

Avery was a Regular Guy with a Hearty Laugh

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By Jeff Chapman – Contributing Writer



Jeff Chapman and former Governor Bill Avery in Topeka in 1997

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I had the pleasure of getting to know former Gov. Bill Avery, who died Nov. 9 at the age of 98, as "Bill." He was often a guest speaker at Rotary and other civic clubs or political fundraisers, and he either needed a ride or someone to meet him on the edge of town to lead him to his destination. I helped fill that role. Once we arrived, not even he always knew what his address would entail until it left his lips. He liked to speak off the cuff. "Jeff, don't you worry about what I have to say, just tell me when my time is up and I will wrap it up," he'd say. Bill Avery was one of the nicest and most genuine people I ever met. He once was stumping for Kent Glasscock for governor and started a speech saying, "Kent, I don't know why in the hell anyone would want to be governor..." Of course, the audience roared, but he finished by saying, "I admire people who run for office, not because I did, but because I love Kansas, and it takes people who are willing to work hard and not be afraid to take criticism to lead this state."

I asked him what it was like to be a former governor. He answered, "Of all the things in my life I have done, mostly farming, some politicking and this and that, the thing I did the shortest amount of time was being governor, and that little 24 months has given me more unnecessary recognition than any of the rest."

The best part about being governor, he said, came when it was over. "I wasn't very popular for my stance on taxes, and even though I was probably wrong on a few issues, I told my constituents that's what I stood for, and so I took the arrows and came home to farm." About losing elections, he said, "Wouldn't you know I had the good fortune of running against the popular Robert Docking for governor and then Bob Dole for the U.S. Senate. Those aren't too good of odds for a Wakefield farmer."

Bill Avery was the 37th governor of Kansas and served two years in the 1960s before the four-year term became law. Born in 1911 near Wakefield, Avery graduated in 1934 from the University of Kansas -- "that place further down the Kaw." He served in the Kansas House from 1951 to 1955 and in the U.S. Congress from 1955 to 1965. He was a Republican through and through.

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At the annual Native Sons and Daughters banquet in Topeka, he regularly won the award for Longest Living Male Kansan in attendance, and it wasn't the award that made this so great. It was when Gov. Avery took the microphone from the grasp of Sen. Pat Roberts and began to address the attendees. Gov. Avery was always the gentleman, always laughing at himself, poking fun at aging, poking fun at everyone there, but he made certain to always mention his dear wife, Hazel.

Avery is remembered as the governor who OK'd the executions of Smith and Hickock, the murderers of the Clutter family from southwest Kansas. Their story was made famous by "In Cold Blood" by Truman Capote. Capote describes the governor as "a wealthy farmer" conscious of public opinion. Gov. Avery would respond, "Wealthy compared to who?" and then just laugh. When he laughed, he would dip his head forward, and because he was so tall, his whole body would sway into his buildup and then he would let out a roar and you would think he was about to fall over laughing, even at the mildest of jokes. After losing the governorship to Robert Docking in 1966, Avery failed to win a Senate seat, losing to Sen.

Dole. He was one of the governors interviewed for the documentary, "The Kansas Governor," in which he proudly stated that in his many years of politics he had never played a round of golf.

After retiring he worked for Clinton Oil Company, became president of Real Petroleum Company and later returned to Wakefield to farm.

Gov. Avery once asked me to meet him at the Farm Bureau parking lot on the west side of Manhattan and help him find the place he was to speak. When I arrived, he was in his car, wearing his fedora and overcoat. He never just rolled down the window. He always had to exit the car, stand up, straighten his coat and shake my hand. And then we would decide our plan for travel across Manhattan. A simple, "Follow me," wouldn't do.

On this particular morning, we needed our headlights. Ready to go, I looked in my rear-view mirror to see a jostled fedora and then--Wham! my car was struck from behind. I jumped out to see if the governor was OK and began to evaluate the damage. He awkwardly emerged from his car again, straightened his fedora and overcoat, walked over to the front of his car, picked up the broken grill from the ground and placed it in the back seat of his car. Then he began to laugh. "Just a scratch, Jeff. My eyes and brakes don't seem to work like they used to. Let's get some coffee."

Gov. Avery was a hard-working, fun-loving Kansan who was kind enough to share his time to be in public service and try to make things better for all of us. For the last 15 years, he was simply my funny friend Bill from Wakefield. Thanks for the adventures and the laughs, Bill. You will be missed. Jeff Chapman, a former Manhattan resident, is a vice president of Weis Fire and Safety Equipment Co., in Salina.

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Bill Avery While Governor in 1962