

Obituary

ROBERT LYONS

Robert (Bob) E. Lyons, a lifetime resident and farmer in Wagner and Charles Mix County, and former South Dakota legislator, died Sunday, November 19, 1995 at St. Benedict Hospital in Parkston.

Funeral Mass was held Saturday, November 25, 1995 at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Wagner. Burial was in the church cemetery, rural Wagner.

Pallbearers were Dick Lyons, Pat Lyons, Jack Lyons, Tom Lyons, Bob Lyons and John Robinson.

Honorary pallbearers were Dr. Ken Sadler, Wilbert Peters, Ed Novak, Bob McBride, R.L. Frei, Wes Carda, Leonard Andera, Wilbur Nedved, Lyle Mensch and R.H. Frei.

Bob was born in Wagner on December 29, 1909, the son of William F. Lyons and Katherine Cosgrove. He was the youngest of 12 children and the sole remaining grandchild of Irish immigrant parents, Jeremiah and Ellen Lyons, County Waterford. Educated at rural schools and St. Ann's in Geddes, he graduated from Wagner High School in 1929.

Bob farmed with his parents for a number of years and served in the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, clearing trails in the Black Hills. He established his own farm in 1935 and farmed all his life, raising hogs, cattle and grain.

Mr. Lyons was elected State Representative for three terms, 1970 to 1976, representing 19,000 residents of the 16th district which included Charles Mix, Bon Homme and northwest Douglas counties in south-central South Dakota. He told a newspaper reporter in 1977: "I never campaigned for election, and never made speeches. My friend, Sheriff Frank 'Mr. Democrat' McCabe of Charles Mix County told me: 'Bob, you're going to run. And so I did.'" He added, "My political philosophy is to represent all the people of my district—Democrats and Republicans. I like to see them on the street over the weekend when I come home, as I'm always glad to get their opinions and talk over what is happening in Pierre." He did not seek reelection to the House when his term expired in 1976, saying, "Let the young ones take over." However, in 1977, Governor Richard Kneip appointed Mr. Lyons to finish the term of his ailing friend, Republican Senator Jess Tjeerdsma of Springfield, at the Senator's request, representing District 16 in the Senate.

Bob's legislative career dis-

played a wide menu of interest. He filed a bill to protect domestic water well owners against possible damage by irrigation systems and worked for legislation to provide tax relief to the elderly and disabled (passed in 1974). He supported a bill for the Wagner-Lake Andes Irrigation Project and for an educational TV tower in Wagner. He fought efforts to lower milk standards, informing his constituents, "Before the Dairy Marketing Acts, if a dead cat fell in it (the milk), we pulled it out and sold it anyway." An early environmentalist, he filed a bill to ban non-biodegradable disposable diapers after they clogged his combine in the grain field.

Throughout his legislative service, he joined in the annual effort to get a state income tax and to repeal the personal property tax, writing in his newspaper column, "It's time we start taxing new Cadillacs and quit taxing old living room chairs." Once on a day before an election, opponents circulated a story that he had died. Mr. Lyons rapidly issued a statement that like Mark Twain, "reports of my death are greatly exaggerated," and won the election. The South Dakota State Medical Association publicly acknowledged his efforts to address critical issues regarding professional liability costs for physicians (1976).

Mr. Lyons continued a long family tradition of civic and political involvement in the community and State. He told a reporter, "I've always been interested in politics; when I was a boy, my father had me traveling the county on horseback to spread the word for Tom Berry, the cowboy Governor." His Irish immigrant grandfather, Jeremiah Lyons, was an active supporter of Stephen A. Douglas in the campaign of 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was elected. His uncle, Richard F. Lyons, who led the Lyons family to Dakota Territory in the early 1880s, was a member of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Dakota (1889) and chairman of the State Democratic Party.

Another uncle, Dennis Lyons, served in the Iowa State legislature. A cousin, Thomas D. Lyons, was a candidate for the elected position of State Superintendent of Schools in South Dakota and later a distinguished lawyer and judge on the Supreme Court bench in Oklahoma. He assisted his older brother, Dennis (D.B.), a homesteader and rancher south of Winner, in promoting soil conservation practices. Mr. Lyons' mother, Katherine Cosgrove, a former school teacher, was active on the local

school board.

Mr. Lyons campaigned in presidential elections for the Kennedy brothers, John F. (1960) and Robert (1968) and for Senator George McGovern, a family friend (1972). He served as agricultural chairman for the South Dakota Democratic Party (1968), and was elected delegate to the National Democratic Convention in Chicago. (After Robert Kennedy was assassinated, Mr. Lyons canceled plans to go to the Convention.) He was district chairman of five counties for the Democratic Party, president of Charles Mix National Farmers Organization, member of the Wagner Planning and Zoning Commission, and the Local Government Study Commission. He was affiliated with the Knights of Columbus, Rotary, Farmers Union, National Farmers Organization and a lifelong member of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church.

To his numerous nieces, nephews and cousins, he was known as "Uncle Bob", a great story teller and family historian. At family gatherings he would tell of the perilous journey made by his Irish grandparents, Jeremiah Lyons and Ellen Whelan, when they fled the Great Famine, sailing to Boston and on to New York in 1845. After working on the railroads, the growing Lyons family established a farm in the Bridgeport section of Chicago (site of cattle stockyards and 1952 Democratic Convention) where Mr. Lyons' father, William, was born in 1861.

Among his prized possessions was his grandfather's blackthorn shillelagh. He often narrated the story of the Lyons family migration from Iowa to Lake Badus near Madison, where they joined a Swiss farming colony before South Dakota was a State. At the beginning of this century, his parents moved to a farm near Wagner where he was born. At a family reunion he described his boyhood home as "three claim shanties shoved together, but filled with a lot of love. It was home, and everybody was always welcome there."

He recalled the cycle of life and death in those early pioneer days. When a sister died of scarlet fever on a moonlit night, his parents hitched up the horses and drove ten miles to the Wagner cemetery. Returning home at sunrise, they found a young son dead with the same fever, and retraced the journey to place him next to his sister's fresh grave. He said, "Mother never could rest on a moonlit night again."

His life spanned the generation from homesteaders and

sodbusters to farmers and ranchers. His stories chronicled the grandeur and severity of life on the Plains faced by his pioneering parents, ancestors and neighbors, and depicted the 3D's of farming in South Dakota, "drought, dust, and defaulted mortgages or taxes". He was an avid student of the Civil War and continued to read extensively in his retirement.

In addition to his wife of 42 years, Alice, he is survived by his son, Charles (John), Wagner, who moved from Dallas, TX to assist his father and mother. Mr. Lyons was preceded in death by his first wife, Marian Wheeler, who died in 1952. Other survivors include 19 nephews and nieces.

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(by Robert F. Lyons, nephew)