

From Burns to Salem, Sen. Bob Smith leaves his mark

Some observers of the scene in Salem are only half kidding when they claim Robert F. Smith is the best lawyer on Senate Judiciary Committee.

The remark is intended more as praise of the Republican Minority Leader's common sense, then a slur on other members of that panel. Nonetheless, he is the only one without formal legal training.

During legislative sessions, Judiciary studies bills with legal implications. Consequently, that committee oversees more proposed legislation than any other with the possible exception of Ways & Means. Members almost always are lawyers.

How did GOP Smith from tiny Burns (Pop. 3,600) earn the reputation that led to such an appointment in a heavily dominated Democrat Senate? An immediate answer would be to cite his singularly outstanding service for six successive sessions in the House of Representatives. Among the youngest ever (at 29) to serve when elected in 1960, Smith became both Majority Leader and Speaker Pro Tem in 1965 and '67 sessions and Speaker twice in '69 and '71.

But his elevation to the Senate in 1972 coincided with decisive Democrat takeovers in both chambers. And it takes more than a track record in the House of Representatives for a minority freshman to gain recognition and respect in the Senate.

Bob Smith's character building began before his birth. It stems mostly from three individuals and a portion of this state as inhospitable as any. Smith's Senate Dist. 30 covers seven counties in Eastern and Southeastern Oregon—almost 41,000 largely barren square miles—comprising 42 per cent of the state but home to only 3 per cent of the population.

An admirer with a mathematical bent once figured every man, woman and child on earth could be spaced on 100 square feet apiece and there'd be land left over for two million football fields, 220,000 Empire State Buildings and you could still fire a rifle in any direction without endangering life or property.

Actually about the size of Ohio, the area is larger than 14 other states and bigger than the smallest seven combined. But the land is only part of the story. Smith's Texan father journeyed to Alaska following graduation from Tulane University to be a physician for a thousand cannery workers near Seward. He quickly went broke attempting to care for a largely self-ministering native population and earned just enough to escape the territory by horse-logging scrub timber for railroad ties. As an oil field roughneck in California, he confided to an acquaintance his ambition to practice medicine in some desolate, ornery corner of the country at least 300 miles from the next nearest town. The friend had just come from such a spot and said the would-be doctor should go to Burns. He did. It was the winter of 1912 and took the intrepid traveler a full day to reach Sage Hen Hill—about 20 miles west of town—before subzero temperatures incapacitated his model-T. The shack of a local desperado provided temporary shelter that night—and his reluctant host begrudgingly hitched team to sled and hauled the new doctor to town next morning. Only after his arrival did Dr. Smith learn the man was purported to have gunned down five fellow Oregonians—in self defense.

Senator Smith's mother arrived on the scene as a public health nurse from Minnesota—assigned to solving a protein deficiency among local Indians and the pair wed in 1930.

Largely as a diversion from meeting the health needs of his widespread patients, the elder Smith purchased a "little old place" south of Burns. It consisted of 1,500 acres and supported about 100 head of cattle.

By the time he was 10, young

Bob Smith spent every available minute on the ranch and before he was a teenager got to join other ranchers for the

annual cooperative roundup of calves born on the open range. Rising before daylight, the only kid in the bunch brought

in the hobbled horses and was responsible for firewood and water. Heading out at daybreak, he shared lunchless days in the saddle and returned at sunset with the other ranch hands to hastily eat and collapse in bedrolls on the ground.

After an early youth as satisfying as any boy could imagine, tragedy struck twice while Bob Smith was a freshman at Willamette University. Heart attack claimed his father and six months later his mother died in a traffic accident.

A widowed Irish immigrant, Margaret Bambrery, had been helping out at the Smith home in Burns for several years and she stayed on—encouraging young Bob to continue his education and vowing to remain until he was happily married and she had a

chance to babysit his offspring. Smith didn't marry until he was 35 (his bride, Kay, 29) and Mrs. Bambrery got to sit two of the three Smith children before she died at age 89. Well along with his legislative career, the lawmaker-

rancher had operated a construction business, tire shop and gasoline wholesale enterprise. The ranch grew to 12,000 deeded acres and grazes 1,700 head of cattle. Along the way

Cont. on page 13

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By Jack Zimmerman

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