

The woman everybody knew as Bethine

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho remains a small enough, young enough state that its people remain on a first-name basis with their leaders

It's not Gov. Otter. It's Butch.

It's not Sen. Crapo. It's Mike.

It's not former Gov. Andrus. It's Cece.

So it was with a woman generations of Idahoans knew simply as Bethine.

Bethine Church, an Idaho political icon, died Saturday at her Boise home. She was 90 years old. She left behind a legacy that included a two-decade campaign to protect one of Idaho's jewels, the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, from commercial encroachment and the development of the Frank Church Institute at Boise State University, established in her late husband's honor.

As much as anyone, Church nurtured the DNA of Idaho's Democratic Party - rallying, educating and inspiring people such as former Congressman Larry LaRocco, former U.S. Attorney Betty Richardson, newspaper publisher and former gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brady and 4th District Judge Mike Wetherell.

But Bethine Church's larger legacy was her husband.

In 24 years in the Senate, Frank Church helped secure protection for Idaho's wilderness areas.

He was the force behind improving the lives of seniors, including cost of living adjustments for Social Security recipients.

On the national stage, Sen. Church was a voice for civil rights, for a rational foreign policy and for restraining the excesses of the intelligence community. There was never a hint of scandal because the Churches took pains to be exemplary. For instance, the family sold its Robinson Bar Ranch - at a fraction of its current value - to avoid any hint of conflict of interest during the SNRA debate.

Like William Borah before him, Church went on to chair the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and ran a spirited campaign for the White House.

Without Bethine, none of that would have transpired.

It wasn't merely that she nursed her husband back to health from a grim cancer diagnosis in the late 1940s.

Frank Church probably would not have advanced to the U.S. Senate on his own. By 1956, he was a 32-year-old failed legislative candidate whose path to the U.S. Senate required beating two established politicians - former U.S. Sen. Glen Taylor in the Democratic primary and incumbent Republican Herman Welker in a general election with popular GOP President Dwight Eisenhower at the top of the ticket.

That he did so - and won re-election three more times in a Republican state that had never before or since re-elected a Democrat to the Senate - was a reflection of his spouse's innate skills at retail campaigning and politics.

The daughter of one governor, Chase Clark; the niece of another, Barzilla Clark; and a cousin to a senator, D. Worth Clark, Bethine Church was legendary for remembering names and faces. She could charm just about anyone.

Church knew the backroads and precincts of rural Idaho. She forged many of the friendships and alliances that propelled her husband forward.

Frank Church narrowly lost a fifth campaign in 1980, and four years later the cancer he escaped in his youth claimed him at the age of 59. Bethine Church returned to Boise within a few years.

In the three decades since, the political axis has changed. Hardly anyone considers politics as a decent enterprise. The idea that politics can be a vehicle for improving the lives of people is greeted with skepticism at minimum and derision at worst.

But you don't need to look back too long ago to find people who believed in that virtue. Luckily, two of them lived in Idaho. - M.T.