

Ken Robison: The activist

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

Ken Robison was a public man, in many senses of the term. He was a journalist, one of the most visible in Idaho for a decade and more. He was a state legislator (and in between his many successful elections, a candidate) over a span even longer. He was a civic activist and, more recently, an author.

Even so, after his death at Boise last week, no public services were held – at his request. And that seems entirely in character.

Though Robison was a public man, he did not go public because he enjoyed publicity or acclaim, or because he was such a social person – he did not seem to reach out for any of those things. Robison was a public man because of the cause, or rather causes, he was captivated by and that he undertook, and dominated much of his life.

To do that meant moving out of his profession. Robison was a news reporter at Pocatello (for the Idaho State Journal), the Associated Press in Boise and Denver, and for the Idaho Statesman at Boise. He had been in the trade for only about a decade when he was named editorial page editor at the Statesman, relatively young for that job, and he might have moved upward in the news business.

Instead, he moved more and more toward wild lands and wildlife conservation, writing about Hells Canyon and the White Clouds, about protecting wildlife and designating wilderness. Much of what he wrote was several years ahead of the general public discussion, for which he received national attention for his editorials but which also led him increasingly away from the news business. He became active and involved in conservation efforts around the state.

He became interested in taxes, too, but not in the way many tax activists, fixated on tax cuts, are. True to his in-depth researching nature, he dug into the way taxes are structured, into who paid what and who seemed to be overpaying their share. He was one of the leaders behind the 1982 initiative for the 50 percent homeowner property tax exemption, which has reshaped Idaho tax law ever since.

Quiet and low-key, Robison didn't present himself the way most gregarious politicians do, but having concluded he could make more progress as a public official, he decided to run for the legislature. Thorough as always, he threw himself into intensive campaigning. He lost his first race for the state Senate in 1978, won his second (in the Republican year of 1980), lost his third. Four years later he won election to the House in Boise's north end district, and kept on representing it for the next 18 years.

The Idaho Legislature proved a tough crowd to convince, more so as the years went on, and Robison was often on the minority side of things.

But the causes never went away, and he never forgot them.

After leaving the legislature he intensively researched and wrote a book, *Defending Idaho's Natural Heritage*, which was published in 2014. It consists of a series of stories about the battles over conserving Idaho's wild places and creatures, and it was dedicated "to all those who spoke up for fish and wildlife habitat, for flowing rivers and for exceptional natural areas."

When eventually someone writes a successor book to that one, they'll have to include Ken Robison.

And not just because of the specific contributions he made toward those efforts, but also because of the way he provided a role model for civic activism.

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