

Denzil Eugene “Denny” Jones (1910–2012)

By Jeff Mapes

Denzil Eugene “Denny” Jones was a rural Oregon legislator of the late twentieth century who gained an enduring legacy in the state capitol. Part of it was his sheer longevity, serving for twenty-six years until the age of eighty-eight—and then hanging around to talk about it until he was 101. His hardscrabble upbringing in frontier eastern Oregon made him a living link between the state’s pioneer past and its increasingly urban future.

Perhaps most of all, the Republican lawmaker won plaudits from both political parties for working across geographical divides. He never wavered in his disdain for environmental activists and their legislation and he had his prejudices, but he was a pragmatic leader who worked with urban Democrats to come up with money for Portland’s light-rail system. He backed funds for public defenders, arguing it was part of providing a fair trial. “I try to represent the whole state,” he said in 1997. “Except if it comes down to the nut, I’m going to support Eastern Oregon.”

The sheer mythic sweep to the life of Denny Jones was his political brand. Forced to fend for himself in many ways after his mother died when he was five, he later raced horses and built his own cattle ranch in far southeastern Oregon. He had a collection of colorful tales that read like the plot of a gritty western, including one about the time a cousin came upon a shotgun-wielding man claiming part of his land, only to grab the gun and send the interloper scurrying away. “That’s the kind of court system we had,” Jones quipped.

In a more serious vein, he proudly proclaimed in 1992, at the age of eighty-one, that “I’ve probably done more physical work than 90 percent of the people in the state of Oregon. I mean hard labor and it never hurt me a bit...and I intend to keep on doing that.” As a result, few around the capitol were surprised a few years later to hear that Jones was riding his horse when he fell and broke two ribs. He stood up, lifted himself back into the saddle, and rode home.

Jones was born in the Morrow County town of Lone on September 21, 1910. After his mother’s death, he and his older brother lived in a bunkhouse with other ranch hands while his father was frequently gone on other jobs. His father remarried, but Jones reported that his stepmother never cared much for him, to the point that he frequently went hungry. Jones found prosperity in raising cattle in Malheur County, where he and his wife Mildred had two children. He was active in local government and civic groups, including being president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association in 1967. He also lobbied the legislature for several years.

Elected to the Oregon Legislative Assembly in 1972, Jones soon gained a seat on the Ways and Means Committee. From that perch, he looked out for agricultural interests, pushing to cap grazing fees on state lands and protect water rights for farm use. He also got an education in the needs of the rest of the state and more than once came to the aid of the Portland area’s transit agency, TriMet. In the 1970s and 1980s, he built a partnership with Representative Vera Katz, a Democrat from Portland who served with Jones on the Ways and Means Committee, was later House Speaker, and then Portland mayor. “They didn’t have an urban-rural divide,” Senate President Peter Courtney (D-Salem) said upon Katz’s death in 2017. “They worked together.”

He surprised many Republicans by supporting abortion rights, including opposing legislation that required minors to notify their parents before getting an abortion. His reasoning reflected his flinty outlook. He fretted about the taxpayer cost of denying an abortion for a drug-addicted mother. “If you let the child be born and he’s handicapped then you got \$3 million into it,” he told the Oregon Historical Society in 1992. In the same interview, he said he might vote for that year’s Measure 9, which declared homosexuality wrong and abnormal (voters defeated the initiative). An old-school legislator, Jones was praised for his knowledge of agriculture and the state budget. As a one-time lobbyist, he said some of his best friends in Salem were from the lobby.

Despite his institutional longevity, he never reached the pinnacle of the Ways and Means Committee. In 1995, Speaker Bev Clarno (R-Bend) named Jones and Bob Repine (R-Grants Pass) as co-chairs. It was clear around the Capitol that Jones was being recognized for his years of service but that Repine was first among equals. In 1997, Speaker Lynn Lundquist (R-Powell Butte)

gave the job solely to Repine. That was Jones's last legislative session. He had surgery for intestinal cancer, but what kept him from running were term limits enacted by voters in 1992 (a measure later struck down by the courts). After Mildred died later that year, he moved to Ontario to live with his daughter.

In January 2012, Jones told the *Oregonian* that he would not mind riding herd over state spending again. "I was tighter than bark on a tree and we didn't waste a dollar," Jones said. "They could use me again." He died three months later, on April 25. His daughter, Karen Dinsmore, said it had only been five weeks since she had taken away his car keys. "He just wore out," she said.

Sources

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