

Governing Alaska

Campaign for Statehood

A New Era in Alaska

In the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C., every state is allowed to display statues of two outstanding citizens. The National Statuary Hall collection includes presidents, vice presidents, signers of the Declaration of Independence, framers of the United States Constitution and other distinguished Americans.

The two Alaskans cast in bronze are Sen. E.L. "Bob" Bartlett and Sen. Ernest Gruening. Before they served as Alaska's first United States Senators, Bartlett and Gruening were the powerful one-two punch of the Alaska statehood fight in the 1940s and 1950s.

Historian Claus Naske has written that while Bartlett and Gruening did not invent the statehood movement, they "gave it a vitality and dynamism which it had not possessed before."

Although Gruening and Bartlett shared a commitment to statehood and membership in the Democratic party, their personalities couldn't have been more different. Bartlett served as Alaska's non-voting delegate to Congress for 14 years before statehood and Gruening worked as territorial governor from 1939-53.

A. Robert Smith, a newspaper reporter who wrote about Congress for 25 years said, that Bartlett was "Mr. Nice Guy in a body overpopulated with SOBs." Gruening was a brilliant politician and writer who had a knack of making his opponents, and sometimes even his friends uncomfortable.

As the non-voting Alaska delegate, Bartlett had no votes to trade, so he concentrated on winning friends and influencing people. A former miner and Fairbanks newspaperman, Bartlett earned the respect of Alaskans, who knew him as "Bob," a name he picked up as a child when his 4-year-old sister refused to call him by his real name "Edward." Bartlett represented Alaska in Washington, D.C. for the last 25 years of his life, first as a delegate and then for nine years as a senator. Elected seven times as delegate from 1944-59, he devoted his energies to persuading members of Congress that Alaskans deserved better than the "second-class citizenship" of territorial rule.

Bartlett became a convert to the statehood campaign after former Delegate Anthony Dimond advised that it was the only practical way to proceed, because Congress would probably fight any effort to seek piecemeal improvements in the First Organic Act.



Alaska Capitol, Juneau, ca. 1931

Bird's-eye view of the Federal and Territorial Building in Juneau, from the south.

While Bartlett built support for statehood in Washington, D.C., Gruening stirred things up in Alaska and throughout the nation. He used the contacts he developed during a long career in public life. Gruening, born in 1887 in New York City, was a Harvard-trained doctor, but he practiced politics and journalism, not medicine.

After completing 13 years as governor, Gruening wrote a book titled "The State of Alaska," which was published five years before statehood. He used the book as a way to publicize what he thought of as federal neglect of the territory. Gruening's awareness of Alaska's situation really started when President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him as governor in 1939, two days after Hitler attacked Poland and began World War II.

In Alaska, Gruening soon found himself at odds with the canned salmon industry, the shipping industry and the mining industry over new taxes. He wanted them. They didn't.

Describing revenues to the territory from Alaska's resources as "virtually negligible," he spent the next ten years fighting for change. "The wealth of Alaska was being drained off and next to nothing was staying there for its needs," he wrote later.

Gruening complained that the old tax system benefited special interests and harmed the average Alaskan. He said the dividends from the huge Kennecott mine, which had been abandoned in 1938 after producing \$200 million in copper, had enriched "many individuals who never saw Alaska and had no thought of ever coming here or doing anything for the Territory. . ."

Although mining and fishing topped the list of industries, by 1947 more money poured into the treasury from alcohol than anything else. "At that time we had no financial structure that was worthy of the name," Mildred Hermann, a Juneau attorney, recalled. "We financed our government on the basis of how the red salmon ran and how much liquor people drank and that was almost the total source of our revenues. . ."

Starting in 1941, Gruening introduced measures for a modern tax system. The legislature though refused to act. The low point came in 1947, when lawmakers created a fiscal crisis, authorizing more than \$10 million in spending and only \$6.3 million in income. The money ran out that fall. In the crisis that followed, the University of Alaska kept going only because members of the Board of Regents, UA President Charles Bunnell and business leaders offered emergency loans to keep the doors open.

Gruening wrote in his autobiography that Alaska voters responded by "throwing the rascals out" in the 1948 election. "Alaskans realized how an effectively organized minority in the legislature had betrayed their interests and had left the territory in a deplorable state," he said.

With the change in Juneau, a comprehensive new tax system won approval in 1949, an act that some viewed as a prerequisite to show that Alaska was ready for statehood.

For Bartlett and Gruening, another decade would pass before they achieved their common goal.

Information Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum