

**IN MEMORIAM**



**CAMERON McVICAR BATJER**

# MEMORIAL

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A native of rural Nevada, Cameron McVicar Batjer was born on his grandparent's Smith Valley cattle ranch in 1919. His mother's family, the McVicar clan, came to the valley in the early 1860s from Canada. His father, who raised cattle and operated a trucking company that delivered dry goods to mining camps along the eastern Sierras, emigrated to the area from Germany. Herding cattle, plowing fields, and harvesting wheat laid the foundation for Justice Batjer's unwavering work ethic and his commitment to the legal profession and his community.

When his father died unexpectedly in the early 1930s, the family was forced to sell land to satisfy tax debt, and his mother, who was a University of Nevada, Reno, graduate, supported the family by teaching in rural Nevada. Influenced by his mother's dedication to education, Justice Batjer earned a baccalaureate degree in history with dual minors in education and economics from the University of Nevada, Reno, and after college he took up teaching. His first teaching job was in Dayton, where he taught elementary school to 12 students. While in Dayton, he began dating a college friend, Lura Gamble, who was also a teacher. They married in 1942 and later had three daughters: Lura, Christina, and Marybel.

Following the bombing at Pearl Harbor, which led to the United States entering the Second World War, Justice Batjer was determined to serve his country and enlist in the Navy. But when he went to register, he was deferred from service because he had contracted whooping cough. He was eventually admitted and assigned to the Twenty-fifth Construction Battalion (Sea Bees) in the third Marine Division in the Pacific Theater. Over the course of his service, he traveled throughout the United States before going to the South Pacific, Asia, New Zealand, and Australia. He served for a time on General Douglas MacArthur's staff in Australia, before returning to the United States to finish his tour in Maryland at the Mine Warfare Test Station. After serving in the war, he remained an active naval reserve member for decades.

Once discharged from the Navy, Justice Batjer returned to Nevada and resumed teaching, and he coached high school football and basketball, even though he did not consider himself too athletic. While he found teaching and coaching rewarding, he realized

that teaching was not his path—that it “was not in the cards.” So he decided to attend law school. He had contemplated attending law school during his undergraduate days, and he determined that the time was right to make a career change. He applied to Washington, Oregon, and Utah law schools and chose to attend the University of Utah because of its proximity to his family and friends in Nevada. He completed his first quarter of law school during a summer break from teaching. In 1948, he left teaching to pursue law in earnest, and he moved his young family to Salt Lake City.

Justice Batjer was a modest man who did not view himself as particularly exceptional, yet he excelled in law school, and in 1950 he graduated with high honors and subsequently passed the Utah bar exam. As many can attest, despite his humility, his intellect and wit were as sharp and direct as any to be found in the state. His first job after law school was as a staff lawyer for the Utah senate where he drafted bills, reviewed proposals, and attended committee meetings. Although their time in Utah was memorable, the Batjers decided to return to Nevada to be closer to family and friends. But when they returned to Nevada, Justice Batjer did not immediately enter the legal profession, as Nevada had a six-month residency requirement before he could sit for the state bar exam, and thus, to support his family, Justice Batjer returned to teaching. He taught for one year at a Carson City middle school.

Once admitted to practice law in Nevada, Justice Batjer entered private practice as a sole practitioner. Before long, he was offered a position in Washington, D.C., by newly elected Senator George “Molly” Malone. Justice Batjer served as counsel for the subcommittee on Mines and Mining of the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. When the session ended, he returned to Carson City and took over the law practice of his former associate, Frank Gregory, who had been appointed to a district court judge position in the First Judicial District.

It was through Judge Gregory that Justice Batjer became acquainted with Ormsby County (now Carson City) district attorney Paul Laxalt. This friendship would prove to be instrumental in Justice Batjer’s advancement in his legal career. In 1954, Laxalt appointed Batjer as his deputy attorney. Laxalt later resigned his position as district attorney to enter private practice, and Batjer was appointed by the county commissioners to fill the vacancy. Thereafter, he ran unopposed for the position and served as district attorney until 1959 when he returned once more to private practice.

Justice Batjer served as Ormsby County’s Republican Party chair. His involvement in the Republican Party led him to twice run for the office of state attorney general without success. As for the first time he ran for attorney general, he explained that “the registration in those days was about four-to-one and five-to-one in

favor of the Democrats. There were no Republicans running for attorney general.” As a result, he felt compelled to file for attorney general even though he lacked money and a support base of any kind, especially in southern Nevada. He ran against Roger Foley, who was well-connected to the southern Nevada community and whose father was a federal judge. The race, according to Justice Batjer, was “no contest.” Despite that fact, Batjer recalled that the candidates “were friendly to each other and civil to each other.” Such behavior was not unexpected given Justice Batjer’s reputation for being friendly, fair, loyal, and having a good sense of humor.

Religion played an important role in Justice Batjer’s life. His family was Presbyterian, but the only church in Smith Valley was a Methodist church, which did not deter them from regularly attending Sunday services. Justice Batjer fondly recalled attending church with his grandmother who “had an old gray horse and a buggy, and she would go out and put the harness on and hitch up the horse, and she and I’d get in the buggy, and she’d take me to church.” He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Carson City for over 60 years.

In 1967, the Nevada Legislature authorized the expansion of the supreme court from three justices to five justices. Governor Laxalt appointed Justice Batjer and Justice John Mowbray to the two new positions. The new justices were sworn into office in October 1967. Justice Batjer served on the high court for 14 years, 2 years as chief justice. He was slated to serve as chief justice three times, but in 1972, true to his rural roots and sense of collegiality, he stepped aside for Justice David Zenoff to hold the chief justice position that year. Before Justice Batjer’s first chief justice term, the Nevada Constitution was amended to specifically make the chief justice the head of the Nevada court system. With that change, Justice Batjer traveled the state to visit various district courts and justice courts to fulfill his constitutional obligations. Justice Batjer left the supreme court in 1981. That same year, he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to chair the United States Parole Commission, which oversaw the release and supervision of offenders under its jurisdiction. Justice Batjer held the position for nearly a decade before retiring from public life.

He was the recipient of numerous awards for exceptional service and accomplishments, including the University of Nevada Alumni Association Alumnus of the Year award, the United States Parole Commission Ben Baer Award for Outstanding Leadership, the University of Utah Law School Order of the Coif, the Phil Harris Award for Outstanding Service from Rotary International, and the Washoe County Bar Association Lifetime Achievement Award.

Justice Batjer died on May 27, 2011, in Reno, Nevada. He was 91 years old. His wife Lura predeceased him. He was survived by his three daughters: Lura Batjer Caldwell, Christina Batjer, and

Marybel Batjer. Above all, Justice Batjer had a passion for his family, especially his doting daughters who encouraged and participated in his world travels, which continued well into his senior years. His love of travel was simply one indication representing his great zest for life.

Upon his passing, Justice Batjer was recognized by others for his commitment to Nevada and the law. In a statement, former U.S. Senator Paul Laxalt described Justice Batjer as a man “who possessed classic Nevada values—such as self-reliance, perseverance and compassion—in rare abundance.” Laxalt reminisced that his long-time friend was a “uniquely talented attorney,” who was “understated and courteous; but [who] was also a fiercely competitive advocate, [who] never entered a courtroom less prepared than his opposition.” Justice Batjer was also remembered by Supreme Court Justice Ron Parraguirre as a close family friend and mentor, who “was an extremely bright, compassionate man who was never without a broad grin. We have lost a true gentleman who was a credit to the Supreme Court and the state of Nevada.”

