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WILLIAM E. BORAH, BOISE ATTORNEY
(Advertiser Column By Judith Austin)

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[This column was written in November, 1970.] Not very long ago, Idaho's newspapers and many of her political leaders paid tribute to a lady whose life has been longer than this state's by twenty years. Mary Borah, whose husband served as a United States Senator from Idaho during a time of great growth and change in the state and in the country, celebrated her hundredth birthday last month. That occasion, and the collection of informal photographs of William E. Borah that is in the files of the Idaho State Historical Society, suggest a look at the life and work of Idaho's most renowned political figure.

Borah was born in 1865 in Illinois. He spent one year in college, at the University of Kansas, and then "read law"--studied and worked with a practicing lawyer, and then took bar exams. In 1890 he headed west, arriving in Boise at an ideal time for a young lawyer because statehood had just been granted.

The young man soon became active in Republican politics. It could be said that his first great success in this field was becoming part-time secretary to Republican Governor William McConnell. Two and a half years after he undertook that "moonlighting," Borah married the Governor's pretty daughter Mary! Borah also began to seek public office, even though his law practice was growing rapidly. In 1896 he ran for Congress as a Silver Republican, losing despite the fact that William Jennings Bryan, presidential candidate on the same ticket, carried Idaho. In that same year, Borah made his first big splash as a trial lawyer when he was hired by Cassia County as a special prosecutor to assist in the trial of Diamondfield Jack Davis on charges of murdering two shearers. The trial was a lively one, and Borah obtained a conviction although Davis was later pardoned.

On December 30, 1905, former Governor Frank Steunenberg was killed by a bomb at the back gate of his house in Caldwell. The state was deeply shocked by this presumed retaliation for Steunenberg's actions in the northern Idaho miners' strike of 1899, and Borah delivered a dramatic and moving oration at the funeral on January 2, 1906. A little over a year later, he was again hired as a special prosecutor--this time in the trial of William Haywood on the charge of conspiracy to murder Steunenberg. Senior attorney for the prosecution was James A.

Hawley, who had opposed Borah in the Diamondfield Jack trial, was the most respected attorney in the state, and was soon to become governor. Hawley, Borah, and two Canyon County lawyers--Owen Van Duyn and William Stone--posed for the camera during the trial; Hawley is on the right and Borah, a very young-looking 41-year-old, is on the left in polkadot bow tie and white waistcoat. This photograph is in the Idaho State Historical Society Collection.

The Haywood trial was Borah's last courtroom appearance, for when the trial convened in the summer of 1907 he had already been elected United States Senator from Idaho. He had been chosen by the state legislature in January, on a straight party-line vote, and although he had officially taken office in March he would not go to Washington until Congress reconvened the next December. The trial gave Borah an opportunity to make a national name for himself; his opposite number for the defense was Clarence Darrow, already famous as a defense lawyer, and the participants in the trial received nationwide publicity. Indeed, Borah's summation of the prosecution case--made in a losing cause--has become a classic example of courtroom oratory.

When Borah was elected to the Senate, Boise's leading paper published an editorial that was remarkably accurate in its predictions, although it may have sold Borah a little short:

We know he has the capacity and the learning, the diligence and the patience to carve out a career for himself in the senate of the United States which will make the state feel still prouder of having sent him there. None of us look for any storming of the citadel of fame, for that is not the character of the man. He will not be found indulging in displays for effect, but when his opportunity comes, he will be found more than equal to the occasion and will surprise those who may not have measured his ability to sound and solve problems of every character.

And of course the paper was right. Borah was reelected to the Senate five times, once again by the state legislature and four times by the public, and in his years of service he had enormous influence on the United States government. After World War I he led the successful fight to keep the United States out of the League of Nations and the World Court, but he was also one of the people who encouraged the country's sponsorship of the great Washington Arms Conference of 1921-1922 and was strongly in favor of recognizing Russia after its revolution. He was a loyal party member and a good one, but he refused an offer to run for vice president with Coolidge in 1924 and one to lead the Republicans in the Senate under President Harding.

Living as he did long before jet planes made trips from Washington to Boise easy, Borah did not come home very often.

But since Congress met for shorter periods then, the trips he did make tended to be for a month or two at a time. During those trips, he did all the things politicians are expected to do: made speeches to all sorts of groups about the state, attended political meetings, and simply "appeared." And in Washington he was expected to be a representative of Idaho in both serious and light-hearted ways. For example, one picture in the Idaho State Historical Society Collection shows former Senator Fred Dubois on the left, Chef Nicholas Sabatini in the center, and Borah on the right as they inspect Idaho potatoes the good chef is about to cook for the Idaho State Society dinner at the Hotel Mayflower in Washington in March of 1926. Then there is an equally ceremonial appearance, this one in Boise. The Senator is the rather bored-looking gentleman on the horse in the middle, riding in the Fort Boise Centennial parade on September 13, 1934. During the same visit to Boise, the Borahs--who had no children of their own--sat and talked with two small residents on the steps of the Children's home. A most typical picture of Borah was taken in the early 1920's by great Boise photographer Ansgar Johnson, one of a set made as Borah stood on a street in downtown Boise. It is a warm portrait of a wise and quiet man. There are many more photos, both formal and informal, of the Borahs in the Idaho State Historical Society photo collection.