

George Hansen's political high-wire act

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Former Congressman George V. Hansen used up all his nine political lives and, given the chance, he would have burned through one or two more.

He was capable of charming and embarrassing the same people - which he did for the better part of two decades.

By the time he died Thursday at age 83, he'd been off the public stage longer than he'd been on it - and anyone younger than 50 couldn't tell you what all the fanfare was about.

What it was about, of course, was one of the most gifted - and flawed - politicians ever to climb out of the back roads of eastern Idaho.

As a pitchman, he had no equal. Anyone who watched Hansen work his magic during a campaign would have to concede that Idaho's best politicians - former Gov. Cecil Andrus or the current occupant of that office, C.L. (Butch) Otter - could no more than match him and then only on their best days.

When he was first elected to Congress in 1964, Hansen pulled off the seemingly impossible - and rare - stunt of knocking off a Democratic incumbent in the year of LBJ's massive landslide.

But Hansen's career quickly devolved into a political high-wire act. He traded a safe seat from Idaho's 2nd Congressional District for the chance to challenge U.S. Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, in 1968. The experts told Hansen he was making a mistake. The experts were right.

The experts were also right about 1972 being Republican Jim McClure's year for retiring Sen. Len Jordan's seat. Hansen ran anyway and, notes political historian Randy Stapilus, emerged with the financial wounds that may have led to his ultimate downfall.

Then came the Watergate summer of 1974, when Hansen deposed the three-term Republican Orval Hansen of Idaho Falls in the GOP primary.

From there, it was a never-ending cascade of scandals, any one of which would have grounded mere mortal politicians.

But somehow Hansen survived.

He survived the 1975 conviction for violating the nation's campaign finance laws. He was saved by a legal defense that persuaded the sentencing judge that Hansen was merely "stupid, but not evil." The judge settled for a \$2,000 fine.

He survived another bombshell the following year when the Lewiston Tribune's Jay Shelledy reported Hansen had been delinquent filing his income tax returns between 1966 and 1975.

Hansen's Democratic challenger, then-state Sen. Stan Kress of Firth, came within a percentage point of derailing Hansen in the 1976 election.

Nor did Hansen pay any appreciable price for playing politics with the 1979-1980 Iranian Hostage Crisis. He traveled to Iran - twice - and his grandstanding was a violation of federal law.

By 1982, Hansen fatigue seemed to be setting in. A Rexburg college professor, Richard Stallings, got a respectable 48 percent.

Two years later, Hansen had been convicted of breaking the ethics laws by failing to disclose profits he had earned from the sale of silver futures. Ultimately, he would draw a prison sentence of up to 15 months and a \$40,000 fine - but first there was a rematch with Stallings.

Incredibly, the congressman with one foot in the federal penitentiary fell only 170 votes short of being re-elected. Stallings went to Washington, D.C. Hansen served two, six-month prison terms.

When he got out, there was more trouble. By 1992, he was convicted of bilking nearly 200 people of \$18 million and an eastern Idaho bank of about \$2 million in a check-kiting scheme.

Hansen drew a four-year sentence this time, but not before about 100 of his victims asked for leniency.

"I've never seen that kind of blind allegiance," U.S. District Judge Edward Lodge said.

And if you think that's enough of a twist, consider this: While serving the second prison term, Hansen's first conviction on the ethics charge was overturned. That knocked a year off his prison hitch and got his congressional pension restored.

But aside from the occasional newspaper interview, Hansen became an historical oddity: the Idaho congressman who had gone to jail - twice.

He had provided his constituents with two decades worth of political high-jinks and drama - but little else. There was no overreaching accomplishment or lasting piece of legislation bearing his imprint.

If you're looking for a legacy in Hansen's career, perhaps it lies in a cautionary tale for Idahoans who looked the other way while he broke the rules because they had confused Hansen's sincerity for integrity.

His successors are more run-of-the-mill. But, thankfully, they also happen to be responsive to the laws of physics. - M.T.