

Resource Sheet #2

Louise Day Hicks, Icon of Tumult, Dies

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff, 10/22/2003

Examine the following primary source related to the incident depicted in the photograph and list any information that helps answer the class questions. Be sure to consider who, what, when, where, and why.

Louise Day Hicks, who came within 12,000 votes of being elected mayor of Boston in 1967 and earned a national reputation as a symbol of racial divisiveness, died yesterday. She was 87 and suffered from a variety of ailments.

"One of her virtues was courage," said former University of Massachusetts president William M. Bulger, who as a state senator from South Boston during the 1970s was a leading opponent of court-ordered desegregation. "I can only speak in highest praise of Mrs. Hicks. . . . She stood up for her point of view."

"She was a tragic figure," said Paul Parks, a former Boston School Committee chairman and vice president of the Boston NAACP. "She became an object of hate -- and she asked for it."

To those who helped elect Mrs. Hicks to three terms each on the School Committee and City Council and one in Congress, she was the one political leader who understood the deepest beliefs -- and fears -- of working- and middle-class white Bostonians.

In the culture wars of the 1960s, Mrs. Hicks' supporters felt she represented them as the media and courts and academe did not.

Other elected officials refrained from asking a question she posed almost gleefully: "If the suburbs are honestly interested in solving the problems of the Negro, why don't they build subsidized housing for them?"

"Boston schools," she said, "are a scapegoat for those who have failed to solve the housing, economic, and social problems of the black citizen."

In the face of radical change and racial upheaval, she stood up for white ethnics and the traditional values they professed: home and church, neighborhood and flag. "You know where I stand" was her campaign slogan in the 1967 mayoral race. To admirers, Mrs. Hicks spoke the truth to liberal power in simple declarative sentences.

Yet her slogan's genius lay in how that very simplicity masked the complexities of race and resentment that fed her popularity.

"A large part of my vote probably does come from bigoted people," Mrs. Hicks once told an interviewer. "But, after all, I can hardly go around telling them, 'Don't vote for me if you're bigoted.' The important thing is that I'm not bigoted. To me, that word means all the dreadful Southern segregationist, Jim Crow business that's always shocked and revolted me."

To be sure, Mrs. Hicks's manner owed less to a white supremacist like Orval Faubus than it did to, say, Rose Kennedy.

Mrs. Hicks's almost-exaggerated gentility and slightly inflated diction were lace-curtain Irishness at its daintiest. Her hair was always carefully styled, and she favored flowered hats, white gloves, and blue, pink, or kelly-green dresses. With her small, breathy voice and matronly carriage, she gave the impression of being more at home at a sodality meeting than a political rally.

Even so, her detractors never doubted that Mrs. Hicks did indeed have much in common with that "Jim Crow business." Her use of the word "business" in such a context exemplifies what The Reporter magazine called her penchant for "conscience-soothing euphemisms."

Mrs. Hicks never indulged in racist invective or the overtly inflammatory rhetoric of a George Wallace. She didn't have to. "Neighborhood schools for neighborhood children," her political mantra in the '60s, or a phrase like "civil rights infiltrators" was considered racial code easily translated by even the most politically naive.

No less than her supporters, Mrs. Hicks's opponents felt they knew where she stood. James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality called her "the Bull Connor of Boston," a reference to the brutally racist police commissioner of Birmingham, Ala. A fellow School Committee member said in 1965, "She wants [racial] peace the way I want a heart attack."

The prospect of her winning City Hall moved the Globe to make its first political endorsement in 72 years and back Kevin White in the mayor's race.

Racial resentment both fueled Mrs. Hicks' electoral success and limited it. Running for reelection to the School Committee in 1963, she received a record 74 percent of the vote. She also topped the ticket running for reelection in 1965 and for the City Council in 1969, 1973, and 1975.

Yet Mrs. Hicks never won a two-person race. She unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for state treasurer in 1964. There were her two mayoral losses to White, in 1967 and again in 1971. She was defeated for Suffolk County register of deeds in 1976. In 1970, in a 12-person race, she won the Democratic nomination to the 9th Congressional District seat, which was tantamount to election in that Democratic stronghold. Yet two years later she was defeated by J. Joseph Moakley, who ran as an independent (before resuming his Democratic affiliation).

By the mid-1970s and the controversy over court-ordered desegregation in the Boston schools, Mrs. Hicks's popularity began to decline. Though she was president of Restore Our Alienated Rights, the best-known anti-busing organization, more outspoken members, such as Elvira Pixie Palladino, came to dominate the debate. Mrs. Hicks was narrowly defeated for reelection in 1977. She returned to the council in 1979, however, filling a vacancy. Eleven months later, her reelection bid failed by some 400 votes. It was her last race for electoral office.

White appointed her to the Boston Retirement Board, and she served there from 1980 to 1982. Mrs. Hicks, who was troubled by poor health in her last two decades, disappeared from the political arena.

Parks said yesterday he'd occasionally see her at the Massachusetts Land Court, and she'd offer a cheery hello. Bulger recalled how Mrs. Hicks would invite him to the Mass she had said at her home each Christmas season. "She was very deliberate about getting out of the public eye," he said.

City Councilor James Kelly, who has lived down the street from Mrs. Hicks for 30 years and considers her a close friend and political mentor, said they talked about old times last month. "As tough as she was and as courageous as she was, she was also sweet and sentimental and all those things you'd want in a human being," he said.

Mrs. Hicks' conservatism tended to obscure just how remarkable it was to find a woman so politically prominent at that time. She was a member of the National Organization of Women and while in Congress lobbied for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1976, she was elected the first woman president of the City Council.

Mrs. Hicks was asked once if she disliked campaigning. Her response epitomizes the way her political career managed to combine both past and future views of a woman's role in society. "Oh! Glory, no. It's like being a bride."

Though the thought would doubtless dismay her admirers and detractors, Mrs. Hicks might be seen in certain respects as a feminist ideal: She was a wife, mother, lawyer and an elected official.

One of nine women in her Boston University Law School class of 232, she rose at 4 a.m. to study, attended morning classes, worked in her brother's law office during the afternoon, and returned home to dine with her family and put her two sons to bed.

"I wear a skirt with pride and dignity, but I've never hidden behind it, which is more than some men can say," she told The Boston Herald in 1975. "My father must have been the creator of women's lib because he felt there were no limitations to what I could do or to the opportunities I should be exposed to."

Anna Louise Day was born in Boston on Oct. 16, 1916, the daughter of William J. Day and Anna L. (McCarron) Day. Mrs. Hicks described her father as "the greatest influence in my life" and "my first and only hero."

A highly successful lawyer and special justice of the South Boston District Court, he was a figure of great influence in the city (Day Boulevard, in South Boston, is named for him), and much of Mrs. Hicks's initial political success derived from his popularity.

In addition to their daughter, the Days had three sons. The family lived in an 18-room house on Columbia Road in South Boston. Mrs. Hicks lived there all her life.

(A 2001 lawsuit filed by her sister-in-law, Rita Day, charged that Mrs. Hicks deceived her brother Paul Day into signing over his interest in the property a few months before his death, in January 2001. The suit is pending.)

Mrs. Hicks was educated in parochial schools, attended Simmons College for a year, and received a teacher's certificate from Wheelock College. After teaching first grade in Brookline for two years, she worked in her father's law office and married John E. Hicks in 1942. (Hicks died, of cancer, in 1968.)

Mrs. Hicks was at her father's deathbed in 1950 and resolved to follow in his footsteps. She briefly attended Boston College Law School and, after earning a bachelor's degree from BU's School of Education in 1952, she earned a law degree from BU in 1955.

Her two best friends in law school were a Jewish student from Newburyport and a black student from North Carolina. "One time the three of us said a novena together," Mrs. Hicks recalled in a 1967 Life magazine interview. "They were both praying to find a husband, and I was praying to pass the bar exam. All three of us got what we wanted."

Mrs. Hicks established a law firm, Hicks & Day, with her brother, and in 1961 ran for the School Committee. Presenting herself as a reform candidate, she pledged "to take politics out of the School Committee." Her campaign slogan was "The only mother on the ballot." (Left unsaid was the fact her sons were in parochial school).

Through much of her first term, Mrs. Hicks earned a reputation for seriousness and moderation on a panel little known for either. She was elected chairwoman in January 1963 and seemed likely to receive the endorsement of the leading reform group, Citizens for Boston Public Schools.

All that changed in June, however, when the Boston chapter of the NAACP demanded "an immediate public acknowledgment of the existence of *de facto* segregation in the Boston Public School system."

The numbers were never in dispute -- 13 city schools were at least 90 percent black -- but the language was. The committee rejected use of the word "segregation" in any statement. Compromise wording was finally agreed on, only to have Mrs. Hicks reject it at the last minute. She later said a version leaked to the press differed from the one she had consented to. NAACP leaders contended she withdrew from the agreement once she realized it threatened her popularity with white voters.

Whatever the reason, Mrs. Hicks's career was transformed. Within months, she was the most popular politician in Boston. She was also the most controversial and famous. By 1965, she was seeking a gun permit and had two police bodyguards assigned to her around the clock. By 1967, she was on the cover of Newsweek.

"In every one of the major cities," Mrs. Hicks said, "the civil rights leaders have found a scapegoat. If it has to be me, so be it. My conscience is clear."

She leaves her son William D..

Funeral plans are pending.

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