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O'Bryant's secret left marks

William J. "Jack" O'Bryant may move a little slowly these days, but he retains a dry sense of humor and a benevolent view of life.

After all, he is 93, the only surviving former mayor of Idaho Falls. He very well could be the oldest surviving past mayor of a major city in Idaho. He is one of the last district managers of the old Utah-Idaho Sugar Co. factory at Lincoln and has served as president of two LDS stakes.

W. J. O'Bryant

O'Bryant was not a firebrand or glib-speaking leader, but in his own quiet, deliberate way he got things done.

At Valley Care Center where he moved nearly a year ago, he has a warm smile for visitors and is interested in community and church affairs. He walks with a limp and uses a cane, his hearing is slightly impaired, and his memory in his own words "is sometimes a little short." In his slow drawl, however, he speaks lucidly and with aplomb.

He served as mayor of Idaho Falls from May 1959 to January 1964. He served a four-year, nine-month term because the Legislature in 1961 changed the date for biennial municipal elections from May to November on odd years. Shortly after that, the mayor's term was lengthened from two to four years.

The O'Bryant administration left its mark, which still benefits Idaho Falls residents.

He bought surplus electrical power from the federal government through the Bonneville Power Administration at far cheaper rates than Utah Power & Light Co. would have sold it.

His predecessor, Mayor John Rogers, had proposed buying additional power from the private utility. This BPA agreement is still in effect today.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching decisions took place in 1962. For $140,000 the city bought the Smith-Hart auto dealership garage, which now houses the city Engineering Department. It also purchased, for $131,100, 445 acres that would become Sand Creek golf course and the Sandy Downs rodeo grounds.

Idaho Falls Mayor Tom Campbell estimates that the Smith-Hart building is now worth about $200,000 and the Sand Creek property $2.5 million.

The city kept the property purchase a secret until the deal was final. O'Bryant said this was to keep the owners would not increase the purchase price.

That brought about unexpected consequences. Critics were angry that the purchase proposals had not been aired beforehand and many thought it was unnecessary.

O'Bryant and city Councilman Don Foote did not seek re-election in 1963. Two other councilmen, Phil Leahy and Alex Creek, were defeated, one of the rare times that incumbents here have not been returned to office.

In 1959, O'Bryant unseated Rogers, mainly because of the private power purchase issue. In 1961, he was re-elected over a former mayor, Thomas Sutton, a grocer. O'Bryant was succeeded by S. Eddie Pedersen, who served 10 consecutive years and was replaced by Campbell. Pedersen, a former tailor, died recently.

O'Bryant said he did not seek re-election because, "I thought two terms was enough. I didn't want to run again," adding with a grin, "I was afraid I would be re-elected."

He recalled the city was slightly in debt at times, but that it was in the black when he left office.

O'Bryant was born in North Powder, Ore., Dec. 19, 1893, and had four brothers and four sisters. Still surviving is a 90-year-old sister and two brothers in their late 80s.

O'Bryant worked for the sugar company 40 years in Utah, South Dakota and Idaho.

He came to Idaho Falls in 1948 to become the company's district Idaho manager at the Lincoln plant east of the city. He recalled the company showed a profit and had as many as 300 seasonal workers at its peak.

A few years after leaving the company, the sugar beet industry came on hard times, and the Lincoln plant closed. Before that, sugar factories at Rigby, Sugar City, Shelley and Blackfoot had shut down, and the once-thriving sugar beet industry disappeared from eastern Idaho.

After leaving the mayorship, O'Bryant served for several years as head librarian for the Idaho Falls LDS Genealogical Library.

After his marriage to the former Zora Haws in 1916, he converted from the Baptist to the LDS faith and rose rapidly in the Mormon Church. He served three years as stake president at Spanish Fork, Utah, and later five-and-a-half years as president of the Idaho Falls LDS Stake. He is presently a high priest.

His wife died two years ago. He sold the house he'd owned for 30 years when he moved to the rest home. He has five children, including a daughter, Mrs. Richard (Sharon) Nielsen of Idaho Falls.

He still attends church services and a few other functions, reads a lot, takes short walks and exercises mildly.

He was inducted into the Eastern Idaho Hall of Fame March 22, 1979, for "outstanding services to his community and leadership." He proudly showed the handsome bronze plaque.

He is an given honorary life member of the Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce. He served as director for United Way, was a Rotary Club member, and was active in Boy Scouts, serving as chairman of the Bonneville Boy Scout District.

He is an admitted "dyed-in-the-wool Republican." He said, "I would vote for a good Democrat, but I haven't found one yet."

He took out large ads in The Post-Register in support of former U.S. Rep. George Hansen during the 1982 and 1984 campaigns. He said he thought Hansen was unfairly prosecuted for false reporting of campaign finances.

He praised President Reagan and lamented that his critics "are attempting to discredit him" over the Iran controversy.

He praised the city administrations of Pedersen and Campbell, saying they were progressive.

Finally, he chuckled and said, "I have seven more years to go to be 100 and I'm going to make it or die trying."

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)