders. The need for the money was immediate and pressing, and a clear course of action was indicated. Dallas could include the \$7.5 million in the upcoming bond election; the land could be purchased on warrant (the money could be paid back from later income); or the land could be bought with tax money. Most city councilmen favored the mayor's plan for including the money with the bond election to be held in August.²⁷

By June 12, no decision had been reached. The only concrete action taken was a memorandum of understanding from the mayor of Dallas to the mayor of Fort Worth promising that the airport would be built. Dallas was faced with a debt ceiling of \$135 million, and with the pending bond election, leaders were not sure if the \$7.5 million needed could be worked into the budget. Finally, on June 25, it was decided to include the money for land acquisition with the bond election. Mayor Jonsson told the press that a "little minor juggling" was done on the budget.²⁸ The all-important decision to include the land money with the bond issue was indicative of the resourcefulness of Dallas leaders. The city leaders were determined to let nothing stand in the way of the continued growth of the North Texas area.

The original bond issue, which was to have been held in July, was postponed until August, and education of the public became a key issue. City council members saw the need for an intensive public relations campaign to sell the bond issue. Although the plans for the campaign were not completed by June 14, the first steps were taken in the "selling campaign." Two public relations firms were hired and paid out of private funds to study the education problem and see how the program could be most effectively presented to Dallas voters. Civic, political, and business leaders were put to work; a speaker's bureau was established to talk to garden clubs, PTAs, and civic clubs for the purpose of informing these groups of the need for the airport. Some fifty leaders led the educational effort.²⁹

Furthermore, Joe Hagger was appointed to help mold public opinion. The combined issues (the capital improvements program and the airport land question) were presented to the community by Hagger in what soon became known as the Crossroads Program because leaders believed that these issues were so vital to the continued growth of Dallas that the city stood at a crossroads in its history. Of the program itself, Mayor Erik Jonsson stated that "we have too strong a confirmation in the goals for Dallas program that if you take it to enough people, they'll go for it."³⁰

Jonsson, further asserted that "We're not just going to sit around. We're working, and a lot of us are going to get out."³¹

The Hagger committee staged a grassroots effort to sell the airport plan to the voters. The actual need for the airport was explained thoroughly so the public could make intelligent decisions. An example of inadequate public education before the first election was the fact that no one made a speech in Garland before the June 6 election. The new campaign avoided such oversight. In general, speakers pointed out Love Field's limitations and took the time to explain that with the larger jets and more people, Love Field soon would be too small to handle the traffic. The capital that would be brought into the area also needed explanation for the average citizen. He needed to be made aware of the new jobs, increased revenue, and greater value of his property that the new airport would bring. Joe Hagger's committee tried to show that the whole area would benefit, not just the few people who customarily used the airport for either business or pleasure. Each person had to be shown how the airport would benefit him and his family.³²

Another part of the education campaign was the amassing of details for public presentation. On June 25, the following breakdown of expenditures of the proposed bond issue was printed in the *Dallas Morning News*:

Fire protection	\$ 1,000,000
Library	2,325,000
Parks and recreation facilities	7,875,000
Streets	44,323,000
Storm drainage	11,851,000
Civic center	23,900,000
Cultural center	15,000,000
Auditorium expansion	9,000,000
Neighborhood development	7,400,000
Fair Park	12,600,000
Airport	7,500,000
Waterworks	15,226,000
Sanitary sewers	17,000,000

Although the above list was termed tentative, it was indicative of the amount and kind of details presented to the voters. No one could legitimately say that Dallasites did not have the opportunity to become informed on the issues. Even such details as specific streets to be repaired were included in Hagger's education program.³³

By late July it was hard to estimate the impact of the selling program. It was apparent, however, that the leadership of Dallas put forth a maximum effort to gain the support of the populace. The initial problem of the June 6 defeat was met, the problem of how to obtain the money for the airport was met, the debt limit was "juggled," and a public education program was initiated. The Crossroads Committee, the radio stations, the television stations, and the newspapers all did their part. Each of the mass media carried programs and advertisements daily in an education

effort. If the Dallas voter was determined to turn down the funds for an airport and various city improvements, he was at least going to do so as an educated voter.

Record numbers of people were expected to vote on August 8. City Secretary Harold Shank stated that he expected a 75,000 voter turnout. Absentee ballots indicated of how the voting would proceed, and there were 2,323 absentee ballots cast. The Crossroads Committee wound up its campaign the Monday night (August 7) before Tuesday's election with a television advertisement to encourage Dallasites to vote. Also, on Monday and Tuesday, the Dallas Chamber of Commerce dispatched forty-five young women to downtown street corners to hand out leaflets with information concerning the election.³⁴

The results of the election on August 8 were very different from those of June 6. All propositions on the slate carried by substantial margins. The \$7.5 million proposal for a regional airport carried by a 53,623 to 28,514 margin.³⁵ Eric Jonsson called the overwhelming passage of the fourteen proposals one of the city's "great moments." of the 83,000 people who voted, large majorities favored all items. Support for the election was strong in every portion of the city with one exception, the Pleasant Grove area, which turned down every proposal by a four to three margin. E.O. Cartwright, president of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce, said concerning the victory:

It's a great victory for Dallas. Once again our responsible citizens have proved that when they know the facts they will always vote for progress. The victory has vast national importance, too, because new business and industry is attracted to progressive cities, and the Crossroads program unmistakably labels Dallas as progressive.³⁶

Mayor Erik Jonsson added:

My greatest joy is that people of all walks of life, regardless of race, color, or creed, exercised their most precious right to vote. I'm even grateful to the people who voted against it, because they were doing what they believed in, and as long as we have this, America will be strong.³⁷

When the election results were tallied, the first and most critical phase of the founding of the Dallas-Fort Worth Interregional Airport passed into history. Earlier, Fort Worth's voters had approved the project eagerly, and Dallasites were finally convinced. A facility which would serve North and East Texas into the twenty-first century would now become a reality, and the continuing growth of the Dallas-Fort Worth region was assured.

NOTES

¹*Dallas Times Herald*, January 10, 1967.

²George Fuerman, *Reluctant Empire* (Garden City, 1957), pp. 148-150.

³"Dallas, Ft. Worth May Get Together on Airport Plans," *Air Travel* (July, 1964), p. 60.

⁴"Dallas, Ft. Worth May Get Together," p. 60.

⁵"Dallas, Ft. Worth May Get Together," p. 60.

“Dallas, Ft. Worth May Get Together,” p. 60.

⁷*Dallas Times Herald*, July 28, 1964.

“House Bill No. 109,” *Journal of the House of Representatives of the 59th Legislature of the State of Texas* (Austin, 1966), p. 3368.

⁸*Dallas Morning News*, January 15, 1967.

⁹*Dallas Times Herald*, February 17, 1967.

¹⁰*Dallas Morning News*, February 17, March 1, 1967.

¹¹*Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 26, 1967.

¹²Dallas Chamber of Commerce, Facts Series: “The Dallas Economy.” (Dallas, 1967), pp. 1-2; *Dallas Morning News*, June 4, 1967.

¹³*Dallas Morning News*, June 4, 5, 1967.

¹⁴*Dallas Times Herald*, June 8, 1967.

¹⁵*Dallas Morning News*, June 4, 5, 8, 1967.

¹⁶*Dallas Morning News*, June 8, 1967.

¹⁷*Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1967.

¹⁸*Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1967.

¹⁹*Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1967.

²⁰*Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1967.

²¹Dallas Chamber of Commerce, Minutes, June 25, 1967, Library, Dallas Chamber of Commerce, Dallas, Texas.

²²*Dallas Times Herald*, June 9, 1967.

²³*Dallas Morning News*, June 8, 1967.

²⁴*Dallas Morning News*, June 8, 1967.

²⁵*Dallas Times Herald*, June 11, 1967.

²⁶*Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 1967.

²⁷*Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1967.

²⁸*Dallas Morning News*, June 13, 25, 1967; *Dallas Times Herald*, June 13, 17, 1967.

²⁹*Dallas Morning News*, June 14, 22, 1967.

³⁰*Dallas Morning News*, June 22, 1967.

³¹*Dallas Morning News*, June 25, 1967.

³²*Dallas Times Herald*, June 27, 1967.

³³*Dallas Morning News*, June 25, 28, 1967.

³⁴*Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 9, 1967.

³⁵*Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 9, 1967.

³⁶*Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 9, 1967.

³⁷*Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 9, 1967.