
CHAPTER 25

Robert C. Byrd's Senate

The Education of a Senator 1917-1958

In 1989, at the completion of my twenty-two years as a Senate party leader, Senate Historian Richard Baker asked me to participate in a series of oral history interviews to offer my observations on leadership in the modern Senate. Chapters 25, 26, and 28 present a distillation of those interviews.

According to genealogical records, a William Sale came to America from England in the year 1657 and settled in Rappahannock County, Virginia. On November 20, 1917—260 years later—his ninth generation descendant, Cornelius Calvin Sale, Jr., was born in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, the son of Cornelius and Ada (Kirby) Sale. On Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, Ada Sale died of influenza, her widower husband being left with four sons and a daughter. In accordance with the dying mother's request, the father gave the baby son to the father's sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Titus Dalton Byrd, who adopted the baby as their own and gave it the name Robert Carlyle Byrd.

Having no recollection of my mother, because she died when I was less than a year old, I grew up believing that the Byrds were

my true parents. They brought me to West Virginia when I was about three years old, and we lived in various rural and coal-mining areas until I graduated from high school, got a job, and married my high-school sweetheart, Erma Ora James, a coal miner's daughter. On May 29, 1987, Erma and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

My foster parents were hard working, honest, and religious. They were poor, but they gave me their love and their good name, and they taught me how to live. Although I strayed from their teachings from time to time, still, through the years, I have found that the basic values and principles by which they lived were right. I am convinced that the man who wrote the old song "Faith of Our Fathers" knew what he was talking about, and so do I.

Starting to school in a two-room schoolhouse in Mercer County, West Virginia, and growing up in the years of the Great Depression, I determined early to try to excel—both in the classroom and in the workplace. Graduating from high school in 1934 when times were hard, I could not go on to college but

had to go to work. Although finding a job was not easy, I finally landed one at a gas station four miles away, which paid a salary of fifty dollars a month. I walked the distance when I could not hitch a ride on a bread truck.

Later, I worked as the "produce boy" in the coal company store, and then I became a meat cutter. When I married, I was making seventy dollars a month—and I earned every penny of it! Jobs were hard to get, and I was glad to have one. I cannot remember ever missing a day's work because of sickness.

During World War II, I worked as a shipyard welder in Baltimore, Maryland, and in Tampa, Florida. When the war ended, I took Erma and our two daughters back to southern West Virginia and worked again as a meat cutter. Then, I began a new career: politics.

My interest in politics awakened during World War II. In 1946, I filed for a seat in the West Virginia house of delegates, the lower house of the state legislature. One of thirteen candidates in that race for the three delegate seats from Raleigh County, I was politically unknown. My foster father was not a politician, not a banker or businessman, not someone with money or influence who could give me a big start in politics. He was a poor coal miner. I had to make it on my own, and, inasmuch as I was working as a meat cutter at the time, I did not have much going for me.

A Republican lawyer named Oppie Hedrick, from Beckley, West Virginia, took an interest in my candidacy. He advised me: "Make your fiddle case your brief case. Everywhere you go, carry that fiddle case. Your identity will become known. You make yourself a little speech, and they won't forget you because of that violin."

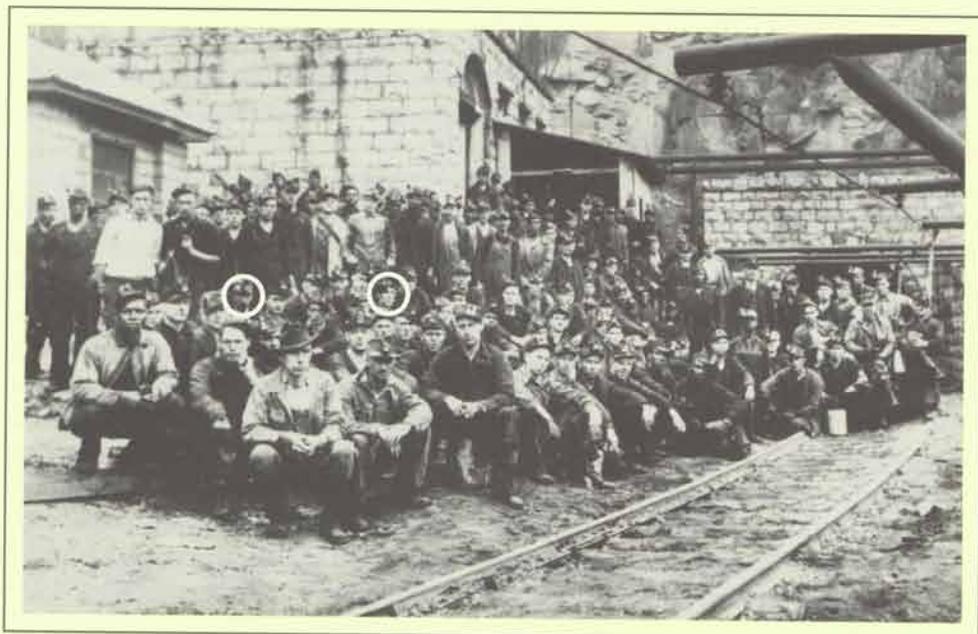
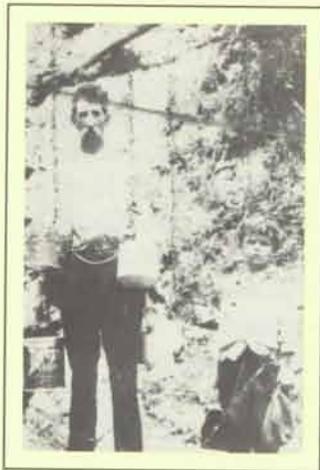
I took his advice. I would go to meetings—just any kind of meeting—Odd Fellows, Fraternal Order of Moose, the Elks, women's garden club meetings, Kiwanis, Rotary,

Lions. I would play a few tunes, quote some poetry, and then briefly state why I thought I should be elected to the legislature. I campaigned for better schools and rural roads and for liberalization of workmen's compensation laws.

The outcome of the election was a surprise: I led the entire field of thirteen, incumbents included. The headline in the August 12, 1946, Beckley newspaper read, "Butcher Fiddled While Others Smiled and Led Democratic Ticket." I was not surprised to have won a seat in the legislature, because I had worked very hard to win, but to lead the ticket was most gratifying. I had campaigned assiduously and had called on all the Democratic county executive committee members and other politicians. I would go to their homes, sometimes as late as nine or ten o'clock at night, and take my violin with me. I would tell them I was running for office, and, before leaving, I would ask, "Would you like me to play a tune on my violin?" They would say, "Yes." And it caught on quickly. I also used a little campaign jingle to aid voters in remembering my name:

BYRD by name,
BYRD by Nature;
Let's send BYRD
To the legislature.

I did not have an automobile of my own. (I was thirty-two years old and in the West Virginia senate before I owned a car and learned to drive.) But I had a coal miner friend named Dallas Radford who had an automobile. In the late afternoons, after working all day in the mine, he would drive me around the county to see political leaders, county officials, and precinct workers. He never charged me anything; I just paid for the gasoline. I have never forgotten that coal miner friend, who had known me since I was a boy, believed in me, and just wanted to see me get ahead in politics.



Scenes from the early life of Robert C. Byrd include, *clockwise from upper left*: young Robert Byrd with his foster father, Titus D. Byrd (c. 1923); Vacation Bible School students at the community church in Stotesbury, West Virginia, in 1927 (Robert Byrd is in front row, wearing bow tie); young Robert Byrd with his violin (c. 1929); and a group of coal miners at Stotesbury (c. 1932), including Titus Byrd, *circled at left*, and Mrs. Byrd's father, Fred James, *circled in center*.

Office of Senator Robert C. Byrd

In those days, the state legislature met only two months in every two years, and the annual salary was five hundred dollars. When I went to Charleston for the session, my wife remained at Crab Orchard, Raleigh County, where I was employed. The pastor of my church, Colonel Shirley Donnelly, had a sister who lived across the street from the state capitol at Charleston. He suggested that I rent a room at her house, in order to be close to the capitol and away from the hotels where most of the legislators gathered. He believed, rightly, that it would be a better influence on me.

I also selected a good legislative attaché from Raleigh County—a fine old gentleman named Granville Bennett. He had served as foreman on juries, knew his way around the courthouse, and had been active in the Democratic party for a long time. Bennett, who boarded nearby in Charleston, would come up to my room in the evenings, and we would go over the calendar bills together and decide how I should vote on them. He was a good influence on me. I did very well at that session of the legislature.

Right after the election and before the session had begun, George Titler, president of the United Mine Workers in District 29 (Beckley), asked to see me at his office. He told me that he wanted me to vote for Walter Vergil Ross, a member of the house of delegates, for Speaker. Titler was a rough, tough old-time labor leader. But I replied, "No, I can't vote for Mr. Ross. I have already promised my vote to his opponent, Mr. John Amos." This incurred Titler's wrath, and he assured me that, when the time came for my reelection in two years, he would urge the coal miners to vote against me.

During my first term in the legislature, in 1947, I introduced a bill to liberalize workmen's compensation payments. Having grown up in a coal miner's home, I knew the needs of the miners, and I knew the time had

come to increase workmen's compensation benefits. I introduced the legislation, and it passed the house. The only speech I made during the session was on that bill, for I had been advised not to talk too much or too often. I was told that, whenever I had something to say, I should say it and say it well—be prepared, and let it go at that.

I received the plaudits of more than half the members of the house of delegates that night. At that time, there were two former United States senators serving in the West Virginia house of delegates. One was Rush D. Holt. The other was Joseph Rosier, appointed in 1941 to fill the unexpired term of Senator Matthew M. Neely, who had been elected governor. I felt that I was walking in some pretty high cotton, with two former United States senators sitting in that legislature. When I concluded my speech, Rosier asked unanimous consent that it be made part of the house *Journal*. Unlike the U.S. Senate, where speeches automatically appear in the *Congressional Record*, a speech in the West Virginia legislature was not recorded in the *Journal* unless unanimous consent was granted.

My wife Erma and I opened a small grocery store of our own at Sophia (Raleigh County) in June 1948. When the time came for me to run for reelection that year, George Titler, the UMWA president, kept his promise. He really went after me. I campaigned with my fiddle, and I met him head on. I explained to the voters: "Mr. Titler tried to tell me how to vote, and I did not intend to be told how to vote. I had already made a commitment, and I did not intend to break my promise. Moreover, I felt I was voting for the better man for the job of House Speaker."

The 1948 election was one to remember. President Truman was running for election, and there were various county races for sheriff and other local offices, but my campaign for reelection attracted more attention than

all of the other contests in Raleigh County because of the Byrd-Titlet feud.

I was reelected by a huge vote. At that time, the United Mine Workers was a potent political organization, with around 120,000 coal miners in West Virginia. But the miners demonstrated that they, too, would not be told how to vote by their leader. They voted their sentiments and supported me strongly.

In 1950, I ran for the West Virginia senate. The ninth senatorial district included Wyoming County, which adjoined my home county of Raleigh. Titlet vigorously opposed my candidacy in Wyoming County, where I was not as well known, and campaigned hard against me. But I worked that county from one end to the other, won the race for state senate, and won it big. I defeated Clay S. Crouse, a Beckley lawyer, in the primary by a vote of 9,819 to 4,818, and went on to defeat Republican A.D. Cooke in the fall elections, 23,843 to 12,355.

While a member of the lower house of the legislature, I had enrolled in 1950 at Morris Harvey College (now Charleston University), near the state capitol, hoping eventually to earn a baccalaureate degree. I had graduated from high school sixteen years earlier, in 1934, during the Great Depression, at a time when it was not possible for me to go on to college. As a member of the state senate in 1951, I pressed ahead with my studies, driving to and from the college, more than sixty miles away, while Erma ran the store at Sophia. During the summer, I attended Concord College at Athens, fifty miles away.

In 1952, while serving in the state senate, I ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. That opportunity came when the Sixth District's congressman, Dr. Erland H. Hedrick, decided to run for governor rather than seek reelection to Congress. I seized the occasion. I knew that if I did not run at that point, I might not have a good opportunity

again—or certainly for a long time—to run for an open seat in Congress.

From the beginning, I knew it would be a tough primary campaign, with five other men running, including a competitor from my own county who was sure to split that county's vote. I realized I would have to work extra hard in the congressional district's other three counties. At the time, I was attending Marshall College (now Marshall University) in Huntington, West Virginia, but I withdrew and plunged headlong into the campaign.

I knew that my chances for obtaining the Democratic nomination could be jeopardized if I alienated any of the several factions within the party that were contending for the governorship. The state's attorney general, William C. Marland, attracted powerful support from the party's "statehouse faction," and Congressman Erland Hedrick drew his own potent following from the mine workers' union. I was not interested in getting caught in that crossfire, for I needed votes from all sides.

At one point, I learned of a meeting of Dr. Hedrick's supporters at Van, a mining community in Boone County. I had not been invited, but I decided to attend anyway. Arriving after the meeting had begun and making my way up to the front row, I introduced myself to Woodrow Hendricks, a lawyer who was acting as master of ceremonies. I told him I was a candidate for Congress and was taking no sides in the governor's race. Hendricks was a little cool toward me, but, finally, when all the other candidates had spoken, he introduced me as a candidate for Congress. "He is a butcher," said Hendricks, "he is a fiddler, and here he is."

His calling me a butcher and a fiddler was not exactly intended to be complimentary, I felt. His manner and tone led me to believe that I need not expect much help from him. I suppose he thought that I would simply

stand, wave at the crowd, and sit down. But I did not sit down so easily. I began by saying, "This man has introduced me as a butcher. Shakespeare worked in his father's meat shop [which I later learned was not accurate], so what's wrong with being a butcher? Mr. Hendricks has also introduced me as a fiddler. Thomas Jefferson, one of the greatest presidents and a founder of the Democratic Party, was also a fiddler. So, what's wrong with being a fiddler?" Then I said, "The gentleman who introduced me is a lawyer. If it's the last thing I ever do, I intend to get a law degree, if for no other reason than to show a man like this that a coal miner's son can do what he did." The crowd loved it. They ate it like ice cream!

When Hendricks finally got the floor again, he announced that the next meeting of Hedrick supporters would be at Nellis—a few miles away—the following Saturday night and stated that William Blizzard, president of the United Mine Workers in District 17 (Charleston), would be the speaker. "Y'all come," he urged.

The next Saturday night, I rounded up a banjo picker and a guitar player and headed for Nellis. When we arrived at the school-house rally, Bill Blizzard was already making a stem-winding speech. Blizzard, like George Titler, was a rough-and-tumble labor leader of the old school. A mine-worker chieftain in those days had to be a tough customer, and Bill was no exception.

When I walked into the crowded room and took a chair, Blizzard pointed his finger at me and said, "Now, I want to say to you coal miners, when any of these candidates ask you for your vote, ask them where they stand in the governor's race; if they're not for Dr. Hedrick, don't you vote for them—no matter what the office, all the way from Congress to constable." After Blizzard had finished a long fire-and-brimstone speech, Woodrow Hendricks, who again was the

master of ceremonies, announced that, following the benediction, some refreshments—ice cream, cake, and sodas—would be served out in the hall. "Go and help yourself," he said. Just then, a grizzled coal miner in the back of the room shouted, "We want to hear Byrd!" Hendricks responded, "You can hear Byrd some other time. We're going to have the benediction now."

There was no stopping that. The local preacher pronounced the benediction. As the audience filed out, I sent my two friends to the car for the banjo, fiddle, and guitar. While the people were having refreshments, we tuned up our instruments and played "Old Joe Clark," "Cripple Creek," "Turkey in the Straw," and other favorites. The people began coming back into the room, bringing their cake and ice cream with them. I asked them to move in, take chairs, and not block the doorway. The room was soon filled again, with every person who had been there earlier returning for the music.

I then put my fiddle down and said, "Now this is *my* meeting. I drove seventy-five miles to come here tonight, I am a candidate for Congress, and I think I'm entitled to be heard. Mr. Blizzard has told you to ask every candidate which man he's going to support in the governor's race."

At that moment, Bill Blizzard walked back in, pointed his finger at me, and shouted, "Where do you stand in the governor's race? Are you for Hedrick?" I said, "Just have a seat, Mr. Blizzard. I'll tell you where I stand." I went on to say that I had paid my own filing fee; Dr. Hedrick had not paid it; Bill Blizzard had not paid it. I had paid it. I was on my own. I declared, "There are six of us running for the nomination for Congress. I'd be foolish to take sides publicly for any one of the candidates in the governor's race, because, if I did, I would lose support in my own race. Any good politician knows better than to do that. I don't expect Dr. Hedrick to

choose sides in my race; he's running his own race, and I'm running mine!"

Then I addressed the crowd: "I grew up in a coal miner's home; married a coal miner's daughter; ate from a coal miner's table; slept in a coal miner's bed. Are you going to vote against a man like that?"

"No!" the mining crowd roared.

"When the controversial Fire Boss bill came up in the state senate," I continued, "I had an ulcer of the stomach and was in bed at a hospital. It was a bill that you coal miners were very interested in. I didn't have to go up to the senate and vote. I had a perfect excuse, if I had wanted one. I could have shown by a doctor's slip that I was in the hospital. But I didn't take the easy way out. I got a cab, went up to the capitol and voted with you, the coal miners of West Virginia, on that bill. Are you going to turn down a man like that who stands up for you?"

"NO!" came the chorus back.

I told the crowd, "I had a little grocery store at Sophia. The strike came and coal miners couldn't buy food because they couldn't get credit. I didn't have much on the shelves, but I let 'em have what I had. I fed their children. Some of that money I was able to collect; some I won't ever collect. Are you going to turn down a man who stood by the children of coal miners when the miners couldn't get credit anywhere else?"

"NO!" The chorus kept getting louder.

Bill Blizzard, by then, saw that he was licked. So, I concluded, "When I finish talking, I'm sure Mr. Blizzard will have something more to say to you, and when he finishes, I, too, will have something more to say. Stick around."

Well, Bill Blizzard got back up on the stage and struck a conciliatory note: "Bob Byrd, we can't turn against you; your labor record is too good. But we do wish that you would support Dr. Hedrick for governor." When he had finished, I quoted a poem and dedicated

it to Bill Blizzard, and we all went away friends that night. I had won the crowd—lock, stock, and barrel!

If it had not been for my violin, I would not have been given an opportunity to address that meeting. It was the violin that made it possible for me to speak to the crowd that night in 1952 about my candidacy for a seat in Congress. Almost forty years later, it is still the most famous fiddle in West Virginia.

In the course of the 1952 primary campaign, the Ku Klux Klan story broke. I had joined the Klan in the early 1940's when I was in my early twenties. Because I was opposed to communism and so was the Klan, I became a member—a mistake I could never erase and would always regret. Ironically, my interest in running for political office had its genesis in a suggestion to me by a retired Methodist minister who was a Grand Dragon in the Klan from Arlington, Virginia. The minister, who initiated me into the organization, suggested that I should "some day" run for Congress but that I should begin at the "bottom of the ladder: the House of Delegates." That suggestion was the spark that put me to thinking about public office. I got others to join and had signed up 150 new members before I went off to work as a welder in the Baltimore, Maryland, shipyards. Two of these former klansmen went public with the story shortly before the 1952 primary election. I admitted that I had been a member in the early 1940's and also admitted that I had made a mistake. I weathered the storm and won the nomination.

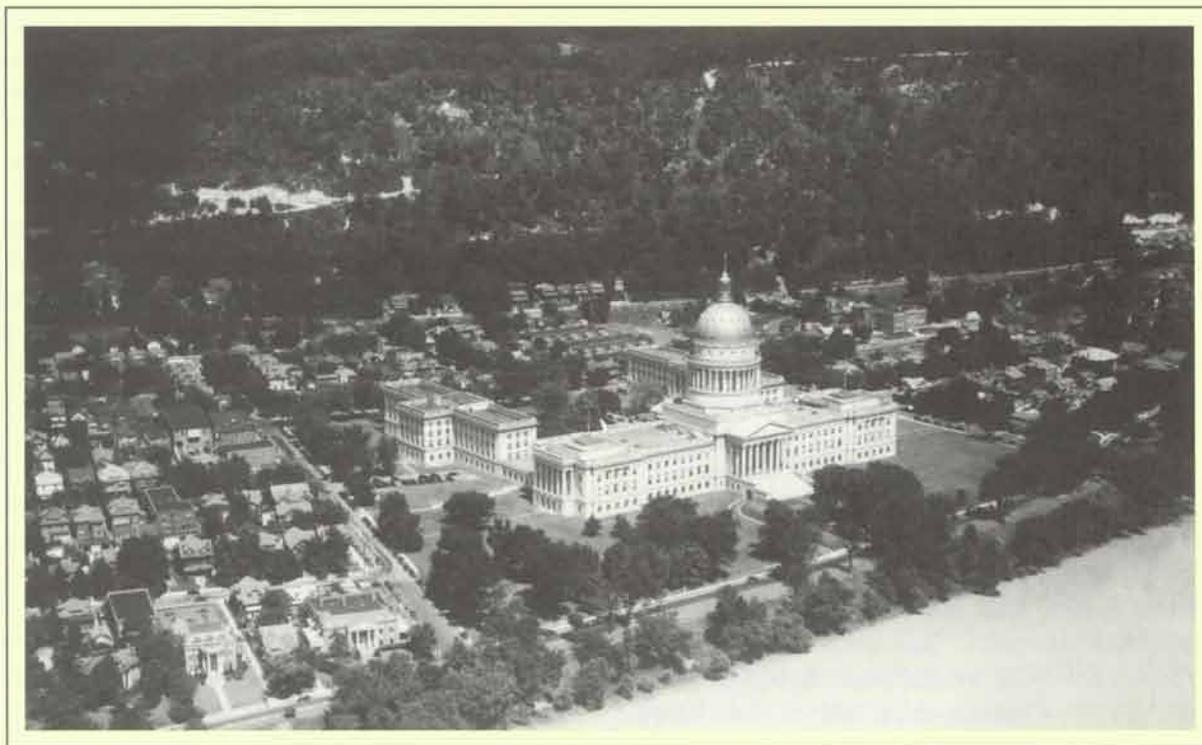
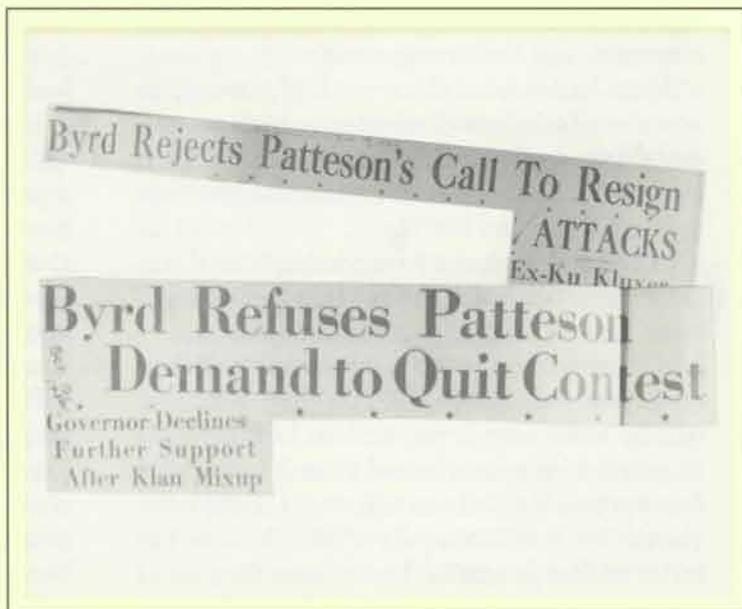
In the race for general election, however, a letter was brought out that I had written to the imperial wizard in Atlanta, whom I did not know personally. In that letter, I had recommended that the Klan be revived in West Virginia. I was very naive. I had written that letter at the request of a man who lived in Beckley, West Virginia, the county seat of

Check No. 44

Robert C. Byrd

EARNINGS		DEDUCTIONS	
Jan. 31	70.00	State	7.00
Feb. 28	70.00	City	6.50
Mar. 31	70.00	County	6.17
Apr. 30	70.00	Health	12.00
May 31	70.00	Life	
Jun. 30	70.00	Retirement	
Jul. 31	70.00	Union	
Aug. 31	70.00	Charity	
Sep. 30	70.00	Life Insurance	
Oct. 31	70.00	Life Insurance	
Nov. 30	70.00	Life Insurance	
Dec. 31	70.00	Life Insurance	
Total	840.00	Total	35.67
Net Pay	804.33		

Handwritten notes: 70, 65, 718, 1260, 50, 15, 25, 52, 2274, 1224, 2/33, 7527



Pay stubs from Robert C. Byrd's days as a coal company store "produce boy" in 1938 show the deductions from his seventy-dollar monthly salary; he served from 1947 to 1952 in the West Virginia legislature at the state capitol in Charleston, West Virginia, *bottom*; newspaper headlines during the 1952 campaign for the House of Representatives reflect Byrd's rift with Governor Okey Patteson. *Office of Senator Robert C. Byrd and Library of Congress*

my county, and who wanted to be a kleagle in the Klan. I foolishly wrote the letter in 1946 and forgot about it. That letter surfaced in the fall campaign after I had indicated in the primary contest that I had been a member back in the early 1940's and had since lost interest. I had forgotten about that 1946 letter. The letter created quite a stir. It was one of several letters that I had written at the time in the belief that the Klan could be an effective force in the struggle against communism and in the promotion of traditional American values.

During the fall campaign, my Republican opponent attacked me about the Klan. As the November election drew near, Democratic Governor Okey Patteson called me to the state capitol on a Saturday night. When I reached his office, he said, "Bob, I've been away on vacation, and I've had to return earlier than I intended because of three problems: I have the miners' strike in Widen, at which there have been some shootings; I have the West Virginia turnpike problem; and I've got your Klan problem. I don't mind telling you, Bob, that your problem is giving me more headache than the other two problems put together." He went on, "I am asking you to get off the ticket. You pull out of this race, serve out your term in the state senate, and then you can run for Congress when this whole thing blows over." "Governor," I said, "if I pull out of the race now, I'm as close to Congress as I'll ever get. The people who are supporting me expect me to run, and I won't get out of the race." He replied, "Well, I can't force you out. There is no law under which I can force you to get off the ticket. But I'll have to withdraw the party's support from you."

I responded, "Well, I understand that. Just don't fight me if you can avoid it. If you have to withdraw your support, fine. You're the titular head of the party in the state, and you're under a lot of pressure. I understand

that. But just don't make it any harder than that on me." "Well, Bob," he said, "I won't do anything to hurt you. As a matter of fact, if I were a voter in your congressional district, I'd vote for you." He was a very nice man, a popular governor.

The next morning, the newspaper headlines read, "Byrd Refuses Patteson Demand to Quit Contest." Phone calls started coming in from people, urging, "Stay in there. Don't get off the ticket." Public interest had been aroused. With the Democratic party apparatus shunning me, I ran my own race. I defeated the Republican candidate, Latelle M. La Follette, by 21,000 votes, receiving 55.6 percent of the ballots cast. I then resigned from the state senate, having served half of the four-year term. I was on my way to Washington!

My race for a seat in Congress had been a difficult and trying one, and its outcome was a testament, as I saw it, to the willingness of the voters to listen to all sides, to weigh the facts, and to forgive. I was happy and grateful for the outcome. My convictions concerning hard work had also been reinforced.

When I became a member of the House of Representatives in January 1953, I had a five-member staff. In those days, there was none of the advanced electronic equipment that we now have. Along with my staff, I operated the mimeograph machine, the robotypewriter, the typewriters, and other office equipment. We worked long hours.

As one of the new members of the House and a member of the minority party, I was not in a position to receive significant assistance from that body's leadership. During the six years that I served in the House, I did not build much seniority, and I never came to know a wide range of members.

My interests were mainly the parochial ones that impacted on my own congressional district. I worked my district hard and returned to it often. Some of my detractors

predicted that I would be only a one-term congressman, and I tried hard to lay that notion to rest, giving my constituents good service, with prompt attention to their problems. As a result, I became strongly entrenched in my congressional district. Coal mining was the backbone of the economy, and, consequently, I was very interested in legislation that affected coal, the miners and their families.

In my first House term in 1953, I was appointed to the House Administration Committee—a housekeeping committee. In 1955, at the start of my second term, I was assigned to the Foreign Affairs Committee and given membership on the Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific. The first time I ever traveled overseas was in 1955 as a member of that subcommittee. Its chairman was Clement J. Zablocki of Wisconsin. On the subcommittee trip, in addition to Zablocki and myself, were Marguerite Stitt Church of Illinois, Ross Adair of Indiana, John Jarman of Oklahoma, Richard Wigglesworth of Massachusetts, and Dr. Walter Judd of Minnesota. We traveled around the world in an old Constellation, a four-motored propeller plane that was slow in comparison with today's aircraft. Visiting more than twenty countries in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Far East, we were gone sixty-six days—from October 11 to December 15, 1955. The trip was quite an education for me in international affairs.

When I was first elected to the House, Harley M. Kilgore and Matthew M. Neely were West Virginia's two U.S. senators. Because Senator Kilgore was from Beckley, the county seat of my home county, I was better acquainted with him than with Senator Neely, who was from the northern part of the state.

Senator Kilgore advised me to enter law school. At that time, I did not possess a college degree, but I had acquired seventy hours

of college work before coming to Washington, and I wanted to get a law degree. Although I did not expect to practice law, I wanted the kind of reading and class experience that would go with such a degree. In January 1953, I enrolled in night classes at George Washington University law school. There, I built up more than twenty credit hours before transferring to American University's Washington College of Law, after learning that George Washington University would not give me a law degree because I lacked the prerequisite baccalaureate degree. Having been advised to see Dean John Myers at American University, I asked for an appointment.

Dean Myers told me that American University also required a prerequisite degree. But he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You have seventy hours of straight-A college work. If you can complete the required courses in law with no lower than a 'B' average, I will recommend you for an LL.B. degree." That was a challenge, and it gave me a chance to obtain a law degree.

Over a period of ten years, attending law school at night, I managed to finish the required courses with a high "B" average or a low "A." When I graduated *cum laude* in 1963, at the age of forty-five, I had the honor of receiving the certificate of that LL.B. degree from President John F. Kennedy, the commencement speaker.

Having to face reelection every two years when I was in the House significantly delayed my legal studies. During each election year, I concentrated heavily on my congressional district, keeping my political fences mended and serving my constituents. Once elected to a six-year term in the Senate, however, I was able to speed up the pace and finish my law school work—the only time in history that anyone has both begun and completed law school while serving in Congress.

When I ran for the U.S. Senate in 1958, the incumbent senator, Republican W. Chapman Revercomb, was up for reelection. He was suave, urbane, and courtly and had twice served in the Senate. Incumbents were hard to defeat then, as they are today. From the House, I saw the Senate as a broader field of opportunity, and I wanted to serve all of West Virginia, not just one congressional district. I knew I could do more for my state as a senator than as a member of the House.

I had begun to explore the possibilities of running for the Senate, aware that Senator Revercomb would be running for a new term in 1958. In the fall of 1957, after Congress had adjourned, I traveled around the state to measure my strength as a potential candidate for the Senate. One evening, when I was in West Virginia's northern panhandle, I received a telephone call from Washington. The caller was Robert Howe, the United Mine Workers' liaison to the House of Representatives. He asked when I would be back in Washington, and I told him I planned to remain in West Virginia for several weeks. He said he wanted to see me because he had a message to deliver from "the Boss," meaning John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America. I told him I would come to Romney, in the eastern part of West Virginia, one evening the following week to speak at a civic club meeting. Howe agreed to drive to Romney, about 115 miles from Washington, to meet with me.

When I met with Robert Howe in Romney, he got right down to business. Howe said that Lewis wanted me to know that he planned to support former Governor William C. Marland for the U.S. Senate in the campaign of 1958 and that Lewis did not want me to run for the Senate but wanted me, instead, to run for reelection to the House. According to Howe, Lewis recognized that I had a good labor record but

believed that the miners' union owed it to Marland to support him in the race for Revercomb's Senate seat.

I replied, "Well, the UMWA paid its debt last year [1956] to Mr. Marland in the election for U.S. Senate. That's the reason Mr. Revercomb is a senator now." In the race to fill the two years remaining in the term of Senator Kilgore, who had died in February 1956, the miners' union had supported Marland against Revercomb that year, but Marland had lost. "You supported him, and he lost," I contended. "Now, we have Mr. Revercomb in the Senate. I should have my chance at it." Well, he was sorry, Howe said, but that was the message from the UMWA president. Lewis would come into West Virginia and campaign for Marland and against me if need be. I told him, "I will be back in touch with you."

That night, after my speech to the civic organization, I made my way southward to Beckley. Along the way, a few miles from Romney, I entered Petersburg, the county seat of Grant County. There, I stopped my car and went to a telephone booth. The snow was up around my ankles, and it was cold in the booth. I called my wife, who was at home in the Washington area, and said, "Well, Erma, I've made my decision." "What decision?" she asked. I said, "To run for the United States Senate." "How did you come to make it?" "Mr. John L. Lewis helped me to make it," I said. "He sent me a message today telling me not to run for the Senate. He is going to come into the state and campaign for Marland for the Senate, so I am going to run."

I then drove on to Raleigh County, arriving in Beckley at about three o'clock in the morning. Later that morning, I was up early, calling some of the political leaders in southern West Virginia.

I first called Judge R.D. Bailey in Pineville, Wyoming County, to say I was running for



Robert C. Byrd is shown with members of his family, *clockwise from upper left*: with his older daughter, Mona, in 1939; with his wife Erma and daughters Mona, *left*, and Marjorie, *right*, in 1958; and playing the fiddle for his grandchildren in the 1970's.
Office of Senator Robert C. Byrd

the Senate. Having represented Raleigh and Wyoming counties in the state senate, I knew Judge Bailey well. He had once been a candidate for governor and was highly respected throughout the state.

I then called Sidney Christie in McDowell County, which, at that time, had the third largest population of any of the state's fifty-five counties. It was a coal-mining population. Because the Christie brothers were the political kingpins in that county, I called Sidney, who was the most politically active of the brothers (and whom, in later years, I would successfully promote for a federal district judgeship), to tell him I was announcing for the United States Senate. Christie's reaction, like Judge Bailey's, was positive. After that, I called other political leaders, and the consensus was, "Go to it. We're with you."

Later that day, I publicly announced that I was running for the United States Senate against Chapman Revercomb and that former Governor Marland would be a candidate against me in the primary. I also announced that John L. Lewis, chief of the United Mine Workers, would support Marland and would come into the state and campaign for him.

As it later developed, Senator Neely died in January 1958, opening up the other Senate seat in the 1958 election. John D. Hoblitzell, Jr., was appointed by Republican Governor Cecil Underwood to fill that vacant seat for several months until the general election that fall. With the opening of Neely's Senate seat, Marland chose not to file against me but, instead, filed to fill the unexpired term of Senator Neely. Jennings Randolph—who had served seven terms as a West Virginia member of the U.S. House of Representatives and who had lost for reelection in 1946, after which he had become an executive with Capital Airlines—also entered the race for Neely's seat. The primary election for Neely's seat thus became a hot contest that

also included a former president of the West Virginia Senate, Arnold M. Vickers. I had two primary opponents: Fleming N. Alderson of Charleston and Jack R. Delligatti of Fairmont.

In the meantime, before the second Senate seat became vacant, the coal miners had become aroused by the news that John L. Lewis would oppose me for the Senate. But when the opportunity opened for a second Senate seat and William Marland decided to enter that race, the tension between Lewis and myself was relieved. I was then contacted again by Bob Howe and by Jim Mark, the UMWA liaison to the Senate, whom I also knew. Both suggested that I pay a visit to Lewis, because no confrontation was now going to take place and Lewis would be supportive of my candidacy. It would be good for me, they thought, if I smoked the peace pipe with the formidable mine workers' chieftain. So, I went to see Lewis.

When I arrived at the UMWA headquarters, Howe and Mark took me to the office of John L. Lewis, who opened the discussion. "Young man," he began, "when you announced you were going to run for the United States Senate, you also announced that former Governor William C. Marland would be a candidate against you; and you took the liberty of announcing that I would support Mr. Marland and would come into West Virginia and campaign for him." Measuring his words, Lewis said, "I want you to know, young man, that I am in the habit of making my own press announcements, and I resented your presuming to make such a public statement involving me." His eyes twinkled; they were icy blue beneath his bushy eyebrows, and they seemed to bore right through me.

I listened respectfully. Then, when he had finished talking, I told my side of the story. I had always admired John L. Lewis, I said. He was a great labor leader. My foster father

was a coal miner, and I had married a coal miner's daughter. I could remember when there was no union in the coal fields and how the men had to work from daylight until dark to eke out a meager living. I had seen the union come into being, I said, and knew that Lewis and the union had done much to improve the pay and working conditions of miners.

I further responded to Lewis, "I'm a politician; and when I was considering running for the Senate, you sent Mr. Howe to West Virginia to inform me that you would not support me if I ran for the Senate. You told me to run for the House again, for which you would support me, but that you were going to support Marland in the Senate race, even to the extent of coming to West Virginia and campaigning for him." Continuing, I said, "I resented the message that you sent to me by Mr. Howe, and that made up my mind to run for the Senate. I knew that your opposition to my candidacy would elevate the visibility of my race, and I was running to win, so I decided to play my trump card: announce that Marland was going to run against me, that you would support him, and that you would campaign for him in West Virginia against me. I would have been foolish to sit there and say nothing concerning your opposition to my candidacy." I then concluded, "It gave the kind of visibility to my race that brought support from people who, otherwise, probably wouldn't have even known I was running. So, I played my trump card—early."

Lewis wound up by saying that he was going to back me for the Senate and that I would make a fine senator. That ended the meeting on a happy note. I had a feeling of satisfaction about this meeting, having faced up to John L. Lewis and stood my ground firmly, just as I had done with George Titler a decade earlier. I had also developed a greater respect for Lewis.

On the way back up the hill to my office on the House side, Jim Mark said to me, "Mr. Lewis admires somebody who has the courage to stand up to him. You demonstrated that, and you did it in a nice way. I have a feeling that when I get back to the office, I'm going to hear some good things about you."

Later that afternoon, Jim Mark called me on the phone and said, "Well, it's just as I had thought. You really made a hit with Mr. Lewis. He likes you. That was a great thing you did, coming down and meeting with him. Glad you all got everything smoothed out."

John L. Lewis kept his word. He supported me, and he also supported Marland. But Jennings Randolph won the nomination in the other Senate race, beating Marland and the others handily. Randolph and I, together, became the Democratic nominees for the two U.S. Senate seats, and we both went on to win in the general election in November. John L. Lewis remained a strong supporter of mine in my future campaigns for reelection to the Senate, as did George Titler.

Since 1946, I had been able to win election campaigns with only meager financial resources. In the early years, I had broken into politics by campaigning hard for the house of delegates and by using my violin as an attention-getter. It had been the same when I went on to become a state senator and, later, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. My trusty fiddle had opened doors for me many times and in many places, and it did so again in the U.S. Senate race.

Jennings Randolph and I ran in 1958 on a combined "war chest" of not more than \$50,000. Since we were not opposing each other, we decided to run as a team. The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee allotted a few thousand dollars to my campaign and to Randolph's. In those days, campaigning in West Virginia consisted mainly of traveling around the state, speaking at

courthouse rallies and family reunions, in union halls and on street corners, as well as appearing before civic organizations. We also used highway billboards; our campaign motto was, "Byrd and Randolph will build West Virginia in the U.S. Senate."

We ran a few radio and newspaper ads but used very little television. Randolph won the election for the two-year term, defeating

John Hoblitzell by a margin of 117,657 votes. With a margin of 118,573 votes, I defeated Chapman Revercomb for the full six-year term and became the 1,579th person to serve in the U.S. Senate since its beginning in 1789.

I was elated with this victory, deeply grateful to the voters of West Virginia, and determined—more than ever—to work hard to justify their faith and confidence in me.