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ORO 1 8 1988

William Holden left legacy

The recent death of William S. Holden, venerable Idaho Falls attorney, brings to mind the hectic days just before and after Idaho Falls was declared the atomic reactor headquarters for what then was the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

William S. Holden

It was May 18, 1949, when the announcement came. Holden, along with two other leaders, E. F. McDermott, longtime Post-Register publisher and Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce special committee chairman, and Idaho Falls Mayor Tom Sutton, led in the jubilation. Idaho Falls, then a typical Western town of 15,000, hasn't been the same since. Its population has grown to an estimated 44,000 today.

Holden, who died May 20 at age 81, left a legacy that will be hard for anyone in the community to match. A modest, reticent attorney, he shunned publicity, fearing he would be taking credit from others.

Many of Holden's thoughts are contained in a tape recording he made shortly before he died.

He was more than the legal mouthpiece for the efforts that brought to eastern Idaho what is now the burgeoning Idaho National Engineering Laboratory. He took the lead in holding numerous conferences with government leaders in the nation's capital, as well as hosting conferences in this area with AEC moguls. He was then chairman of the chamber's special planning committee for the AEC.

In his reminiscences, he recalls a key battle that was fought in the U. S. Senate. It designated Idaho over Montana as the nuclear research site. Then came fierce struggles against Pocatello, Blackfoot and Arco for the site headquarters.

His widow, Ida Holden, a public figure in her own right, recalls how she and her husband hosted a dinner for six key AEC decision-makers, at their stately colonial-type home on South Ridge Avenue.

Pocatello was the chief contender to Idaho Falls, mainly because it had the U.S. Naval Facility to offer as a headquarters building. But Idaho Falls won the coveted designation, mainly because it is closer to the site and because of the city's better capacities to furnish services for the hundreds of new residents expected to come here.

Charley and Bill Campbell, owners of Rogers Hotel, now part of Shoup and B Street Plaza, sacrificed many rooms and offered most of the building as the first Idaho AEC headquarters. Actually, the first personnel were quartered temporarily at the City Building before shifting to the hotel.

The youthful-looking Leonard E. (Bill) Johnson was the first manager of the AEC's Idaho Operations Office.

Holden recalled in his tape that McDermott and Jim Brady, KIFI radio station manager, made several trips on behalf of the site procurement. Some Idaho Falls leaders even went to Boise to demand a correction from the Idaho Statesman. It charged in an editorial that Bonneville County had acted improperly in transferring $1 million to complete the road from Idaho Falls westward to what was then known as the National Reactor Testing Station, the predecessor of INEL.

Just last Aug. 9, Mrs. Holden was presented a handsome replica of the front page of The Post-Register of May 18, 1949, which carried the banner, "Idaho Falls Selected as Headquarters for Atomic Reactor Testing Station." The page showed a picture of Holden, McDermott and Sutton clasping hands in a gesture of victory. McDermott was Holden's leading supporter. The page also contained a story focusing on the new road to be extended and improved westward to the atomic site and Arco. At that time only a rough dirt road existed for a half dozen miles to the west.

The presentation to Mrs. Holden was made before some 200 INEL staff members at the Eastern Idaho Vocational Technical School. An accompanying letter of appreciation lauding Holden's vigorous efforts was signed by Troy E. Wade, administrator of the Research Section for Defense Programs for DOE at Washington and formerly Idaho manager; Mayor Thomas Campbell; Don Ofte, Idaho operations manager; and Con Mahoney, chamber president.

The historic account given by Holden on tape recalls the many oldtimers how the community leaders banded together to bring the coveted AEC prize here.

Holden's accomplishments, of course, went far beyond heading his pioneer law firm, one of the largest in the state. He was considered a foremost expert on irrigation water resource, civil rights and constitutional law. He won many citations and high positions for his legal endeavors in those fields.

Among his many offices he served as chairman of national water commissions, helped create the Idaho Water Resources Agency, served as chamber president and was Idaho delegate to the first White House Conference on Civil Rights. The list goes on.

He was leader of the Western States Water Council and led the successful fight when California and Arizona sought to export water from Idaho and Wyoming. Even now, there is a congressional law banning such a study.

His venture into politics was colorful and influential. He attended five National Republican Conventions and even served as secretary for one of them. He worked closely with U.S. Sens. Frank Church and Len B. Jordan on water matters vital to Idaho.

In his early years, he served on the staff of Congressman Addison T. Smith and also was national secretary for the Young Republicans of Idaho.

In 1956 he made his lone foray for high public elective office. He challenged Republican U. S. Sen. Herman Welker, an avid disciple of Wisconsin's colorful Sen. Joe McCarthy, the red-baiting spokesman who saw communists controlling the government. McCarthy's outpourings made for sensational headlines for a time but people became weary of the charges which lacked facts.

Holden appeared a favorite to unseat Welker but three others surprisingly entered the race, fatally splitting the opposition vote. They included John Sanborn, former congressman, and Ray J. Davis, ISU and former Ricks College professor. Welker won with only 40 percent of the vote, with Holden a strong second. In the general election, Welker was swamped by Democrat Frank Church, at 32 the youngest ever to become senator. Church had nudged out the maverick Glen H. Taylor by 170 votes in the Democratic primary. Some political observers believe if Holden had won the primary he would have defeated young Church.

Since 1949, INEL had made many strides, grown and become internationally significant. BORAX III was the first reactor to light an American town, Arco, in 1955. It had many historic firsts in the nuclear field, including the Naval Reactors Facility, which continues to be the training center for the nation's nuclear navy personnel.

With 10,500 employees now, the INEL is the foremost employer at a single facility in Idaho.

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)