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Legislative News
2008 Political Campaigns
2010 Political Campaigns

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Editorials
Guest Columns

FEATURES

2008 Democratic
National Convention
Jerry Kopel
InnerView
Jay Fox's Dining Guide
Politi-Flix
Politics Uncorked
'Those Were the Days'

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Guidelines

Guest Columns

SMITH: ADAMS COUNTY POL WAS A SOFTIE AT HEART

Eldon Cooper was a tough, hard driving legislator

4/19/2013

By **Morgan Smith**
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

"I just shook hands with a good man," a patient named George says, pointing to Eldon Cooper. It was May, 2012 and we were at the Colorado State Veteran's Home in Aurora. Even though Eldon was in a wheelchair then, he would visit once or twice every week, bringing friendship to older veterans, many of whom were totally alone. His second visit that day was to Ed Gatewood, 92 years old. When Eldon said something about how you can die at any minute, Ed responded by saying, "You're too ornery to go early."



MORGAN SMITH
GUEST COLUMNIST

Eldon and I went back to 1972 and Adams County politics. I was making my first run for the Colorado House of Representatives. Eldon was already in the House, preparing to run uncontested for re-election.

Then the Secretary of State gave us a jolt. Eldon had changed

residences during the re-apportionment process that took place in the 1972 legislative session. As a result, the Secretary of State ruled that he hadn't been in his new residence long enough to be qualified to run for office.

Technically, it looked like he was out of luck. The law was clearly against us. Fortunately, however, we had justice on our side, namely Adams County District Judge Jean Jacobucci. So I volunteered to represent Eldon, thinking that I could win the case for him and also get some good publicity for my own campaign.

When the case came up for trial, state Rep. Don Friedman, a Denver Republican appeared and said that he wanted to testify for Eldon. I put him on the stand and asked him a totally inappropriate question — "Was it the intent of the General Assembly that the new district boundaries preclude Eldon Cooper from running for re-election?"

Jim Kreutz from the Attorney General's office (his wife, Martha later served in the House) objected in outrage. Judge Jacobucci agreed with his objection but then said that he wanted to hear the answer anyway. That was when Kreutz knew that he had been home towned and that Eldon was going to win. Luckily for us, the Secretary of State and the Attorney General elected not to appeal and Eldon was able to continue his fine career in the legislature.

Later Eldon, a superb roper, tried to repay me by inviting me to his roping

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Eldon Cooper addressing the Colorado AFL-CIO in September of 1975.

File photo by The Colorado Statesman



State Rep. Eldon Cooper works at his desk at the state Capitol in 1972.

File photo by The Colorado Statesman

club and letting me use his horse. I had been a very mediocre saddle bronc rider as a teenager and had gotten bucked off in about every rodeo arena in western Colorado. But I was a truly pathetic roper and gave it up after two embarrassing sessions.

After our service in the legislature, I rarely saw Eldon. Once was when Governor Roy Romer and I went to a labor meeting to say that we were supporting the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Eldon, fiercely committed to the union movement, was not happy with us.

Then, learning from former Sen. Tillie Bishop that he was having health problems, I met him for lunch at Racine's in December 2011. He was sitting in a booth when I got there and looked the same — full head of hair, broad powerful shoulders, that intense, alert look.

"I thought I was invincible. Being an old cowboy, I never thought I'd get to this," he said, telling me that he had to walk with a cane or walker or sometimes go in a wheelchair. I could tell how badly he missed Mary Jo, his wife of 62 years who had died in June, 2009. He talked about his huge family which included, believe it or not, 27 great grandkids and 4 great great grandkids. Born in Colorado Springs, he grew up on his father's dry land homestead in Yoder, a beautiful place when there was rain. "Waves of gramma grass like an ocean," he called it. In 1932, however, after four years of drought, they packed up and headed north with four wagons, ten horses and eleven cows. It took them eleven days to get to Merino. "Most fun I ever had in my life," he said about sleeping under the wagon and shooting rabbits for food.

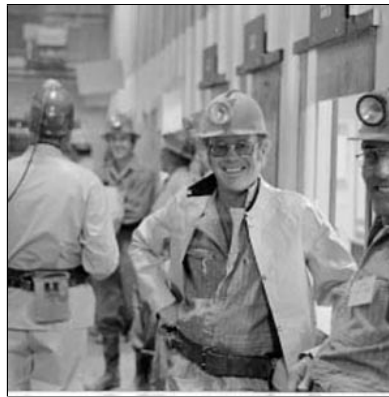
When our lunch was over, Eldon insisted on me leaving while he took care of the bill. I realized later that he didn't want me to see him get out of the booth and struggle to walk.

From then on I would call about once a month. My next visit was when we went to the Veteran's Home that following May. He was in a wheelchair full time by then but moved around so quickly that I could barely keep up. Then he transferred to a nursing home in Brighton. I had planned to visit next week but obviously it's too late. Eldon died April 16.

Eldon was a tough, hard driving legislator. I remember him taking on Ted Strickland over Ted's anti-rodeo bills; that was a huge boost for Dick Lamm's campaign for Governor against Ted in 1978. But he didn't let party labels deter him. Republican Sandy Arnold from Boulder was the legislator he admired most; he even offered to give up his seat and help Sandy run for Governor. When Joe Shoemaker couldn't get a House Republican to carry the bill to create a dental school, Eldon jumped in and carried it successfully.

Beneath that toughness, however, was a deeply caring human being. The patient named George had it right. Eldon was a good man.

Morgan Smith is a former state representative and Commissioner of Agriculture. He can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net.



This photo shows state Reps. Eldon Cooper, right, and Morgan Smith about to go down into the Idarado Mine at Ouray. Both legislators served on the Interim Committee on Mineral Taxes.

File photo by Morgan Smith/The Colorado Statesman