

1987 Distinguished Alumnus

James B. Griffith



During Jim Griffith's three terms as State Auditor he initiated a program making Wyoming the first state to audit federal mineral production and royalties which has recovered \$41 million in revenue which would have otherwise been uncollected for Wyoming.

By Marty C. Padilla
Alumnews Editor

In 1946 The University of Wyoming's student population grew by 1,500. The increase was so significant that the first day of classes were postponed until adequate housing could be established for the influx of G.I.'s home from military service and ready to enter college. Among those young soldiers eager for the benefits of a higher education was James B. Griffith, one of this year's Distinguished Alumni Award Recipients.

"The start of school was postponed ... no one had a place to live," he recalled. The school had to immediately create additional living quarters which gave rise to the "Butler Hut."

"They sprang up all over the campus, I mean all over. It looked like the

military bases which most everyone had just returned from. They weren't very warm and were heated with potbelly stoves."

GI's were being offered, \$65 a month plus tuition and books to enter higher education institutions in 1946, Griffith recalled. He was just out of the Navy. "It was really a nightmare for awhile around the campus," he said. In fact, many of the butler huts were still in place when he graduated with a degree in business administration in 1950. Prexy's Pasture was the main arena for the makeshift huts.

Outside of a good education, an additional benefit of attending the University of Wyoming Griffith boasts, is the lifelong friendships that he made. "I formed some close associations during my days at UW and I continue to have those associations today," he said.

While at UW Griffith served as president of Sigma Nu in 1949-50, was a member of Alpha Kappa Psi, professional

business fraternity, and played football as a freshman.

Six weeks after he left UW, Griffith was stricken with the crippling disease of multiple sclerosis. "Since then I've learned to live with it," he said.

He went to work as news editor at his family's newspaper *The Lusk Herald*. "I worked my tail off. At a small paper you do a little of everything, writing, photography, typesetting ... I was involved in the whole ball of wax," he said. Griffith continued with *The Lusk Herald* for the following twenty years working his way through the ranks as editor, co-publisher, and later as a partner. His long lived career in the newspaper business brought Griffith numerous awards for journalistic excellence as well as a term as president of the Wyoming Press Association in 1961. The WPA also honored Griffith by naming him a Lifetime Honorary Member for the outstanding accomplishments he made

while he was a publisher and editor. He also acquired a Nebraska newspaper at this time, *The Harrison Sun*. Griffith noted that the technological advances developed and utilized during his journalism days were astounding. In the den of his Cheyenne home, he displays a typecase which was used to hold the metal type of newspapers that were once put together, one letter at a time.

"For some mysterious reason I left the paper and entered politics," he said with a smile.

And enter politics he did. For eight consecutive elections Griffith would grace the halls of the capital in Cheyenne and meet Wyoming voters. In November 1971 he was elected Wyoming State Treasurer. In November 1975 he was elected Wyoming State Auditor and re-elected in 1979 and again in 1983 by one of the largest voter margins in Wyoming's history.

Jim Griffith's career in state Government as Treasurer and Auditor netted millions of dollars in revenue

The Griffith family had been no stranger to Wyoming's political arena when Jim sought a state office. Griffith's father, James Sr., had served as Republican State Chairman for ten years. "I remember that when I was age 10 through age 20 my father was so heavily involved with politics I guess I believed everyone lived like that."

Young Griffith also tested Wyoming's political waters while he served as state committeeman from Niobrara County and later as State Republican Chairman. He was also a delegate to several National Republican Conventions. "I guess I believed everyone should be interested in government, if there not ... we're in trouble," he said.

Griffith recalled that former U.S. Senator Gale McGee and his then Sigma Nu Advisor, Ralph McWhinnie, were mentors for his political career. "They taught me how to argue," he said.

"A political job means a lot of work, a lot of pressure, and I guess in the beginning I really missed the paper," he said.

During his tenure as Wyoming's Auditor, Griffith said it became apparent that auditing was not being done on mineral royalty payments made to the state and federal government. Griffith realized that the collection system was not working properly, and if any royalties were not being collected, Wyoming was losing out on its share of the uncollected revenue. He noted that 48 percent of Wyoming's land is owned by the federal government and approximately 72 percent of

mineral production takes place on that federal land. The state is entitled to receive 50 percent of all mineral royalties received, he added.

Griffith approached then Secretary of the Interior James Watt about jointly conducting some auditing of mineral royalties. Meanwhile, he worked with Wyoming's federal delegation to spearhead the Federal Oil and Gas Mineral Royalties Act. The act, signed into law by President Reagan in 1982, was in large part due to Griffith's initiatives in Wyoming and his involvement in the effort to improve the federal system. The new law, among other things, enabled the Interior Department to delegate its auditing authority to the states.

Griffith established a state audit program to audit federal leases in Wyoming in order to determine whether royalties were being collected in the proper amounts. He soon identified several million dollars worth of royalties that should have been collected by the federal government and shared with Wyoming, but were not. Griffith's audit results received a great deal of attention in Washington D.C., where they were cited at Congressional hearings by proponents of legislation to improve the Interior Department's royalty management program. Wyoming was the first state to audit federal mineral production and royalties which over the years has recovered \$41 million in unpaid royalties for Wyoming's highways, schools, the University of Wyoming and numerous other state entities, he said. Eight

states and several others groups have subsequently followed Wyoming's lead.

Ties with Washington D.C. are not easily shed, Griffith admits. He is presently serving for Interior Secretary Donald P. Hodel, as a member of the Royalty Management Advisory Committee and also served both Interior Secretaries, Watt and William P. Clark, as a member of the National Committee on Mineral Accountability.

Griffith also implemented a Uniform Accounting System for the state while serving as Auditor. The Wyoming Uniform Accounting System affected over 100 agencies, departments, institutions and boards.

As State Treasurer, Griffith recalled he spent a good deal of time revamping the investment policies of the state of Wyoming in order to insure maximum benefits from the state's cash flow. Today, this new system of investment is the second largest source of state income and generated at that time from \$130-140 million each year. Griffith said money deposited in Wyoming banking institutions doubled during his term in office and \$250 million was made available for loans through the Farm Loan Board.

Although he spent a good deal of time in Cheyenne, Griffith's hometown has always been in Lusk. He boasts his roots in Wyoming date back before the turn of the century. His mother lived in Wyoming when it was a territory and attended UW in

the early 1900's. His father, James B. Griffith Sr., writing about his son in a letter dated May 3, 1937, "I hope he has lived an exemplary life and has been of service to his state and the United States of America." The letter was recently discovered in a time capsule at the Wyoming Supreme Court and State Library Building.

In the summer of 1986 he was honored by his hometown residents, with "Jim Griffith Day" during Lusk's centennial celebration. First street was renamed Griffith Blvd. The city of Douglas also named a street for Griffith to thank him for his services as a member of the Wyoming Farm Loan Board.

He was active in the Lusk Chamber of Commerce and was instrumental in the promotion and participation of "Legend of Rawhide" and the "Mellerdrummer" group that represented Wyoming at the Seattle World's Fair.

He has three daughters, Sally, a professor at Villanova University in Philadelphia; Laura is a student at the University of Wyoming; and Lynn, a Peace Corp volunteer who just returned from three years service in Mali, West Africa. His stepson, Michael McVay, also attends UW. Griffith and his wife Carolyn make their home in Cheyenne.

On receiving the Distinguished Alumni Award of 1987 Griffith said, "It is very humbling to have your peers select you for such a great honor. It is truly the highest honor I will ever receive." □

"I formed some close associations during my days at UW and I continue to have those associations today."