

## **BILL SHEFFIELD PASSES**

Bill Sheffield, the 5th governor of Alaska, died Friday, Nov. 4, at his home in Anchorage, surrounded by friends. He was 94. Governor Sheffield called Alaska home for over 70 years. He was Governor from 1982-86. His commitment and contributions to the State of Alaska and City of Anchorage – as an entrepreneur, businessman, public servant and philanthropist – filled his life with purpose, vision and projects.

William Jennings Sheffield was born in 1928 in Spokane, Washington to Hazel and Bill Sheffield. His father's insurance business dried up during the Great Depression and the family survived on the small family farm. It was likely through the lessons of his early childhood that he learned to work hard. Early on, he developed a ferocious work ethic that stayed with him throughout his life.

Sheffield suffered a serious speech disability throughout his youth – he did not overcome the stutter until after he came to Alaska – yet graduated from high school in Silverdale, Washington. In a speech there many years later, he told students about the adversities of his childhood and of growing up with a serious stutter. He wanted them to understand that they could succeed as he had.

Sheffield had a lifelong love of flying. He and some high school friends pooled their money to buy an old crop duster plane. They delighted in the memories of that crop duster for years to come.

With World War II over and high school behind him, Sheffield joined the Army Air Corps (now the US Air Force) where he trained as a radar technician. He had vivid memories, good and bad, from the Army. Among the good memories were travels to Florida, Louisiana and Illinois where he saw new places and met new people. On the other hand, his stutter was so severe that sometimes he went weeks missing paychecks because he could not say his name when called.

Sheffield came to Alaska from Washington State in 1953 to sell and service household electric appliances - vacuum cleaners and televisions - for Sears Roebuck.

In pre-statehood Alaska, he found a strong sense of community and public service and he became very active in the Jaycees (Jr. Chamber of Commerce). Sheffield called joining Jaycees one of the best moves he ever made. He formed lifelong friendships there and learned skills that would serve him well throughout his life.

“Working in the Jaycees forced me to become comfortable in talking to people, running meetings, building organizations and asking for contributions to the causes we were promoting,” he wrote in his memoir.

Those were exciting times in Alaska. The drive for statehood gave the Jaycees, and other community organizations, a huge canvas on which to sketch their visions of the future.

Sheffield could see the need for infrastructure to support a new state and its growing population.

In 1958, he and his friend Brad Phillips from Jaycees leased a small apartment complex, renting rooms to tourists in the summer and teachers in the winter. It was Sheffield's first foray into the hospitality industry.

Never one to limit his vision and dreams, Sheffield went on to found Sheffield Enterprises and would ultimately own 19 hotels in Anchorage, Whitehorse, Juneau, Valdez, Sitka, Kodiak and Ketchikan. He was proud of his contributions to tourism in the new State of Alaska and Canada. There were many obstacles to overcome, including cleanup following the 1964 Good Friday earthquake, but his persistence and commitment paid off. He sold the business to Holland America in 1987.

Sheffield met Lee Buhlert in the 1950s and they married in 1969. While running the successful Sheffield Enterprises, he and Lee enjoyed fishing and boating in Southeast Alaska, tending their dogs and spending time with Lee's sisters in California. They built a vacation home in Rancho Mirage and worked with the community organizations they believed in.

In 1977, Sheffield threw his hat into the 1978 gubernatorial election. But soon after, Lee was diagnosed with lung cancer. They aborted the campaign and Lee died nine months later.

A lifelong Roosevelt New Deal Democrat, Sheffield was a practical centrist who focused on basic things that he thought everyone ought to have or have access to. Growing up during the Great Depression, he saw first-hand how government could improve peoples' lives. After Lee's death he threw his considerable energy, determination and that work ethic into a run for Governor.

The campaign took Sheffield all over Alaska and he loved it. Meeting people and campaigning energized him. Adding to the excitement of the 1982 campaign were two highly controversial ballot propositions, on subsistence and the capital move.

Sheffield's own opinions on these issues were strong. At a gut level he understood that Alaskans who depended on hunting and fishing to subsist should have priority. And he always opposed moving the capital from Juneau. His opponent in the General Election was his old friend Tom Fink who was on the other side of both issues.

Sheffield was elected as the fifth Governor of the State of Alaska and served from 1982-1986, with Stephen McAlpine as his Lieutenant Governor. He loved being Governor and the work of being Governor. He arrived at the office early, stayed late and worked weekends. None of his staff could keep up.

Sheffield's over-arching mission as Governor was to improve Alaskans' lives and their opportunities. There was a lot to be proud of:

—He completed the state's takeover of the Alaska Railroad from the federal government.

- He shepherded state financing for a road and port system for the Red Dog Mine in Northwest Alaska. The lead and zinc mine created hundreds of jobs for rural Alaskans and opened a new revenue source for NANA, the Native Corporation that owns the land. Thirty-seven years later, the state is still receiving revenue from its Red Dog investment.
- Sheffield opposed offshore oil development in Bristol Bay and strengthened regulation of placer mining and logging on state lands.
- He supported funding for victims of domestic violence and increased day care opportunities.
- He appointed more women to the judiciary than any previous governor.
- He began a system to classify public employees, a critical step to pay equity for women.

Perhaps most important, Sheffield bucked political pressure and used his executive authority to deposit \$700 million in excess oil revenue into the Alaska Permanent Fund.

Sheffield ran for re-election in 1986, but that was probably doomed by two events.

First, a grand jury investigating procurement practices accused Sheffield of attempting to steer a contract for office space in Fairbanks to a political ally and lying about it. Although the grand jury did not find evidence for an indictment, the panel urged the Alaska Senate to use a political process instead and begin impeachment proceedings against Sheffield. The Senate Rules Committee held hearings, but ultimately did not recommend impeachment.

The other, likely more devastating impact to his second run was the 1986 plunge in oil prices from \$20 a barrel in May to \$12.50 and then down to \$8 a barrel. The result was that 40% of the state's budget was unfunded.

There was no easy way out of the dilemma, but Sheffield concluded that as governor he had the responsibility to take decisive steps. He cut 320 state positions and reduced salaries of all exempt and partially exempt staff, including his own. Sheffield believed that even more than the grand jury report, it was the budget cuts that cost him the re-election.

Since Holland America had purchased his hotel business in 1987, there was no business to return to once his term as governor was up.

Not one to sit idle, Sheffield left his beloved dog Carl with his housekeeper Christina Loris, while he travelled extensively for Martec, an international firm engaged in environmental cleanup of European sites following the breakup of the Soviet Union. During these travels, Sheffield fell in love with Prague and often said that, outside of Anchorage, it was his favorite city in the world. He and his longtime companion Cheri McGuire would return several times in later years.

In 1997, Governor Tony Knowles appointed Sheffield to the Alaska Railroad Board of Directors where he was elected chair. When the hunt for a new CEO came up empty, Knowles suggested Sheffield throw his hat in the ring. Railroads had been a passion for Sheffield. As Governor, he had completed the state's takeover of the Alaska Railroad from the federal government. Sheffield held the CEO position until retiring in 2001.

That retirement didn't stick. In 2001, Anchorage Mayor George Wuerch asked Sheffield to run the Port of Anchorage (now the Port of Alaska) on an interim basis until the Port could find a permanent CEO. Sheffield ended up staying at the Port until 2012 when he retired for good.

As he always had, Sheffield continued to put his energy and vision to work for the good of Alaska and its people, including sponsorship of the Lee Sheffield Infusion Center at Providence Hospital in Anchorage in memory of his late wife, and three terms on the board of the Alaska Community Foundation.

In recent years he was recognized by numerous organizations: the 2017 Eugene R. Wilson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Fundraising Professionals, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Democratic Party of Alaska, an honorary doctorate from the University of Alaska, and Philanthropist of the Year by Girl Scouts of Alaska.

Once he finally stopped working, Bill and Cheri had more time for adventures in Alaska and around the world. He and Cheri's travels included Prague, Mexico and Rancho Mirage in California. Many of those travels and good times were shared with close friends Stephen and Dana McAlpine, John and Margaret Pugh, and Rhonda Roberts and Dean Nelson.

Fishing factored heavily in their summer schedule. Sheffield could eat salmon every day. He and BFF Kevin Bruce had a rule on fishing trips that each night's meal had to have been harvested that day from the water.

Road or train trips to Denali and Seward were frequent. He loved Big Lake and treasured each trip there. Sheffield loved to entertain, and his home was legendary as the scene of fundraisers for politicians and community organizations, as well as birthday parties.

Every year, he looked forward to the annual Thanksgiving dinner he hosted in Rancho Mirage. He loved to talk current events and politics, enjoying a nice Scotch. His sense of humor buoyed any occasion.

Sheffield was preceded in death by his wife Lee, his step-daughter Deborah, his parents, his brother Harold, friend Kevin Bruce and beloved dogs Lord Baranoff, Heidi and of course, Carl. Bill is survived by Cheri McGuire and a long list of friends and admirers

Governor Sheffield commented often on how blessed he was in life to have come to Alaska and to have such wonderful friends. His friends considered themselves blessed as well

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