

Idaho has lost a treasure with death of Merle Wells

Most Idahoans knew Merle Wells only by reputation, and what a reputation it was. The only person ever to hold the title of Idaho historian emeritus, he was a human encyclopedia to whom ordinary encyclopedias deferred.

It could be intimidating. Wells, who died Monday at 81, was the quintessential scholar. His books required heavy-duty shock absorbers to haul home from the library. Yet for all his erudition, he was a self-effacing man who shunned attention — which only added to the mystique. The first time I interviewed him, I was terrified.

His home seemed to be constructed less of wood and plaster than of books and filing cabinets. We talked for an hour and scheduled another interview to finish the rest of the questions on my list. In 60 minutes, he had answered one.

The question was how Idaho got its name. Wells told the story in such detail that it included the motives and personality

traits of its key players. It was as if it had happened yesterday and he had watched it happen. (The name, incidentally, was invented by a politician, rejected by Colorado and adopted by Idaho only because another politician's wife hated the name we almost got — Montana.)

My fears of interviewing the eminent scholar were groundless. While it is true, as so many have said, that Wells knew more than anyone ever has or will about the history of Idaho, he also was the least assuming of men. To see him on the street, you might have mistaken him for a retired clerk or accountant. Slightly built with wispy white hair and soft blue eyes, he looked as if a strong wind would blow him away. Several years ago, in Nevada, one almost did.

Wells was at the wheel of the venerable pickup he used for historical forays into the Western wilds. He didn't so much drive as aim at whatever interested him. Absence of



TIM WOODWARD

roads was immaterial, but the howling Nevada wind ended an era. It rolled and destroyed his truck, which already looked as if he'd driven it through a war. He survived the incident as he had his other off-road feats of daring, without serious injury.

He was less lucky on one of his European odysseys. At the British Museum, he turned his ankle and was never the same. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life, using a bicycle to get around town because it was easier for him than walking. I saw him riding it on the Connector one day, a frail man on a pink girl's bicycle in four

lanes of traffic, and trembled for him. Again, my fears were groundless. He rode his bicycle everywhere — including the hospital to check himself in for a suspected heart problem — yet lived to die peacefully in his sleep.

In winter, he wore a long, yellow coat with a black streak up the back where the bicycle had spattered mud. A mutual friend picked him out in the throng at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, one of the world's busiest, by his coat alone.

Yes, he was a bit eccentric. He was also uncommonly brilliant, compassionate and public-spirited. His books will remain the last word on their subjects. During World War II, when Japanese Americans were interned at Minidoka, he was among the first to greet them with a kind word and offers of help. And when a news story incorrectly reported a historical detail, the phone would ring, and a thin, lilting voice would begin, "Say, this is Merle Wells. In your story this



Merle Wells

it did happen.

I'm going to miss those calls. We haven't lost a mere historian. We've lost our history's guardian and best friend.

They buried Merle Wells Thursday in a plain blue box in one of the last six plots in Pioneer Cemetery.

They buried him with his passport and battered straw hat, a pocketful of his pens and notes, an Idaho road map, and copies of his nominations of the Lolo Trail and Silver City for the National Register of Historic Places. His funeral will be Nov. 20 at the First Presbyterian Church.

"This is where he belongs,

with our early governors and leading citizens," Pastor Mark Davis told those attending the private graveside service. "I hope you'll come here sometimes, to remember and treasure him."

Treasure. It was exactly the right word.

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Idaho has lost two treasures this month. Helena Schmidt, the last of our mountain solitaires, died Nov. 1.

She spent her entire life on Starveout Creek, a tributary of the Wildhorse River, in No Business Basin on the edge of Hells Canyon. The road to her home would make a mountain goat dizzy, and in the end it claimed her. She tried to turn her dilapidated Subaru around on one of its switchbacks, literally a death-defying feat, and landed 300 feet below. She was 90.

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Friends remember Wells as a blessing to Idaho's people

'He was the historian's historian'

By Tim Woodward
The Idaho Statesman

Friends and colleagues of Merle Wells remembered him Wednesday as a gentle man who never forgot anything and devoted his life to the advancement of truth.

Wells, a virtual encyclopedia of state and regional history and the only person ever to hold the title of Idaho historian emeritus, died late Monday night of prostate cancer. His death shared the news columns with reports of one of the closest elections in U.S. history, a coinci-



Merle Wells

Davis recalled "his lifelong determination to get the truth out. His whole career was that way. Without him, we wouldn't have

See Wells / 6B

dence many found appropriate.

"I think he would have liked that," state historian Larry Jones said. "But before he ever would have said so, he'd have given you a two-hour lesson on the history of our presidential elections."

Flags flew at half staff in Wells' honor Wednesday at the State Historic Preservation Office, where associate state archaeologist Mary Anne

a historic preservation program. His whole life was devoted to studying, teaching and preserving history for the people of Idaho. And he was such a gentle man. I never once heard him raise his voice. I don't think we realize yet what we've lost."

Former Gov. Robert Smylie called Wells and former Idaho State Historical Society Director Jerry Swinney "the godfathers of the historical society. I appointed him to take Jerry's place, but he didn't want to be an administrator. He agreed to take the job until we found a replacement and he could get back to doing what he really liked, which was the history of Idaho. He knew more about who did what to whom on what street corner than anyone else ever has or will.

"... A part of our history goes with him. There are so many ways we throw our history away anymore. Nobody writes it down. Merle did. And he never forgot anything. He was a great friend and a magnificent servant of the public."

Swinney, now retired and living in Rochester, N.Y., called Wells "the historian's historian. He was also a prolific writer on Idaho and regional history. His knowledge of those subjects will never be equaled."

Belying the scholarly intellect was a touch of the bumbling professor. Lindy High, now a management specialist in the Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction's office, laughs about the time Wells offered her a job.

In the reception line at her wedding.

"He told me he had a job cataloging documents at the historical society and wanted to know if I'd be interest-

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Local

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Funeral plans

Merle Wells' funeral has been tentatively scheduled for 11 a.m. on Nov. 18 at Boise's First Presbyterian Church, 950 W. State Street.

ed. I said, "Yeah, but can we talk about it later?"

Brigham Madsen, former chairman of the history department at Brigham Young University and a friend of Wells' from their post-graduate days at the University of California at Berkeley, affectionately refers to him as "Mr. Idaho History." He knew it better than anyone. He never married, and spent his entire life devoted to history and scholarly work."

Eighty-one at his death, Wells was a scholar virtually all of his life. Bill Rankin, a classmate at the College of Idaho in the '30s, remembered the young Wells as "serious and studious. He was very soft spoken and had a piercing mind. His physical stature was slight, so he wasn't involved in sports. He was just a mind. And what a mind it was!"

Publicly, Wells was all history. Privately, he had a second passion. The other guiding force in his life was his religion. He was a lifelong member of Boise's First Presbyterian Church. Illness forced him to miss the Easter service for the first time in 69 years.

"He was a true gentleman whose goal was to teach others and inspire and encourage them in process of discovery," Pastor Mark Davis said. "He was also one of the most humble men I've ever known."

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