

Commentary: Marty Peterson Idaho jurist delivers poetic justice

Marty Peterson/Lewiston Tribune

One of the major voids of Idaho's 150-year history has been the lack of books by and about Idaho's political movers and shakers. Only four memoirs written by statewide elected officials come to mind. Three were written by former governors - Robert Smylie, Don Samuelson and Phil Batt - and one written by former territorial Congressman and U.S. Sen. Fred T. Dubois. The Dubois memoir, while incomplete, is the best of the lot and includes the only eyewitness account of President Benjamin Harrison's signing of the bill making Idaho a state. In addition, there have been a handful of biographies of Idaho politicians, including William E. Borah, Frank Church, Cecil Andrus and James McClure.

Add to that list a newly published memoir by former Idaho Supreme Court Justice Byron Johnson. Johnson, who served on the Supreme Court from 1988 to 1999, titles his book "Poetic Justice: A Memoir." It is an appropriate title since he is also a very serious poet.

In fact, Johnson probably comes closer to being a true renaissance person than anyone I've known in public office. In addition to writing poetry, he is a historian, a mountain climber (once making it to the 18,200-foot level of 20,000-foot Mt. McKinley), and talented writer. One of his other passions has been the preservation of the history and buildings of Idaho City, the old mining town north of Boise.

A native of Boise, Johnson pitched on the baseball teams of both Boise High School and Harvard. In high school, he once pitched in a game against Payette High School and struck out future Baseball Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew. After acceptance and scholarship offers from Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Princeton, he chose Harvard, both for undergraduate school and law school.

This is a book that should be required reading for all individuals contemplating a legal career. He takes you through his decision making in deciding to pursue law school and then determining the type of lawyer he wanted to be. It is a fascinating inside look at the options that were open to a talented young attorney and the paths that he chose to follow.

In the 1960s, Johnson became involved in Democratic politics that led to eventual unsuccessful runs for the Idaho Legislature and the U.S. Senate. He provides interesting insights into the world of Idaho politics and the give-and-take of dealing with various political personalities. This is the kind of insider material that only comes from the kinds of political memoirs and biographies in which Idaho is so lacking. One brief but fascinating reflection is his childhood friendship with Judge Charles Koelsch, the last surviving member of the team of lawyers involved in the prosecution of William D. Heywood for the assassination of former Idaho Gov. Frank Steunenberg.

Johnson was appointed to the Supreme Court by Gov. Cecil Andrus in 1988. He brought with him the first personal computer ever to be used by a judge and he became the leading advocate for use of technology by the court. During the next nine years, he would participate in 1,500 Supreme Court decisions.

The book provides a look at the inside workings of the court and some very candid comments about individual court members he served with. It is the kind of insight into the courts and judges that has been all but non-existent in Idaho's historical texts. But Johnson's legacy of documenting the activity of the court goes well beyond this book. He has also produced a series of video oral histories with several former Supreme Court justices and court employees, as well as one of himself.

Johnson continues to live in Boise with his wife of 28 years, Patricia Young. She is a retired Idaho magistrate judge. Her father, Merlin Young, was a former Idaho district court judge and U.S. bankruptcy judge.

"Poetic Justice: A Memoir" by Byron Johnson can be ordered online through Limberlost Press.

Peterson grew up in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley. He is retired and lives in Boise.