

Commentary Chris Carlson

When Idaho had a senator

Chris Carlson/Carlson Chronicles

At the risk of dating myself, some readers may recall an old folk song by Pete Seeger and made more famous by Peter, Paul and Mary.

The first line is:

"Where have all the flowers gone

Long-time passing?

Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?"

It is a poignant plea for something lost that never will be recovered.

Sometimes on weekends, my wife and I prowl through thrift stores and old bookstores. Recently, while cruising through a thrift place in Kellogg, I came across a tear sheet of a page from the Idaho Statesman from Sept. 1, 1912. The tear sheet was a full-page write-up by the Statesman's Washington, D.C., news bureau on the considerable legislative accomplishments of "the Lion of Idaho," Sen. William E. Borah, during the five-plus years he had served in the Senate.

The old Pete Seeger song ran through my mind with a slight variation in the words:

"Where have Idaho's senators gone

Long time passing?

Where have the statesman gone

Long time ago?"

Admittedly, the full-page article was a "puff piece," so glowing was the praise. It was clearly slanted, with quotes from other senators on what an energetic dynamo the Idaho senator was.

Borah had been chosen by the Idaho Legislature to take a vacant Senate seat in March 1907. The 17th Amendment to the Constitution changing senators' elections to a popular vote had yet to be enacted.

The Statesman article was also clearly signaling that the paper would be supporting Borah's bid for a second term, which Borah received from the Idaho Legislature in early January 1913.

Here are two quotes from the article.

As you read, ask yourself if you have ever heard anything similar said about Idaho's two current senators, Mike Crapo and Jim Risch?

From the Sept. 1, 1912, Statesman:

"A review of the Congressional Record for the past few years shows that no member of either branch of Congress has been more successful than Sen. Borah of Idaho in securing the enactment of legislation, and important legislation at that."

Another quote:

"So successful has Sen. Borah been with his bills of late that it is a matter of comment among senators. Not long before adjournment, one of the Senate leaders, who has been in public life for

nearly 30 years, remarked to some of his colleagues that 'Sen. Borah is the most successful man in charge of a bill that has been in the Senate since I have been a member of that body.' "

Few of the issues were simple or easy. Borah's list of legislation passed included the three-year homestead law, the children's bureau law, the eight-hour workday law and the law giving early patents for homesteaders on government reclamation projects.

Borah also took pride in defeating an Alaskan government bill that would have denied Alaskans any voice in their government. He led the charge for an alternative bill that provided a great degree of self-government. He also strongly supported passage of the 17th and 19th amendments, which provided for the direct election of senators and the vote for women.

Though a staunch Republican, Borah was a true progressive.

History notes his opposition to the League of Nations and his isolationist views, which, coupled with his reputation for great oratory, would have one think he was more of a show horse.

Aside from the fact that his favorite form of exercise was horseback riding early each morning through Rock Creek Park, Borah was clearly a work horse.

By all accounts a decent, honest, hard-working senator and loyal to his friends, the only blemish on his distinguished record was a rumored affair with Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who was married to the then-House Speaker Nicholas Longworth (a notorious rake himself).

The affair produced a daughter, and the story is the speaker vetoed naming the daughter Deborah (as in de-borah). Instead she was named Paulina (and nicknamed Aurora Borah Alice) and sadly took her life at age 30.

Borah collapsed and died in 1940 at age 74.

His widow, Mary McConnell (herself the daughter of a former Idaho governor and senator), survived him by 36 years, passing away in 1976 at the age of 106.

Some 77 years later, Borah is still remembered in Idaho along with his progressive record of accomplishments.

I have a challenge for readers: Name one piece of legislation today you can attribute to Sens. Crapo or Risch? They hold the two safest seats in the U.S. Senate. Crapo has just been re-elected to his fourth term, which when completed will tie him with Frank Church for the second-longest tenure. He could go on and perhaps break Borah's record of 33 years. Thus, he still has time to make a mark.

Right now, though, neither he nor Risch are going to be remembered by history for anything other than warming the seats. I wish it were otherwise.

"Where have the statesmen gone

Long time passing?"

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