

I've debated whether to include this confidence, but I will because it hints about the depth of her drive. Molly once told me that when she was an adolescent, she wrote a resolution and put it in her wallet: The resolution was to commit suicide if she weren't famous by the age of 25. By the time she arrived at the *Observer*, she had thought better of such an extreme measure, but she was drawn to celebrity. When she reached it, she was infinitely generous to her fans and friends. In addition to being a great writer, she became a great speaker, teacher, and political motivator. And she never got et' up with the big ass.

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## MOLLY IVINS: A Firecracker Made In Texas

Heather Helinsky  
Guest Contributor



A relaxed Molly Ivins at a get-together.

The Fourth of July was Molly Ivins' Christmas.

Every year on July 4th, she would turn her column into a Dickinsonian novel, warning Americans about the Political Ghosts of Past, Present, and Future; it was a reminder that it is a government for and by the People, not for and by corporate and special interests. The Fourth of July column was rooted in a family tradition from her early years at *The Texas Observer*. Back in the '70s, Molly and a group of her liberal Texas friends

would celebrate the Fourth of July with a camping trip along the South San Gabriel River. Though she was preaching to the choir, this six-foot tall, red-haired woman would stand by the campfire, beer in her hand, and "interrupt the serenity of nature" by reading the Declaration of Independence in a loud voice, from beginning to end. As a benediction, she would say, "The United States of America is still run by its citizens. The government works for us!"

Her life's work was upholding the Constitution through journalism. Whether it was covering the *Texas Legislature*---the Lege---to the people of Texas or introducing the nation to the 1999 Republican Presidential candidate and Texas Governor Governor George W. Bush, Ivins was a watchdog for "We the People," believing wholly in the rights guaranteed by the Constitution to all Americans. As she watched more and more politicians work for the lobbyists and corporations, her columns cried foul.

Molly Ivins spent her early years watching corporate greed in action. Her father was a stern, patriotic, World War II veteran who became a lawyer for big oil. During her youth, her father and his colleagues would meet in their living room to set prices. Meanwhile, her mother made sure she got a Smith education to understand the world outside of Texas politics.

After college, she found success as a reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune* as was one of only a handful of female reporters. In 1970, the twenty-something Molly beat out 40 other applicants to become a co-editor of *The Texas Observer* with Kaye Northcott. Female editorial teams were unheard of in the newspaper business at that time. Almost instantly, Molly and Kaye became role models and mentors for a generation of young female reporters who had always been relegated to writing only for the society or feature papers.

Constantly at odds with her father's politics, Ivins found a role model in John Henry Faulk, the Texas humorist, national radio personality, and Bill of Rights advocate. In the 1950s, Faulk was blacklisted, sued Senator McCarthy, and won. After publishing his book *Fear on Trial* about the dangers of McCarthyism, he had a life-long career as a public speaker, working tirelessly for the ACLU. At age seventy-four, he told the Austin City Council on the 200th anniversary of the Constitution: "The First Amendment was the prime jewel of the Crown of Liberty---the fuel that would carry this Republic down through history. James Madison said, 'I am writing this as a mandate,' because any lesser force cannot survive the up-tides of history."

Molly Ivins easily adopted Faulk's style of Texas humor and political satire and made it her own as she took on First Amendment rights issues. In the spirit of John Henry Faulk, she made a promise to give a free speech once a month to local ACLUs all around the country. Despite her hectic schedule as a journalist, she traveled to small towns in Mississippi, northern Georgia, Alabama, northern Louisiana, north Florida, the Carolinas, the Dakotas, western Michigan, Utah, Nebraska, Idaho, Montana, Kansas, and Oklahoma. For someone who knew Washington very well and hobnobbed with senators during their cocktail hour, she also knew where the Holiday Inn was in Fritters, Alabama. The only time she had to turn down opportunities to speak was when she was fighting breast cancer.

While fighting the cancer that would ultimately take her life, she only worked harder to publish her final book, *The Bill of Wrongs: The Executive Branch's Assault on America's Fundamental Rights*. Jammed packed with anecdotal stories of violations of the rights of citizens, it is easy to see the urgency in Ivins' writing. In the marathon of her life, she was sprinting to the finish line. "I try to explain what the First Amendment means with good stories, because that's what John Henry taught me to do. For that matter, Mark Twain and Jesus were both fond of the form, not that I am putting myself anywhere near them. You'd be amazed how much even the most sophisticated people still enjoy a good story."

With a full-bellied laugh, Molly Ivins reminded us that the children of Want and Ignorance still cling to Lady Liberty's robes, and every American citizen has a life-long job, to stand up to the powerful who seek to bend the Constitution to their own ends. Her words by the campfire to her intimate friends, surrounded by the marvelous nature of wild Texas, were the truth behind every silver-bullet joke. Her hubris was that she believed laughter could activate people to create a more democratic society, and coat the bitter pill of American history with honey.



## Texas All The Way

Dan Rather, Former News  
Anchor, CBS *Evening News*

Some years back, for reasons too boring to get into here, Molly Ivins and I wound up at the same Austin luncheon, one of those big deals at the Driskill Hotel filled with the powerful and the semi-powerful, and with the pomposity hanging thicker in the air than cigar smoke. I won't repeat the name of the group here, but Molly and I were to serve as panelists before them.

As I started to enter the banquet room, one of the attendees took me aside and, in all sincerity and with great concern, said, "Dan, you're not gonna appear on the same panel with Molly Ivins, are you?" I must have looked puzzled because he explained how Molly was, in this gentleman's view, some kind of radical who could only drag me into trouble by sitting beside her in such a public forum.

A bit put off, but wanting to be polite, I mumbled my thanks to the gentleman for his concern and found my seat on the panel, next to Molly. I smiled at her in greeting; she just leaned over and asked me what I was doing "in a place like this."

"I could ask the same of you," I said. "Well," she said, "If I stay here and tell these sumbitches what I intend to tell them, and you stay here next to me, you're gonna be ruined."

That was pure Molly-happy to confirm the worst and to make you laugh anyway. If God hadn't given her to us, we would have had to invent her ourselves.

Think what you want of her opinions, the things she approved of and the things she despised, you always knew where Molly stood, and you always knew where she came from. Texas all the way. If you wanted to see her nostrils flare or her neck swell, all you had to do was tell her where to line up or what to think or — heaven help you — tell her to shut up. Nobody ever accused Molly Ivins of going along to get along.

That luncheon at the Driskill wasn't the first time I heard the word "radical" used to describe Molly, in