

Industry / Media & Communications

Alaskans / Politicians

By Tricia Brown

ROBERT BRUCE ATWOOD

1907 - 1997

Bob Atwood arrived in Alaska at a time when the ambitions of a few could radically shape the territory and, ultimately, a new state. Atwood's ambitions lay in his pro-statehood, pro-development views, and as editor and publisher of the *Anchorage Times*, his voice carried heft. For fifty-two years, Atwood the newspaperman lobbied for what he viewed best for his adopted homeland, from statehood to Native Claims to oil development.

Born on March 31, 1907, in Chicago, Illinois, Robert Bruce Atwood was the son of a lawyer named Burton Atwood. He graduated from Clark University in Massachusetts, and took a job as a reporter in Springfield, Illinois. In Illinois he met Evangeline Rasmuson, a social worker who was born and bred in Alaska, the daughter of banker E. A. Rasmuson. They married on April 2, 1932, and in 1935 moved to Anchorage, then home to 2,200 people. Of those, 650 were subscribers to the *Anchorage Daily Times*. With assistance from his father-in-law, Bob Atwood bought the fledgling paper and turned it into a media powerhouse. At its height, the *Times* was the state's largest newspaper, reaching 450,000 subscribers who voted.

Bob and Evangeline became the parents of two daughters, Marilyn and Elaine, and later named their Anchorage home the Marilaine. Their network of friends extended across the state, from the most powerful to the least.

In 1949, territorial Gov. Ernest Gruening appointed Atwood as Chairman of the Alaska Statehood Committee. Among many efforts in promoting the cause of statehood, Atwood coordinated the "Statehood Flight," arranging for a planeload full of statehood advocates to fly to Washington, D.C. There Atwood himself met with President Dwight D. Eisenhower to discuss the merits of statehood for Alaska.

With brother-in-law Elmer E. Rasmuson, Atwood invested in the oil business in 1954, speculating on the profitability of oil fields on the Kenai Peninsula. Their investment

proved worthwhile just three years later when Richfield Oil discovered oil near the Swanson River.

On November 8, 1955, Atwood addressed Alaska's Constitutional Convention as the body convened at the University of Alaska in what is now known as Constitution Hall. In a matter of weeks, convention delegates drafted and approved the constitution, ascribing to the Alaska-Tennessee Plan to present their effort to Congress. Although Atwood was a candidate for the congressional delegation that would travel to D.C. on the Alaska-Tennessee Plan, but was disappointed to come up short on votes. Instead, Alaskans endorsed Ralph J. Rivers, William Egan, and Ernest Gruening.

Atwood was not without other honors, however. He was named Norwegian Consul in 1959, and a decade later, director of the National Municipal League. During the Alaska Purchase Centennial Year of 1967, Atwood was honored as Alaskan of the Year.

As a publisher, Atwood welcomed the competition of the *Anchorage Daily News* and in fact assisted in its publication by entering a joint operating agreement with Kay Fanning in 1974, easing the expense of publishing for both papers. A dispute arose between the parties when the *Daily News* claimed that the *Times* had violated the agreement, and after a lengthy arbitration process, an out-of-court settlement was reached in 1978. Competition between the papers continued to ramp up in the 1980s, and readers across the state benefited from vigorous, insightful news stories, features, editorials, and photography.

Atwood himself and daughter Elaine made the news in October 1986 when an armed man entered the *Times* newsroom and threatened to kill him. At nearly eighty years old, but still fit and seemingly fearless, Atwood wrestled the man to the floor and with Elaine's help, kept him pinned until help arrived. In media interviews that followed, Atwood was flushed and invigorated, retelling the event in detail.

Atwood lost his beloved partner, Evangeline, in November 1987. "Theirs was one of Alaska's great love affairs," said John Cowdery, an Alaska Representative and longtime friend of the family. Two years later, the Atwood Concert Hall at the Anchorage Center for Performing Arts was named in her honor. On the campus of Alaska Pacific University, the Atwood Center bears the name as well.

The Atwood legacy lay not only in politics and media, but also in their giving. Bob and Evangeline together established several endowments beginning as early as 1962 with the endowment of the Atwood Foundation, promoting education and the arts. Since 1979, journalism students at the University of Alaska Anchorage have benefited from the

Atwood Chair of Journalism, a one- to two-year position that attracts some of the top media professionals in the nation. In 1980, the Atwood Scholarship was established at Alaska Pacific University. Also, the Alaska Historical Society continues to recognize the contributions of local and state historians through its Evangeline Atwood Award.

The scales of newspaper competition tipped in the last years of the 1980s, with the *Daily News* circulation finally surpassing the *Times*, and Alaska's oldest newspaper finally closed in June 1992. Atwood received a further blow in October 1994 when daughter Marilyn preceded him in death.

A giant in Alaska history, Robert B. Atwood died on January 10, 1997, in Anchorage.

Speaking at Atwood's memorial service, Alaska Rep. John Cowdery repeatedly referred to the inscription found at the foot of the Pioneer Statue in Sitka: "Bring me men to match my mountains."

"He stood above the crowd," Cowdery said, "not to be superior, rather to be guardian, and be first to withstand whatever pains were inflicted by man or nature against his beloved community. Be they earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, wind storms, of either natural or political derivation, Bob was first to rally the people of Anchorage."

Two weeks after Atwood's death, his old friend and political ally Senator Ted Stevens addressed the U.S. Congress in tribute: "Above all, Bob Atwood understood the importance of a strong military presence in Alaska, the crossroads of the world, and he helped to make the nation aware of our strategic global position."

"He was a tireless supporter of our service men and women, and remained friends with many of them long after their tours of duty in Alaska were over. For forty years Bob served on the military's civilian advisory boards in Alaska, and was president since 1976 of the Alaskan Command Civilian Advisory Board. He assured that in Alaska there was—and still is—a partnership between our military stationed in our State and Alaskans.

"Bob was a true Alaskan—a real pioneer."

At his death, Atwood had finished work on his biography, a manuscript titled *Alaska Titan*, working with author John Strohmeier. Progress toward publishing that book was ceased when Atwood's daughter Elaine sued to prevent distribution, stating intent to

publish her own version of her father's biography. *Bob Atwood's Alaska* was released in 2003, after Elaine Atwood's death on January 30 of that year.

"Next to Evangeline and his family, Bob's most ardent love was for Alaskan history," said John Cowdery. "He and Evangeline contributed much to Alaska's chronicle."

LINKS:

Who's Who in Alaska Statehood struggle, University of Alaska:

<http://www.alaska.edu/creatingalaska/StatehoodFiles/whoswho/alaskans/atwood.xml>

Eulogy for Bob Atwood by Alaska Rep. John Cowdery:

<http://www.akrepublicans.org/pastlegs/spcowdery031797.htm>

Tribute to Robert B. Atwood, Alaska Pioneer, by Senator Ted Stevens, January 30, 1997, *Congressional Record*, Page S841:

<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?r105:S30JA7-225>:

Alaska Newspaper Project:

<http://library.state.ak.us/hist/newspaper/newspaper.html>

The Atwood Foundation:

http://www.atwoodfoundation.org/about_family.html

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about Robert Atwood and the history of Anchorage. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for ALNCat (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **ROBERT ATWOOD**. To learn more about the historical context of his life, type in **ANCHORAGE PIONEER**.

MORE READING:

Anchorage Daily Times. Anchorage: Anchorage Publishing Co., 1917-1975.

Atwood, Robert B. *How to Be an Anchorage Alaskan*. Anchorage: Anchorage Times Publishing Co., 1946.

Atwood, Robert B. *Bob Atwood's Alaska: The Memoirs of a Lendendary Newspaper Man*. Anchorage: Marilaine Publishing, 2003.

Pioneers of Alaska. *Fond Memories of Anchorage Pioneers: Personal Histories*. Anchorage: The Auxiliary, 1996.

Strickland, Ron. *Alaskans: Life on the Last Frontier*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1992.