



Ben Plastino

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City swelled in Foote's time

Former City Councilman Donald Foote is probably one of Idaho Falls best known residents because his many activities have touched nearly every facet of city life.

On the pudgy side now and with an ever-infectious smile, he daily greets a host of friends. He spends many weekday mornings at city golf courses playing with the "Bill Anderson group." He works in his yard at on West 15th Street and is still an avid fisherman.

"I've never had so much fun in my life," he said with a chuckle. "This is great."

Now 72, he spent 35 years as an agent with the Farmers Insurance Group, retiring three years ago. He has served on so many boards, committees, commissions and organizations that he can't remember them all.

A street was named after him, Foote Drive, near the airport.

His present leisurely life wasn't always that way.

It was on May 19, 1949, when the Atomic Energy Commission placed its finger on the Lost River desert to the west and designated Idaho Falls as its headquarters. The city has never been the same.

From a sleepy western town of some 15,000 it rocketed to more than double that in the following decade. It was the fastest-growing city in the state and one of the fastest in the nation. Even now, some old-timers regret the transformation.

Pocatello, Blackfoot and Arco also vied furiously for the headquarters, but the AEC decided Idaho Falls had the best to offer in the way of inexpensive power, recreation, sewer, water, housing, schools, airport and

other facilities.

"We sold Idaho Falls," recalled Foote. "It was not decided on politics. It was decided on merits. It has proven to be the right choice."

Foote served on the City Council and its key committees from 1951 to 1964. During that time period, the city fathers bore the brunt of the traumatic transition.

Foote first ran for the City Council in 1949, but was beaten by Chic Crabtree, a son of former City Councilman Ray Crabtree. Undaunted, he won on his second attempt two years later, along with veteran City Councilman Russell Freeman and Mayor E. F. Fanning. In that election, Fanning reversed an earlier defeat by Mayor Tom Sutton.

"Our city electrical system then provided all of our power," recalled Foote. "But, we soon had to buy power from private utilities to meet the demands."

The AEC demanded adequate housing and facilities for its personnel and got it. The AEC wanted Idaho Falls and surrounding communities to provide the housing, a historic switch from building its own as it had done at Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington, and at other nuclear installations.

The first AEC personnel, about a half-dozen people, were quartered temporarily in offices at the old City Council room at the City Building on then C Street, now renamed Constitution Way.

The phrasing from Charles Dickens' book of the Tale of Two Cities of "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times," aptly applied to the city.

The AEC had 25 employees by the end of 1949. It surged to 218 in 1950; 2,924 in 1951; 5,450 in 1958; and more than 10,000 now.

The AEC soon after took over most of the old Rogers Hotel, now part of Shoup and B Plaza, for its

headquarters. A few years later it moved to the old headquarters on Second Street east of Holmes. Some two years ago it shifted to the DOE Idaho Operations Office building on the north side.

"I guess we were lenient in our zoning and building specifications to provide housing and other city facilities that were needed in a hurry," said Foote. "We tried to accommodate them in every way possible and we did."

The first low-cost housing was at Bel Aire Addition on the northeast side, and Columbia Heights on the southeast. There were Willowbrook, Hillcrest and Rappleye on the north, Temple View on the west and later Homer and other additions on the rapidly expanding east side.

New schools were built. The city erected the Civic Auditorium adjacent to the new Idaho Falls High School on Holmes Avenue. There was a clamor against the location because it was then on the remote eastern flank with relatively few houses east of Holmes. That soon changed.

New city wells, streets, sewer and water pipelines and electric lines were installed almost overnight. Then came new grade and junior high schools and expansion of the airport. The federal government provided some financing to help.

The Civic Auditorium was dedicated March 3, 1953. William J. O'Bryant was mayor and Foote, Freeman, Vernon Johnson and John Rogers were the councilmen. Of those, only Foote is alive.

Foote remembers that among the major projects were those on 17th Street, such as the new bridge at Boulevard, railroad underpass, and the Snake River Bridge to accommodate traffic to the mushrooming housing areas.

Foote also recalls the city buying the old Smith-Hart building at C

Street and Park for \$140,000 to house the City Engineering Department, and the 445-acre Sand Creek property for \$131,000, site of the golf course, rodeo grounds and race track. They are now worth many times the original price.

At that time, however, there was an outcry because the purchase was kept a secret. Foote says that was done to avoid a sudden escalation in price. Nevertheless, this became a burning issue in the 1965 elections because many residents apparently thought it was high-handed. O'Bryant and Foote, correctly gauging the mood of the voters, did not seek re-election. Two other councilmen, Alex Creek and Phil Leahy, were defeated. It was one of the few times incumbent city councilmen have been beaten.

Foote was born in Escalante, Utah, but the family moved soon after to Antelope Flats east of Idaho Falls. He was a member of the first Ririe High School graduating class. After high school graduation, he took engineering courses with the old Civilian Construction Corps. He then worked as an engineer for Morrison-Knudsen at Johnston Island some 850 miles south of Hawaii in 1941-42. They were building an air base for the war against Japan. He remembers Japanese submarines shelling the island.

Foote returned to Idaho Falls in 1942 and has lived here ever since, most of the time at his present home. He married the former Maxine Park and they have three daughters, all living in Idaho Falls. They are Mrs. Richard (Sharon) McCafferty, Mrs. Larry (Michelle) Fitch, and Mrs. Edward (Diane) Overman.

Foote says he remains happy as he sees the city continue to progress.

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)



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