

Senator Craig Thomas

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The demands of his various jobs and offices have required him to leave Wyoming, but Craig Thomas has never traveled far - in spirit - from his roots.

Raised in Cody, Thomas attended the rural elementary school in Wapiti Valley and graduated from Cody High School. He became interested in agriculture early on. Active in 4-H for many years, he won a trip to the National 4-H Congress in Chicago.

Becoming a veterinarian was his plan when he first came to UW; he majored in animal production. Thomas also began wrestling at UW, and after his first year, he earned a wrestling scholarship. He remembers Dr. Everett Lantz, UW's wrestling coach, being one of the biggest impacts on his college career, which he recalls on the whole as a great experience that served him well in the years to come. "It's one of the things that really shapes your life," Thomas says. "I've never felt that I didn't have the right basic background - as good as anyone else's."

When Thomas graduated in 1954, he went directly into the Marines. "It was the end of the Korean War. Everyone was going into the service," Thomas says. "I never thought too much about what else I'd do."

Thomas was sent to Quantico for officer's candidate school and during the next four years, he spent most of his time in Japan. "It was a great experience that taught lots of discipline and leadership," Thomas says. "It taught how to work with others and how to have goals and work toward them." He served with distinction as a platoon leader and infantry company officer until 1959.

After that, his interest in agriculture led him to take a job with the Wyoming



Farm Bureau. He was a claims adjuster in their insurance company in Laramie, then he moved over to the main organization, serving as the executive vice president for the next few years. That gave him the chance to work in the legislature representing agriculture, and there he began to pursue his interest in federal issues.

He moved to the American Farm Bureau and went to D.C. with them, as director of their natural resources department. He then went to Texas to be administrator of the Texas Farm Bureau; next it was back to Chicago with the American Farm Bureau again. It was about 1975 when he returned to Wyoming, moving back to Casper.

That was where he met his wife, Susan - who has a master's degree from UW in education, and with whom he has raised four children - and that was where his political career began. "When I came back to Wyoming I started getting involved with the Republican Party," Thomas says. He ran for state treasurer twice, unsuccessfully. He ran for state legislature in Natrona County, successfully. He describes it as a good experience, and it turned out, good preparation for serving in the U.S. legislature. "You learn to deal with the idea that there are different views," Thomas says. "And some of the basic behavioral structures are the same, but the issues

are quite different, of course."

When, in 1989, Dick Cheney resigned to become secretary of defense, Thomas ran for his open House seat and took his place. He served there until 1994, when he ran for the Senate, to take Malcolm Wallop's seat. He won that Senate seat by one of the largest margins in Wyoming history.

As one might imagine, the day of a U.S. senator is busy. Thomas' days often look something like this: from 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., he's clearing his desk of the papers from the day before. This is followed by meetings with other groups or internal meetings. Then there are committee meetings, visits with people coming into the office (lots of visitors from Wyoming) and, of course, time spent on the Senate floor. He meets with his staff to talk about the issues of the day. "To some extent, you focus on the issues of committees on which you're a member," Thomas says. "Now I'm on finance and we deal with health care."

As co-chair of the Senate rural health caucus, Thomas has worked at improving health care opportunities for rural families. "We work at getting people together on something that a majority can agree on," Thomas says. "We're trying to do something with prescription drugs, for seniors particularly." His legislative initiatives have been instru-

mental in reforming and strengthening the rural health care infrastructure, by focusing on securing greater equity with urban counterparts, affordability, and qualified care. Thomas is also on the agriculture committee.

Next in his day there is voting and other activities. By 6:30 p.m. those are usually over, but just about every day of the week, Thomas then is off to some kind of gathering where he gets to "eat dinner off a toothpick."

In addition to his committee assignments, Thomas is a member of the Republican leadership team, serving as deputy whip during the 106th and 107th Congresses, and he is the Senate's Republican chairman on the congressional oil and gas forum.

As in any activity where there are strong feelings involved, but decisions must be made in a broad group, there are frustrations that can come along with the rewards of his office. Thomas finds himself in the minority at times. "Issues that pertain to public land states are different," Thomas says. "We have differences from time to time with endangered species and public land management - we're a minority on those." Sometimes the procedures that allow individual senators to have an impact (filibusters, objections) are frustrating. "It's a good thing if you're doing it, but frustrating if someone else is," Thomas says, laughing.

The issues closest to his heart still include agriculture and rural advocacy, and multiple use of and access to public lands. He works to have more flexibility given to states, and less direction from the federal level. He's known as a fiscal conservative, and an advocate for less government and regulation in general.

Among Thomas' many honors are the Spirit of Enterprise Award given by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; the American Legion Award; the Taxpayer's Hero Award from the Council for Citizens Against Government Waste; and the UW College of Agriculture Outstanding Alumni Award in 1995. He has continued to give his time to UW and to the state of Wyoming when he can. He's served several terms on the advisory board of UW's College of Agriculture. He has remained involved with 4-H and was president of the Wyoming State 4-H Foundation for two years, serving on the board for 10 years.

With four more years to serve in his current term, Thomas will not speculate on what will come after that, and whether it will involve remaining in D.C. - a place he likes, but doesn't call home. "I work in D.C.," he says. "I live in Wyoming. It's fun being here; it's a great place. But it's great to go home. That's how we keep our attitudes straight." ¶

