

'The treasures left behind'

Bibles used during their swearing-in ceremonies have deep meaning for Idaho officials

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - When Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little takes the oath of office on the Statehouse steps this morning, he'll rest his hand on a Bible that was printed 126 years ago in Scotland.

His great-grandparents presented the small, black volume to his 24-year-old grandfather in 1894, as he prepared to emigrate to America. It later passed down to his aunt.

"When she died, the relatives came over and cleaned out the house," Little said. "They grabbed the guns and whisky, but left all the books. This was one of the treasures left behind."

Like Little, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and the other constitutional officers take the oath this morning, and they'll do so using Bibles that have great personal meaning to them, both as reminders of their family history and faith and of important milestones in their own lives.

Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, for example, received his King James Bible from his parents almost 50 years ago.

"That was the Bible they gave me when I was baptized," Wasden said. "I've carried it with me ever since."

Within the Mormon faith, he said, children are baptized at the age of 8, when they become accountable for themselves and their actions. It's a solemn event, filled with recognition of the promise they're making to God and that God makes to them.

His parents' gift is another reminder of that early commitment. He keeps it close at hand, in his office desk.

"It offers a perspective on where I've been and the expectation of where I'm going," he said of the well-thumbed book. "It has great significance to me. There was never any question what Bible I would use (for the swearing in)."

Freelance writer Hannah Rosefield, who has studied the history of oaths, said the practice of swearing on the Bible dates back more than 1,000 years, to Ninth century England.

"In the absence of a structured royal government, certain transactions were conducted at the altar, with participants swearing on a gospel book," she noted in a story last year. English courts took up the practice three centuries later, she said, and it emigrated to America from there.

There's no requirement for Idaho officials to swear on the Bible. It's offered to them as an option, along with adding the phrase "so help me God" to the oath of office.

Nevertheless, State Treasurer Ron Crane - who has a two-year degree in religious education and once considered becoming a parochial school teacher - said he "wouldn't consider it any other way."

Crane will take the oath using a Bible he received in 1982, at the start of his 32-year political career. He said the practice honors the "inspired word of God, who is the final authority in my life," and brings with it a sense of humility.

"I'm reminded of what (former Gov.) Dirk Kempthorne said when we were sworn in in 1999," Crane said. "He asked everyone who was there, at the end of the day, to kneel and say a prayer for God to give him wisdom. To me, that epitomizes what we as constitutional officers ought to be thinking: We aren't all-knowing, we make mistakes, and we could use some divine help."

State Controller Brandon Woolf, who serves as a bishop in his church, had a similar perspective. He said the Bible talks frequently about "master and servant," which is a good reminder for any elected official.

Woolf takes his role as a public servant so seriously he brought his entire office staff in for a private swearing in ceremony Monday.

"I told them even though their hands weren't raised like mine, we were all taking the oath to uphold the Constitution and perform the duties of the office," he said.

The Bible he used is called a "Quad" because it contains the Bible and the Book of Mormon, as well as two related tracts, the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price.

The book is about six inches thick. It has hand-written notes and highlights throughout, reflecting the amount of time Woolf spends studying the writing.

"My grandfather gave it to me on my 16th birthday," he said. "I've used it ever since."

Secretary of State Lawrence Denney used a personal study Bible during his private swearing in ceremony Monday, when the term for all constitutional officers officially began. At today's public ceremony, he'll use a Bible that belonged to his mother.

Similarly, Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra will use a Bible that belonged to her brother-in-law.

Otter, who is taking the oath for the 13th time - including his third time as governor - uses a New American Bible that belonged to his father.

"He didn't have it when I was first elected (to the Legislature) in 1972," Otter said. "But when I took my first oath as lieutenant governor in 1987, Dad introduced me and brought his Bible. I got it when he died."

Otter and his father didn't particularly agree when it came to politics. His dad actually ran for the Legislature as a Democrat from Washington County in 1974, at the same time Otter was running as a Republican from Canyon County.

"We separated on what government should and shouldn't be," Otter said. "When I ran against Marjorie Ruth Moon for lieutenant governor in 1986, she'd stay with my folks when she was in Weiser. Frank Church, Cecil Andrus, they stayed with them as well. Of course, I was welcomed there, too."

Otter described his father as "a sincere, Roosevelt Democrat."

"They came out of the Dust Bowl in the mid-'30s with one child, came west from Kansas to Idaho," he said. "My dad was a very devout Catholic. He was a deacon in the church and raised nine kids; for the most part, we all still go to church."

The note cards his father used to introduce him in 1987 are still tucked into the Bible. The book has also been signed by the various judges who administered the oath.

Otter said he's not sure which of his kids will get it.

"Maybe whoever asks first, whoever feels it's valuable enough and personal enough to them," he said.

Then he added with a smile, "They can have it when I'm through running for office."

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