

Jay Hammond: man, myth, legend and, yes, politician
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Jay Hammond led two lives. One as a man. The other as a symbol, archetype and myth.

The bridge between them was his political career.

Do not be misled by his habitual plea, "I am not a politician." Jay Hammond -- member of the first Alaska Legislature, founder of the Bristol Bay Borough, two-term governor of Alaska -- was a politician down to his very bones.

Hammond came to Alaska after World War II, a young Marine veteran in search of a new life. He found it in Southwest Alaska as a guide, bush pilot, homesteader and commercial fisherman. He was a lucky man. The years immediately after the war were golden for those who loved the wilderness way of life. The Last Frontier was wide open to those who embraced it, and modern technology -- the airplane -- provided relatively easy access to the remotest corners of the territory.

Hammond also had the good fortune to fly for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the elite corps of fish and game managers of the late '40s and '50s. There he was exposed to the agency's charismatic leader, Clarence Rhode. Rhode was appalled by those who abused Alaska's resources and natural beauty. He thought Alaska's wilderness should be preserved and protected for future generations, and he impressed his beliefs on his employees. (Rhode was a powerful personality, so imposing that Hammond remembered, "He scared me.")

In the 1950s, Alaska politics were dominated by two forces -- the statehood movement and the Democratic Party. Hammond did not build the foundation of his political career on either. In the first state election of 1958, he went to the House of Representatives from Naknek as an independent. Thirty-five of the 40 House members were Democrats; so was the governor and the congressional delegation.

Hammond was re-elected in 1960 as a Republican and remained in the party. But he was always a quirky Republican who, while fiscally and socially conservative, had little in common with GOP movers and shakers in Anchorage and Fairbanks. The differences would become magnified over the years and take on epic dimensions in his gubernatorial battles with the personification of Anchorage Republicanism, Wally Hickel.

In 1974, Hammond -- who had been reapportioned out of the Legislature after a term as Senate president -- challenged incumbent Gov. Bill Egan. The campaign seemed quixotic at first. Egan, who had served 12 years as governor, was a legend. Hammond was largely unknown, and he had to face Wally Hickel in the Republican primary before getting to Egan.

But Hammond, teaming up with Lowell Thomas Jr. as his candidate for lieutenant governor, proved a marvelous campaigner who took brilliant advantage of the times and his talents. The year 1974 was pivotal for Alaska. Construction of the trans-Alaska pipeline was just beginning, and Alaskans, while excited by the economic opportunity, were apprehensive about how oil might change the state. Hammond addressed this anxiety, assuring Alaskans that he would protect their frontier way of life. In his whip cords and work shirts, trim, muscular Jay Hammond cut a romantic figure, especially attractive to young people.

Rallying Democrats discontented with Egan and independents fearful of Hickel's relentless boomer pronouncements, Jay Hammond was elected governor.

The 1978 gubernatorial campaign, which Hammond won, was in large measure a personal battle between Hammond and Hickel. Hammond prevailed in the primary -- barely -- after recounts and numerous revelations of election improprieties. This was the last gubernatorial election fought on competing visions of Alaska, preservation versus development. Hammond won the election, but the demand for development -- more, more development -- has dominated our elections since. To advertise yourself as a conservationist in today's political environment is to invite public disgrace.

Hammond won two statewide elections not only because he had a message; his message was brilliantly packaged. He seems to have been a natural on television. He instinctively understood, though he would deny it, the power of marketing, and on television he marketed himself as the real Alaskan -- splitting wood, flying his plane, building a cabin. The synergy between his television spots and his campaign oratory -- the man was a spellbinder -- moved audiences and established him as a symbol of Alaska.

Jay Hammond governed under the most difficult circumstances short of wartime. The trans-Alaska pipeline brought thousands of newcomers to the state and required massive amounts of spending on infrastructure and so-called "impacts." Suddenly, the state treasury was filled with hundreds of millions of dollars, and Alaskans fought bitterly over how to spend their wealth.

Hammond did not win popularity contests as governor. He had many enemies, including the oil companies, and he was routinely vilified by business leaders as "anti-growth." Jay Hammond's greatness as a leader was recognized only in later years by those who knew him as "founder" of the Alaska Permanent Fund and protector of the Permanent Fund dividend.

There will be arguments about who "founded" the fund, but Jay Hammond certainly deserves credit for bringing the fund to life and protecting it. He also should be recognized as a thinker and innovator who was the sworn enemy of simplicity. He was obsessed by Rube Goldberg schemes of clunky complexity and dubious legality. The original dividend plan, found unconstitutional, the longevity bonus, the "parachute plan" for the budget, the "claw back" plan for taxes -- all were tortured approaches to public policy based on Jay Hammond's muddled ideas about fairness, equity and what Alaskans "deserved."

Hammond's mental muddle was reflected in his prose, which was built on the premise he described as "Why use 10 words when 10,000 words will do?"

Prolix doesn't begin to describe him, and his mixed metaphors were so excessive they achieved a kind of lunatic grandeur. While describing a spending limit proposal (another Rube Goldberg dream), he told a Fairbanks audience:

"I believe we can structure a garment which won't totally straitjacket government, but will certainly gird up the frayed, elasticized belt of legislative and administrative constraint, which with fat money about, finds it hard to endure the pull and tug of every special interest's desires. The hour is late, our trousers imperiled."

Such excess did not alienate his fans; they were charmed.

Jay Hammond completed his life's journey as a man the rough-cut young ex-Marine who came to Alaska in 1946 could not have imagined: The senior statesman whose face was known to every Alaskan. Like others whose lives become the stuff of public myth, people saw in him what they wanted to see, re-created him in their own image. He was venerated by those devoted to the Permanent Fund, despised by those who would spend the fund rather than pay a dime in taxes.

People need heroes and enemies. Jay Hammond gave Alaskans both for more than 30 years.