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Montana's 1972 Con Con Delegates Deserve Our Thanks

A Column by Evan Barrett

September 12, 2018

In 1972, one-hundred Montana citizens gathered together and wrote the state's new Constitution. Of those one-hundred giants of Montana history, only fourteen are still with us. This month, each of them can look back forty-seven years to when Montana voters began changing us from a state known at the time as a corporate colony of the powerful Anaconda Company into a state that vested much of its power in its people, thanks at least in part to the Constitution.

September 14, 1971 was the primary election day for those who sought to become delegates to a Constitutional Convention authorized by voters by a 65% to 35% margin almost a year earlier. The convention would have 100 delegates elected from the same multi-member districts as the Montana House of Representatives.

Competition among citizens for delegate seats was strong, perhaps because the Montana Supreme Court had ruled that elected officials, like sitting legislators, could not be delegate candidates. An amazing 515 citizens filed to become delegates -- 247 Democrats, 232 Republicans, 32 Independents and 4 from the New Reform Party. In the September primary, 148 Democrats and 132 Republicans were eliminated from the field, leaving 99 Democrats and 100 Republicans to compete in the general election along with the Independents and New Reform candidates.

In the 49 days between the primary and the special general election on November 2, delegate candidates pursued votes and when the dust settled, 58 Democrats, 36 Republicans and 6 Independents were elected to fill the 100 delegate positions, including 19 women, a remarkable leap forward.

On January 17, 1972 the delegates convened in an open convention with a free exchange of ideas including ideas submitted by Montana citizens. After 54 working days the newly drafted Constitution was signed by all 100 delegates and submitted to the people for ratification on June 6.

Over 73 campaign days the proposed Constitution was debated before Montana voters. Opposition was well-financed, mostly by those who had profited from favorable provisions in the 1889 constitution. Many progressive elements and citizens hungry for change supported its ratification. On June 6, 1972 the new Constitution was ratified by a narrow 2532 vote margin, upheld by a 3-2 Montana Supreme Court decision on a case brought by many of the opponents who had lost their favored status.

While most delegates supported ratification, some had opposed it. Yet, through all this process, the 100 delegates had cemented relationships that have lasted to this day. Two reasons delegates bonded were their decision to seat themselves alphabetically,

rather than by political party, and to share power by spreading leadership of the committees among Democrats, Republicans and Independents.

Following ratification, the delegates formed a Constitutional Convention Society and have since met annually with family and friends in celebration of their collective efforts to help forge a new Montana. The large gathering in the House Chambers last year for the 45th Anniversary included a proclamation from Governor Steve Bullock on behalf of the people that noted: "with the passage of time the state Constitution crafted by those 100 Montana citizen/delegates has come to be recognized as the best state Constitution in the nation."

Now, after 46 years, current generations of Montanans should say "thank you" to those delegates remaining and to the families of those who have passed. These 100 delegates, proud Montana citizens all, were giants in Montana history. Their new Constitution began with these remarkable opening words: "We the people of Montana grateful to God for the quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of our mountains, the vastness of our rolling plains, and desiring to improve the quality of life, equality of opportunity and to secure the blessings of liberty for this and future generations do ordain and establish this constitution."

In "Montana: A History of Two Centuries," Montana historians Mike Malone and Richard Roeder, speaking of the Constitution, wrote: "Montanans seemed to be changing their minds about their state and about themselves This attitude expressed itself in a new concern for preserving the environment, a renewed pride in the community, and a new interest in reforming and improving society and government."

A tip of the hat to these delegates is well-deserved.

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, retired in 2017 after 48 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.

(699 words in the body)

The following is provided for those newspapers who are willing to post and/or print it as a sidebar along with the column.

You can learn much about each delegate and the entire process by downloading and reading the marvelous 1989 book “100 Delegates – Montana Constitutional Convention 1972” at https://digitalcommons.mtech.edu/crucible_materials/6/ which is archived as a part of Evan Barrett’s Montana history series “In the Crucible of Change.”

By emailing notes of appreciation to the Constitutional Convention Society at bobcampmt1@charter.net you can thank any and all of the remaining fourteen: Franklin Arness (Libby, now in Delaware), Bob Campbell (Missoula), Wade Dahood (Anaconda), Mae Nan (Robinson) Ellingson (Missoula), Gene Harbaugh (Poplar, now in New Mexico), Lynn (Sparks) Keeley (Butte, now in Arizona), Jerry Loendorf (Helena), Mick McKeon (Anaconda, now in Butte), Lyle Monroe (Great Falls, now in Arizona), Marshall Murray (Kalispell, now in Oregon), Arlyne Reichert (Great Falls), Bob Vermillion (Shelby, now in Great Falls), Roger Wagner (Nashua), and Jack Ward (Hamilton).