



Ben Plastino

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Write-in candidate has hope

The decision of Nels T. Sahl, St. Anthony attorney and Fremont County Democratic chairman, to become a write-in legislative candidate, brings to mind a similar and successful effort in Bonneville County in 1980.

Martin B. Trillhaase, Idaho Falls mechanical engineer, was the star player. As far as anybody can remember, he is the only one in eastern Idaho to win a legislative seat in such manner.

Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, was the incumbent in the election. Friends of Trillhaase launched a campaign, without advance publicity, for the May primary intending to get at least 50 write-in votes. With 50 votes, Trillhaase's name could appear on the November general election ballot. It was a close call. He got 48 votes in Bonneville County and it was believed at first the movement had failed. However, it was found later that three more Trillhaase write-in votes had been cast in Butte County, then part of the legislative district.

"It was my friends that did it and it was a surprise to me," recalled Trillhaase.

In what was then considered a mild upset, Trillhaase unseated Miller, a four-term veteran, in a close contest. Two years later, Trillhaase repeated the victory by a wider margin.

Trillhaase, an Idaho Falls resident 32 years, served two two-year terms before he voluntarily gave up his

seat. He didn't seek re-election because he became disgusted when the courts took over the touchy reapportionment issue from the Legislature. He was also frustrated over many other legislative issues.

Trillhaase, however, was proud of his record because he says he had taken leading roles in legislation to control Utah Power & Light Co.'s soaring power rates. He also takes credit for "taking the teeth out" of the 55 mph federal speed limit law by making the penalty to drivers for speeding in Idaho only a maximum \$5 fine and no demerits.

Sahl, a former Fremont County prosecutor, is rated by observers to have a good chance of ousting the Republican incumbent, Rep. Cyril O. Burt, retired St. Anthony farm equipment dealer. He could perhaps crack the all-Republican eastern Idaho legislative delegation.

Brent Bell, of Rexburg, the Madison County Democratic chairman, said he also is working for a write-in candidate to oppose another Republican incumbent, Rep. R.L. "Dick" Davis, retired Rexburg contractor. One who he mentioned is Tom Kershaw, retired Sugar-Salem School District superintendent. There may be others. Davis defeated Kershaw in 1984.

The races would be in District 31, made up of Fremont and Madison counties.

Bell said efforts to recruit Melvin Hammond, popular former Democratic House leader, to run have

failed. Hammond served eight terms in the House, half of the time as the House minority leader. He gave up his seat in 1984 to become president of the Bolivia LDS Mission. He returned last fall to resume his Ricks College professorship. He said he presently is busy building a new home.

Sahl is the first county Democratic chairman in eastern Idaho to enter himself as a candidate. Earlier in Bingham County, Jeff Colson appointed himself to run against a Republican incumbent, Rep. Michael Simpson, now the House majority caucus chairman.

Also in Bingham, a well-known former state senator, Israel Merrill of Blackfoot, filed against Sen. Jerry Twiggs, Senate majority caucus chairman, in what should be one of the feature legislative races in Idaho. Merrill, now a Springfield grocer, served 20 years in the Legislature and was in Senate leadership. He is rated by veteran political observers and his peers as one of the most outstanding legislators to serve from eastern Idaho.

The only other legislative contest for the general election so far pairs Republican Rex Furness, of Rigby, and Democrat Raymond S. Lindstrom, of Lewisville, for the seat being vacated by six-term Sen. Vearl Crystal, R-Lewisville.

The only primary legislative race forces an eight-term veteran and a heavy favorite, Rep. Ray E. Infanger,

R-Salmon, to oppose Bill McMurtrey, of Arco.

Incumbents at this time should be favored, but that could change in campaign ahead.

In Bonneville County, Democratic Chairman Russell Webb says he is searching for write-in candidates; there is little time left for nomination. The secretary of state must be notified of such a candidate by 19, five days before the May 24 primary election.

Those Democrats who could be considered electable are Miller, Combo, Idaho Falls attorney; Bill Storer, former Iona mayor, have been in close legislative races in the past. There could be other candidates.

There are only four general election legislative contests thus far in the 18 seats in the 10 eastern Idaho counties. It is the fewest number of contests in a primary record. There were eight contests years ago and more in previous years.

The only primary race of proportion is in the 2nd Congressional District. Dane Watkins, of Idaho Falls, an eight-term state senator, must be heavily favored by 3-1. Janet L. Reid, Idaho Falls, a physician who has had little public exposure and apparently meager campaign financing. They are competing for the Republican nomination to oppose the incumbent, Democrat Richard Stallings.

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)