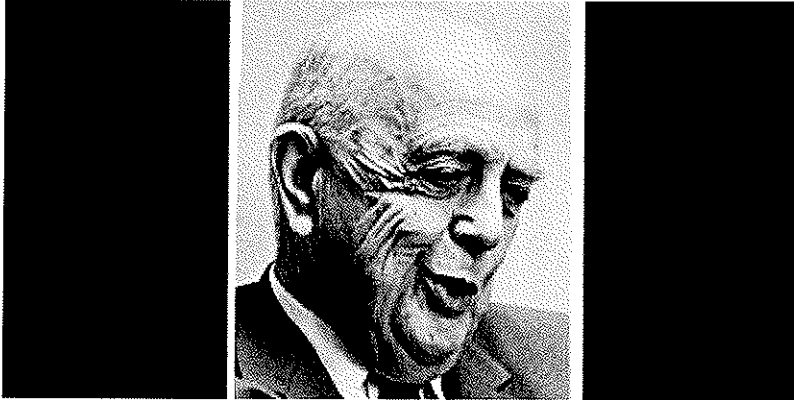


A retrospective look at St. Maries' only Governor



This photo of Governor Doc Robins was taken about year before his death during an interview with the Lewiston Tribune. Gov. Robins died 41 years ago this week.

By Chris Carlson

Published: Tuesday, September 20, 2011 4:01 PM PDT

By any measure, he was an extraordinary man. That he had a winning bedside manner is incontestable. Besides being a beloved “family doctor” who for 28 years delivered most of the babies born in Benewah County, he was an active community leader, a man of many interests, especially in political and public affairs.

Dr. C.A. “Doc” Robins, Idaho’s 22nd governor, was the right man in the right place at the right time in Idaho history. The first of the modern, post World War II governors, he set Idaho on a solid course into the future, shepherding through the Legislature new laws that created the State Building Fund, the Tax Commission, the Department of Labor while revamping Idaho’s antiquated prisons, revising its workman’s comp program, removing the highway department from the patronage system and forcing consolidation of Idaho’s 1,100 school districts into less than 200.

Yet today one can travel the length and breadth of Benewah County and not find a single public reference to one of Idaho’s most accomplished governors ever having lived and worked in St. Maries.

The prescriptions he wrote for the better health of Idaho’s future have stood the test of time. He, as well as his achievements, deserve remembering and commemoration, especially in his hometown.

Three examples provide insight into the character and values of the man.

When getting ready to run for the governor at the urging of some influential men, initially 13 and finally 19 in all, key backers and supporters, including lobbyists and Republican party activists, Robins asked for and received written pledges that none of these people would ever ask him for anything.

He applied this purest approach to political contributions as well. He never asked how much someone had given, never reviewed contribution lists and seldom got on the phone to solicit contributions. He did not want contributors or contributions to cloud his judgment as to what was in the public interest.

His medical patients came first and he placed the needs of the community ahead of his own political ambitions. First elected to the Idaho State Senate in 1938, he was elected three more times. His colleagues held him in such high regard that at the start of his third term in 1943, he was elected Senate president, the most powerful position in Idaho's state government next to governor.

Elected to a fourth term in November 1944, Robins was expected to again be named to the Senate presidency, but he unexpectedly resigned his legislative post because his partner in their medical practice, who was the only other medical doctor in St. Maries, suddenly died. Rather than leave his hometown without any doctor while he was away in Boise, Robins gave up political office. Community needs came before his personal needs.

Robins strongly believed that every person had an obligation to undertake some sort of public service at some point in his life. "I've always felt that any man, to be a good citizen, had to give some service," he once said.

Few people are living who were around St. Maries when Dr. Robins was practicing. Those that do recall Doc Robins, in many instances, were delivered by him, but universally all recall how kind and approachable he was.

Ardys Hughes who had been delivered by Dr. Robins some 85 years ago, echoed all those who took time to share stories and anecdotes with the Gazette-Record, saying simply, "He was a very kind man, a very decent person."

Retired attorney Tom Morris came by with a letter Governor Robins had written on his behalf when he needed a recommendation to enter a particular program in the U.S. Army right at the start of the Korean conflict. Morris said he owed his Army career to Doc Robins and would forever be grateful.

Lois Hodgson wrote a brief note from her apartment in Pullman, urging the editors read a story recalled by her mother in her book "Everything I know Came from the Bunkhouse."

Another person related how in a real sense Robins had transformed, if not outright saved their life by providing private and wise counsel on how to overcome a weight problem as a teenager. Such care truly reflected how the Iowa-born doctor went above and beyond the minimum requirements of care.

Others who shared stories included Raleigh Hughes, Carol Jensen, Bill Caswell, Julie Kinsolving, Sarah Mason and Francine Walters. Gazette Record editors and writers also owe a debt of thanks to retired Lewiston Morning Tribune publisher A. L. "Butch" Alford, who searched the paper's "morgue" for stories and pictures from their records which they graciously shared.

The man who was to become the doctor and the governor was born in Defiance, Iowa on December 8, 1884, but the family moved to Rocky Ford, Colorado, when he was four. Later they moved to La Junta, Colorado, where Robins graduated from high school in 1903.

He received his B.A. degree from a Baptist institution, William Jewell College, in Liberty, Missouri, in 1907, and, by his own admission, became a nomad for the next six years. He made his living by teaching and coaching women's basketball in places like Springfield, Mo., Rocky Ford, Colo., and Billings, Mont., and finally three years in Laurel, Miss., where he met Marguerite, the first Mrs. Robins, who he married in 1919.

Deciding he wanted to become a medical doctor he enrolled in the medical school at the University of Chicago and as so many aspiring students over the years he worked his way through medical school.

"I did everything. I sold boys' suits and overcoats in a store at State Street at Chicago. I sold Panama hats wholesale to merchants one summer," he said in an autobiographical piece he wrote for the Lewiston Morning Tribune on the occasion of his 84th birthday.

Robins also spent one summer as an adult caregiver taking care of a young boy who had just been discharged from a mental asylum. And, one summer, he measured ad copy in competing newspapers for the Chicago Daily News.

He voluntarily joined the Army Medical Corps in August of 1918 as a First Lieutenant but, as the war drew rapidly to a close, he was honorably discharged in December of 1918. This brief service allowed him to join the American Legion, and he later became post commander in St. Maries. With posts scattered across Idaho, it is a safe bet these became hubs of support when he ran for governor in 1946.

Doc Robins came to Idaho literally and figuratively by way of the Old Milwaukee Railroad. Returning to Chicago after his discharge, he met with the railroad's chief surgeon who gave him a one way ticket to Seattle on the condition he look at the communities of Three Forks, Mont., and St. Maries, Idaho n towns where the railroad had operations and were in need of a doctor.

Robins never even got off the train in Three Forks, but as he traveled through northern Idaho on his way to St. Maries like a cutthroat rising to a blue-winged olive fly on the St. Joe, he was hooked. He got off the train on Christmas Eve, 1918, and in every sense of the word was a gift from the Almighty to the people of St. Maries and the citizens of

Idaho.

He practiced medicine for 28 years becoming a vital, indispensable part of community life. Once established, he sent for Marguerite, they were married and he settled down. Marguerite died in 1938. They had no children.

On November 15, 1939, he married Patricia Simpson, a nurse at the hospital where he worked. Their union bore three daughters n Patricia, Paula Jean and Becky. Quite a bit younger than Doc, the second Mrs. Robins after Doc's death married prominent sawmill operator and timber owner R. L. Pugh from St. Maries, and after he died she married one of St. Maries' leading bankers, Ed Yenor.

Robins proved to be a vigorous, energetic campaigner, despite his age (61), criss-crossing Idaho while calling on and utilizing many of the contacts and organizations (where they existed) of fellow legislators. Besides being able to rely on the support of many medical doctors, pleased to see one of their own becoming chief executive, as well as veterans most of whom belonged to the American Legion, Doc also had strong support from Idaho's business community.

His resume included stints as chair of the St. Maries Chamber of Commerce and the North Idaho Chamber of Commerce.

Though he had support from many major figures prominent in Idaho's daily life, years later he singled out three to whom he felt especially grateful: former Idaho Supreme Court Justice Clay Spear; former Idaho legislator, PUC commissioner and journalist Perry Swisher from Pocatello; and, Republican activist Louise Shadduck, who became his executive assistant.

While Doc Robins later said he had been "drafted" to run for governor by a coalition and a cross-section of Idaho's political and business community, winning the nomination was no cakewalk. Former two-term Governor C.A. "Bott" Bottolfsen, a newspaper publisher from Arco, was seeking a comeback and there was a third candidate.

On February 11, 1946, Robins formally announced his campaign for Governor at the party's annual Lincoln Day dinner in Boise. In remarks to the attendees, he outlined his "Eleven Points of Order" that he intended to campaign on, and made it clear the decision to run had not been hasty.

Long-time veteran Idaho political correspondent John Corlett, then working for the UPI News Service and writing a weekly political report, said Robins had lined up all but three of the 53 Idaho GOP legislators in support of his candidacy. Corlett pointed out how unusual it was for a north Idahoan to have any support in southern Idaho, but Doc Robins did.

The primary, held on June 11, proved little more than a speed bump on the Robins juggernaut's drive to the governorship. He easily defeated the former governor by some

10,000 votes and his friends and neighbors in Benewah County delivered “big-time” for him. The final county count showed the town doctor with 771 votes, former governor Bottolfsen with 69 and the third candidate with 22.

Robins campaign then made a shrewd move: In political jargon, he lowered his profile, dropping off the radar screen for six to eight weeks.

In early September, following Labor Day, Robins emerged with a campaign blitzkrieg, addressing what he felt were the major issues facing the state and stumping across mostly southern Idaho for votes. He displayed skill on the major issue of liquor control, whether the state should be in the business and whether prohibition should be restored.

He called it hypocrisy for the state to have a liquor control monopoly, yet he did not say he would pursue stronger state law enforcement nor did he say he would seek a change in the monopoly. His ambivalence was dictated by the fact that a group of moralistic do-gooders, called the Allied Civic Forces, had placed three anti-alcohol and anti-gaming initiatives on the fall ballot.

Robins did stake out a clear position of opposition to the formation of a Columbia Valley Authority, which, like FDR’s Tennessee Valley Authority, would have taken charge of any future dam-building in the region and instituted even more public power entities across the northwest and guaranteed the demise of privately run power companies such as Spokane-based Washington Water Power and Boise-based Idaho Power.

Robins termed the drive for a CVA “another indication of the socialistic tendencies of the current national (Truman) administration.” If elected he pledged to fight the CVA concept and the efforts of the federal government to seize control over state waters.

In a speech he termed “government control of business astonishingly wasteful and extravagant... and the surest way to bankrupt not only the nation but the people.”

A month before the election, Robins began running print ads in the Gazette-Record, along with a full-page ad paid for presumably by the Republican Party that listed all the Republican candidates for office and included a short “open letter” from Robins apologizing for not having been able to spend more time in and around home asking for their vote.

For its part, the Gazette Record did not even pretend to be neutral or objective. Not only did it run banner headlines above the masthead urging votes for Robins, during the campaign it ran complete texts of his major speeches on the front page and published what can only be described as pure “p.r.” pictures of Doc as he campaigned in southern Idaho.

On November 7, 1946, he returned to St. Maries to vote the following day. Getting off the train in Plummer, he was greeted by a 14-car procession for the drive to St. Maries and a parade down Main Street led by the city’s fire truck. In brief remarks, he noted that

during the previous six weeks he had given more than 60 major speeches in southern Idaho and he exuded a justified confidence in winning.

His efforts were rewarded by Idaho's voters on Election Day. Robins steamrolled Arnold Williams, who had inherited the governorship when Charles Gossett resigned.

Robins received 102,233 votes to Williams' 79,131 statewide and in Benewah County his constituents gave him a two to one edge, 1560 votes to 864.

All three Allied Civic Forces initiatives lost decisively, not only in Benewah County but statewide.

On December 22, 1946, Robins left St. Maries for Boise to prepare to assume the governorship on January 5, 1947. Except for a few business visits, and for the two months after leaving office, he never again lived in his hometown.

Toward the end of his four year term, the 65-year-old Robins made one of the few political mistakes of his life. He allowed himself to be talked into running for the Republican nomination for a U.S. Senate seat, (It is the only time in Idaho history, because of deaths in the Senate that both seats appeared on the same general election ballot).

Six weeks before the primary, Robins filed for the six-year term and found himself up against a person who would become one of the great demagogues in Idaho political history, a lawyer and state senator from Payette County named Herman Welker. In the Senate, Welker was to become known as "Little Joe from Idaho," as he allied himself with ultimately disgraced Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy.

Robins never stood a chance, losing to both Welker and Congressman John Sanborn in the primary. To his dying day, though, Robins believed that had Sanborn not been in the race he would have defeated Welker, head-to-head. Truth be told, voters recognized that 65 was probably a bit too old to be starting as a freshman senator.

Turning the governor's office over to Republican Len B. Jordan, in early 1951, Robins spent two months in St. Maries weighing his options. He decided to relocate to Lewiston and anticipated going back to the practice of medicine. He altered plans though when the North Idaho Medical Service Bureau (the forerunner of what became Regence Blue Shield of Idaho) asked him to become its medical director.

He held that post until retiring on May 1, 1958.

Following several heart attacks, C.A. "Doc" Robins died forty-one years ago this week, just a few weeks shy of his 85th birthday, and was buried on September 20 in the Lewiston cemetery.

His life, his record, his considerable accomplishments beg the question of why this

extraordinary governor of Idaho, easily one of the 10 most influential figures in Idaho history, has no place named for him, no lasting monument other than the fading memories of a few who can recall him and a few followers of Idaho history.

If you agree with the editors and publisher of the St. Maries Gazette-Record that there should be some memorial to the only governor St. Maries and Benewah County will ever be able to call theirs, join us in calling on Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter to use his executive authority to rename Heyburn State Park after the much more worthy Robins.

Or call on Idaho's congressional delegation to rename Mt. Heyburn in Idaho's scenic Sawtooths after him.

Or call on Benewah County's commissioners and the city of St. Maries to erect some sort of appropriate monument to one of the area's greatest citizens.

Or do all three. C. L. "Doc" Robins merits remembering.