

Robert Vernon Cook (1925–2008)

By J. Evan Smiley

Robert Vernon “Vern” Cook served in the Oregon State Legislature from 1957 to 1981. Described by those who knew him as an iconoclastic and staunch Democrat, Cook spent his years in the legislature advocating for the working class, particularly in regard to taxation, workers' compensation, and labor rights.

On October 14, 1925, Vern Cook was born on a family farm eighteen miles from St. Francis, Kansas, to Verl and Helen Cook. His family moved to Las Animas, Colorado, in about 1930, then to Gresham, Oregon, in 1937, seeking opportunity during the Great Depression. Cook graduated from Gresham High School in 1943 and enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve. He contracted polio before having a chance to serve, however, and received a medical discharge. He then attended Reed College in Portland, where, he later recalled, he was exposed to ideas and people he had never encountered in rural East Multnomah County. To pay for his college education, he took multiple jobs, including selling magazines, working as a fireman, and being a concessionaire, selling balloons, novelties, and ice cream for the Multnomah County Fair and seasonally for local carnivals and fairs in Oregon and California for seven years.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in political science from Reed in 1948, Cook studied at the University of Oregon School of Law from 1949 to 1952. He passed the Uniform Bar Examination and briefly practiced law in Sandy before opening his own practice in Gresham. He was active in the Oregon Democratic Party, serving as president of the Young Democrats of Oregon Caucus from 1954 to 1957 and as the national regional director of the Young Democrats of America Caucus in 1956. He married Beryl Patricia Kirkwood Cook in 1956; they had five children.

Cook's first political campaign was also in 1956, when he ran successfully for Multnomah County's District 7 seat in the Oregon House of Representatives. He served in the House from 1957 to 1961, when he was elected to represent the 12th District in the Oregon Senate. Cook served on the Taxation and Elections Committee in his first House term. In the Senate, he served on the Judiciary Committee, where he advocated for labor rights and protection against domestic violence. Although he was an outspoken Democrat, he opposed liberal social policies, including affirmative action.

Cook's work in the legislature centered on advocating for the working class. He often spoke out against the influence of special interests in government and how they hindered policies that would otherwise benefit lower income residents. He adamantly opposed a sales tax in his first vote as an Oregonian in 1956 and throughout his time in the legislature, believing that a sales tax placed a disproportional burden on lower income residents. Instead, he supported increasing the income tax on people at higher income levels and taxes on generational wealth, such as inheritance and property taxes.

In 1980, Cook lost his bid for re-election to the Oregon Senate to Ruth McFarland. After twenty-four years in the legislature, he returned to Gresham in 1981 to practice law. He became a municipal judge for the City of Gresham and the city attorney for Troutdale, where he had lived while he was in the Senate. He also served on the board of directors of Mt. Hood Community College in 1999.

Vern Cook died in Portland on December 6, 2008, when he was eighty-three years old.

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