

New era eases out McAllen's patron Onion King's crown falls off, but contributions won't be forgotten

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McALLEN - His roots lie in a bare Georgia vegetable patch, but he scratched a produce-shipping empire out of raw Texas earth from sheer will.

Once dubbed the Onion King, he wrenched an international city from the dust-flecked shoots of this little Texas border town.

During his five terms as McAllen's mayor, 81-year-old Othal Brand didn't watch the sleepy Rio Grande Valley explode into a center of industry; he largely shaped it.

But now this borderland giant, tagged a "one-man show" by some, the last of the Texas patrones by others, has seen his utopia turn on him.

Rejected by voters here twice, he received his latest drubbing June 2.

Leo Montalvo, 57, a youthful lawyer with salt-and-pepper hair, has been the two-time victor. In a recent runoff election, he captured a healthy margin of the vote at 54 percent.

"It's changing times," explained Montalvo, who in 1997 became McAllen's first Mexican-American mayor. Jumping into Spanish, he added: "We're completely convinced that the days in which only the leader's voice was heard are over."

What may have been extraordinary about Brand, McAllen's political boss for two decades, was his ability to reach across ethnic lines.

Even in a city that is 75 percent Hispanic, he captured 46 percent of the vote this time.

Still, a beaten but not defeated Brand, with his shock of hair whiter than the 10-gallon Texas cliché, on Thursday appeared to acknowledge his role as an anachronism.

"Listen, when it's over, it's over," said the one-time produce magnate who acquired the nickname Onion King decades ago when he held a spot on the national television show "What's My Line?"

Brand lived through riper times, times when his vegetable-shipping company Griffin & Brand of McAllen spread across two continents and approached \$150 million in annual revenues.

Back then, he set his sights on a bump in the badlands called McAllen and slipped into the role of the city's patron, or boss, with the same ease as pulling on a pair of worn cowhide boots.

"I got obsessed with this idea of building a city," said Brand, a conservative who once handed out thousands of Bibles south of the border while armed with a pistol to protect himself.

Sometimes, the former church deacon says, it took that kind of stubborn single-mindedness to build a dream.

"That's the way America was built," he said.

Initially, McAllen voters lapped it up.

Along with building schools, roads and churches, Brand lured trade centers and retail outlets to McAllen.

A sharp-tongued firebrand, he whittled a roughhewn reputation for individualism.

He fought fierce battles with the farmworker unions, Lyndon Johnson liberals and black-feathered grackles. McAllen residents, basking in the glow of his populism and surfeited on construction in what would become one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation, paid little mind to their mayor's eccentricities.

But in 1997, when the Onion King's multimillion-dollar business publicly began to falter as the vegetable trade moved south of the border, his political strength began to wane, onlookers say.

"He declared bankruptcy," said Gary Mounce, a political science professor at the University of Texas Pan American. "So the image of his multinational wealth and success kind of tarnished, and he took a lot of people down with him."

That same year, Brand ran for a sixth mayoral term and narrowly lost to Montalvo by 144 votes out of almost 14,000.

Still unbowed, almost four years later, Brand ran again.

As he liquidated his produce-shipping business, his tongue lost none of the saltiness that had earned him his reputation.

When McAllen residents chose single-member districts in 2000, Brand argued against them, asserting that candidates without the business know-how to raise campaign money in at-large districts aren't qualified to be city leaders.

Though some may have agreed, McAllen's business impresarios registered their embarrassment with the city's outspoken curmudgeon in the latest election, observers say.

"I spoke to conservative businessman types that you would think would be in Othal's corner," said Teclo Garcia, McAllen city spokesman until just recently.

"But they couldn't see him being the city's front-man for the next four years," said Garcia, now editor of the Brownsville Herald.

Some critics say a more sophisticated McAllen may have chafed at Brand's campaign tactics, among them papering the city with 10-foot-tall images of himself in a Superman suit.

"A lot of people always thought with Brand it was ego," Mounce said. "And then when the Superman posters came out, that was almost like a Saturday Night Live self-parody.

A newspaper ad depicting Brand cradling long-shot mayoral contender Bobby Garcia (no relation to Teclo Garcia), with its connotations of cronyism, also irked voters, Mounce said, especially when Garcia endorsed the Onion King.

"It just made people ill. It was like, 'This is mah boy,'" Mounce said in a mock drawl. "It just looked so much like the old-time patron. And it didn't work. It backfired."

Ramiro Casso, a former McAllen physician, counts Brand as a friend but challenged him as mayor in 1981 - and lost.

Now a Montalvo supporter, Casso serves as vice president of institutional advancement at South Texas Community College, which has worked closely with the city under the current administration.

He said McAllen is too diverse for a patron.

"You can't have a one-man show in a city that's growing this fast, that's leading in so many areas," he said. At 81, will Brand evolve with the changing times?

Arriving back at his McAllen business Trophy International on Thursday, a characteristically vigorous Brand denied he was in retirement.

"Nay-oh, I'm not nearly in retirement," he drawled. "I'm not ageless, but I'm not old."

Will he run again for mayor?

"Never," he said immediately. Then he punctuated his remark: "NEVER."

Nod. Wink.

"And absolute statements are often and usually contradicted."

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