

# Idaho's Third Senator

*By Chris Carlson, The Carlson Chronicle*

In his wonderfully entertaining memoir, Joe Miller tells an incredible story about Bethine Church, the widow of Idaho's four-term Democratic U.S. Senator Frank Church.

Miller was for 40 years a top lobbyist in Washington, D.C., but early in his career he was paid a then princely sum of \$25,000 a year by the United Steelworkers of America to organize and run campaigns for the U.S. Senate. In his first outing, 1956, one of his winning "horses" was a young, political neophyte, Boise attorney Frank Church.

What Miller did not know but came to know, was the Senate and Idaho were getting two for the price of one. Had Miller known that he might not have crossed Bethine the first time he met her.

In his book Miller tells about flying to Boise shortly after Church had won a narrow victory in the August 6<sup>th</sup> primary over former U.S. Senator Glen Taylor, the singing cowboy. He recounts meeting in U.S. District Judge Chase Clark's home. Judge Clark was Bethine's father, Frank's father-in-law, a former governor of Idaho and as Miller puts it "a shrewd old hand in Idaho politics."

Also present was the Democratic national committeeman, Harry Wall, a movie theater owner from Lewiston; the state party chairman, George Greenfield; attorney Carl Burke, Church's boyhood chum who managed all of the campaigns; and, Bethine.

Miller admits he was not happy to have the candidate's wife sitting in the strategy session. His fear was self-fulfilling. In presenting the media strategy Miller emphasized the then somewhat unusual marketing of a candidate through large billboards across the state. Miller recalls Bethine firmly saying, "Democrats do not use billboards in Idaho," adding "they are absolutely out."

Miller shot back he had not come from Seattle at his expense to take part in amateur night. The battle lines were drawn and it was about to get nasty, but Judge Clark salvaged the evening by suggesting to Bethine that her mother needed her

help in the kitchen. Glaring at Miller, Bethine obeyed her father's suggestion and departed.

As Miller put it, "the billboards stayed in the budget, and Bethine stayed in the kitchen." Not for long, my friend. Not for long.

Hailing from the most prominent Democratic family in Idaho, Bethine had politics in her blood. It was part of her DNA. Many a Democrat across the state could recall meetings, J-J banquets or fund-raisers where Bethine would lead Senator Church into the room, greeting everyone by their first name.

"Frank, you remember John Collins from Malad," she would say, and the Senator would greet John like a long-lost brother. "Well of course I do. John, how are you?" Odds were he did not recall, but John never knew the difference. Anyone who was around the two knew who the best campaigner was, and the better politician.

Thus, she ably filled the role of chief counselor to Church, and doubled his reach as she developed a network of friends, colleagues, and other politically active women across Idaho and in Washington, D.C. It is virtually impossible to think of one without thinking of the other. They were and are absolutely inseparable.

Newly married to the future senator after he came back from World War II service in China (where he won a Bronze Star), she refused to let him succumb to a deadly cancer, literally willing him to live. Having received a new lease on life gave both of them a marvelous perspective on what really matters in this world.

Nineteen years after the senator's death in 1984 she published a memoir of their years together entitled *A Lifelong Affair: My Passion for People and Politics*. No truer words have been written.

On February 17<sup>th</sup> she turns 90 and will deservedly bask in the love and joy of her many friends, all grateful for the time and talents Idaho's third senator devoted to the people of this great state. Happy birthday, Bethine.