

How an Idaho Falls democrat became the state's 16th governor and started a political dynasty



Rett Nelson, [EastIdahoNews.com](https://www.eastidahonews.com)

Local

🕒 Published at 5:00 pm, May 30, 2022

Barzilla Clark was inaugurated as Idaho's 16th governor in 1936 and previously served as mayor of Idaho Falls. Listen to the podcast in the video player above. | Photo on left taken from the [National Governors Association](#), Photo on right provided by the Museum of Idaho.

This is the first in a series of stories about former Gem State Governors from eastern Idaho.

IDAHO FALLS – Barzilla Clark's election as Idaho's 16th governor in 1936 was the culmination of an idea planned out nearly 30 years earlier.

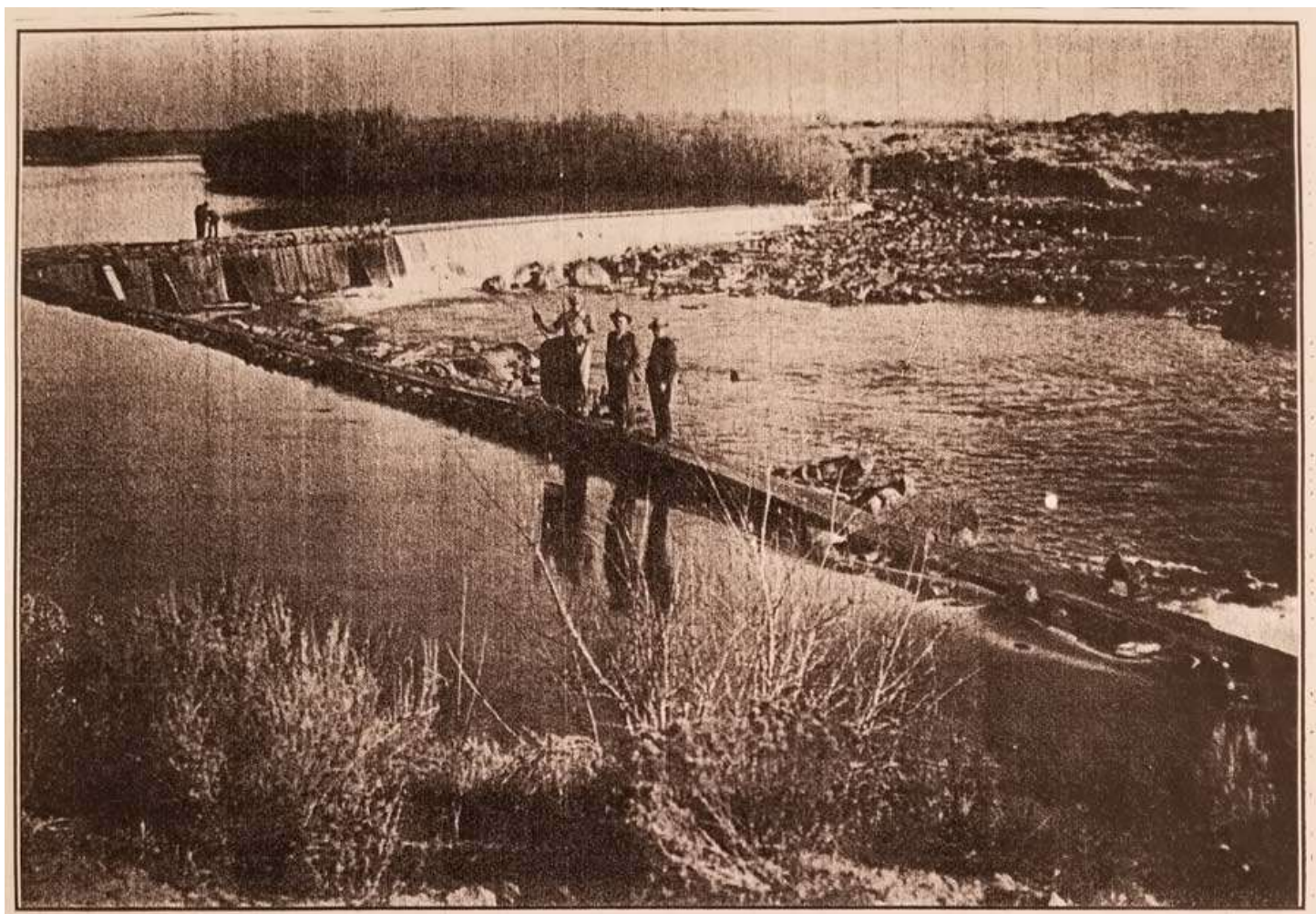
The 55-year-old Democrat had already served for a decade as Idaho Falls' mayor when he had beaten his Republican opponent, Frank Stephan, in the gubernatorial election with 58% of the vote (115,098 total votes), according to the book "Idaho's Governors."

An engineer by profession, one of the major highlights during Clark's time as mayor was the development of the hydroelectric dam and power plant. In the book, an essay from Willard Barnes notes Clark's first speech to the Idaho Legislature was focused on providing greater freedom for cities to establish hydroelectric power plants.

Clark had unsuccessfully run for governor in 1914 following a stint on the Idaho Falls City Council. He was elected mayor for the first time in 1912 before another successful run in 1926. And he ultimately lost his re-election bid for governor after just one term.

RELATED | These early Idaho settlers left a major mark on U.S. history and you've likely never heard of them

But regardless of how things played out, it was the beginning of a political dynasty that shaped public policy in Idaho throughout the 20th century.



Barzilla Clark is one of the men pictured above surveying a diversion dam in Idaho Falls during his tenure as mayor. | Museum of Idaho

A 'civic-minded' family

The decision to enter politics was a natural fit for Clark. His father, Joseph, was the first mayor of Idaho Falls when it was incorporated as a city in 1891.

"He (Joseph) was very civic-minded and was probably just a natural to run for mayor," Michael Moore, [author of a 2015 article](#) about the Clarks, tells EastIdahoNews.com. "(Joseph) also ran for governor on one of those third party tickets, the prohibitionist ticket (in 1892)."

Barzilla had two uncles who served as governors in other states, Barnes writes. Barzilla's brother, Chase, was also elected mayor and went on to serve as governor. A cousin, D. Worth Clark, served as a U.S. Senator for Idaho.

Joseph had brought his family to what was then Eagle Rock from Hadley, Indiana in 1884. Barzilla was the fourth of five children.

Barzilla's interest in engineering was a trait he inherited from his father, who worked as a civil engineer. Joseph was interested in irrigation and hydroelectric projects and the waterfall in Eagle Rock was likely a big attraction

for him. Joseph was instrumental in the city's first power plant becoming operational, [according to a history from Idaho Falls Power](#).

Barzilla attended school in Idaho Falls before moving to Indiana to attend college. While there, he was badly injured in a race.

"He had not properly trained for (it) and he collapsed," Barzilla's 76-year-old granddaughter, Patricia Young, says.

The injury resulted in some type of lung infection, according to Barzilla's obituary, which contributed to his death in 1943. He moved back to Idaho to recover, where he eventually met Ethel Peck, the woman who became his wife.

During this time, he rode the open range as a cowboy and he worked as a caretaker for a mine in Stanley near Sunbeam Hot Springs.

"Chase's wife, Jean Burnett, started Robinson Bar Ranch on the Sawtooth National Recreation Area of the Salmon River (a property owned by the Clarks for many years). One of the family stories ... is that Chase and Barzilla, while building a chicken coop at the ranch, plotted out their political careers," says Young.



Barzilla Clark pictured at his home in Stanley near Sunbeam Hot Springs in the early 1900s. | Post Register photo provided by the Museum of Idaho

Political highlights and accomplishments

When Barzilla was sworn-in as mayor in 1926, he expanded what his father had started with a series of upgrades to the city's power plant.

"The greatest satisfaction of my political career has been the building and successful operation of municipal power plants at Idaho Falls, Idaho," Barzilla wrote in a biographical sketch.

In addition to the hydroelectric dam, Barzilla established much of the city's modern amenities — such as the water and deep well system, city sewer, city hall, fire station, Northgate Mile, airport, and Pinecrest Golf Course — without going into debt.

"This was an incredible feat considering many of Barzilla's improvements came before the New Deal programs provided city governments with a substantial source of federal funds," the Post Register reported in 1991.

U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt implemented the New Deal program during the Great Depression in hopes of restoring financial prosperity and getting unemployed Americans back to work through many public projects.

"Idaho Falls had some of the most public works (projects) of any of the communities in the state," Young explains.

Clark was a big supporter of FDR's New Deal policies and a big proponent of natural resource conservation. Making the latter the focus of his gubernatorial campaign earned him an election victory.

RELATED | Presidents who have visited Idaho and the rise of 'Imperial' leadership in America

"An act concerning the development, conservation and use of irrigation water passed. (Clark's administration) created a State Water Conservation Board," Barnes writes.

Young notes that he also created the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

"He released quite a few people (from prison) because there was no money in the state treasurer's office to take care of them," Young says. "J. Edgar Hoover didn't appreciate my grandfather releasing anybody from prison."

Clark was happy to meet with FDR and his wife when they paid a visit to the Gem State in 1937.

"It was my privilege to spend the day with them, showing them the resources of a typical irrigated valley in the west," Barzilla wrote in 1937. "Proof that the tour was impressive is seen by the fact that the President in his recent fireside chat made particular mention of his visit to the Boise valley."



Barzilla Clark, right, in the car with President Franklin Roosevelt and an unidentified individual. | Patricia Young

Nationwide, public opinion of FDR's New Deal became more critical in the late 1930s," [according to History.com](#), and added to political tensions in Idaho.

Clark, who had faced a divided legislature since his inauguration, found it increasingly difficult to move legislation forward. He had pushed for an overhaul of the financial and tax system early on in his administration, which ultimately failed. A proposed restructuring of the Public Health Department also failed.

A shortage of emergency relief funds at one point drew concern from county commissioners across the state. Many of them demanded that the Governor call a special session of Congress to address it.

"The people are not going to sit and starve," one commissioner is reported to have said. "I don't want a rebellion in our county or state. But a special session may be the only way around it."

Governor Clark eventually called a special session and was able to acquire the necessary funds.

Though Young says Clark was well-respected as a person, many voters weren't satisfied with his administration. In the 1938 election, he lost to his Republican opponent, Clarence Bottolfson, of Arco, who won with 57% of the vote (106,268 total votes), according to voting records.

(A governor's term was only two years at the time. It didn't become a four-year term until 1946.)



Barzilla Clark, seated at desk, with state lawmakers in the Statehouse signing a bill into law. | Museum of Idaho

'The passing of such a good citizen'

Clark stepped away from public service after failing to get re-elected and returned home to Idaho Falls. He'd written a number of newspaper columns over the years covering the history of Bonneville County. This led to the publication of his 1941 book, "Bonneville County in the Making."

In August 1943, Clark became ill and was checked into a hospital. He passed away a few weeks later on September 21 at 9:25 a.m. He was 63. An obituary in the Post Register attributes his cause of death as "pneumonia complicating a lung infection."

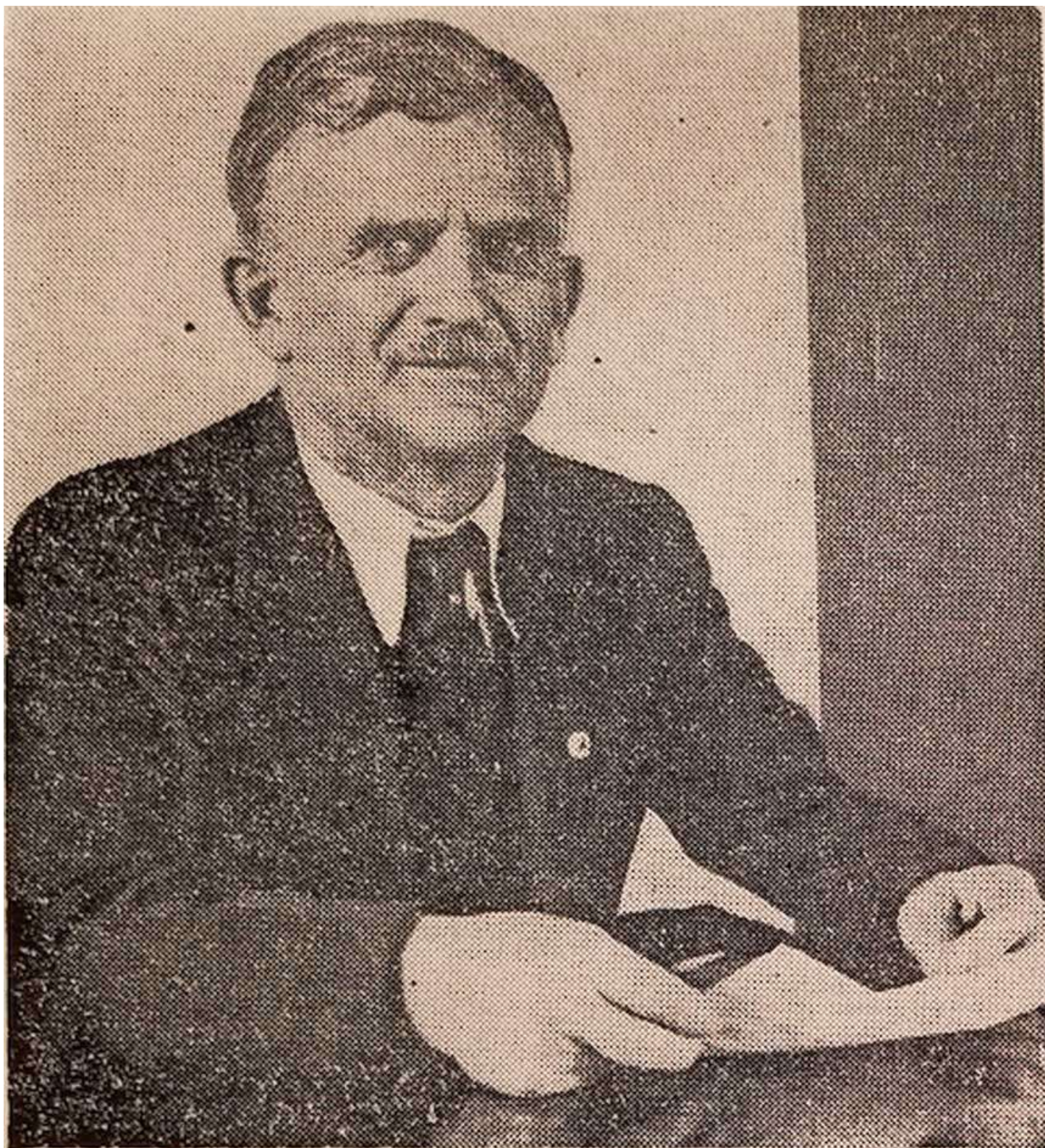
"I regret very much the passing of such a good citizen as Mr. Clark," then Idaho Falls Mayor E.W. Fanning told the Post. "I have known him since boyhood and feel that Idaho Falls has lost one of its most valuable citizens. As a longtime mayor of Idaho Falls, he left many valuable accomplishments by which he shall long be remembered."

Clark died before Young was born, but she's grown up hearing stories about him and she describes him as a "jokester" who was "fun to be around."

"I think my grandfather was one, that if he had a nickel in his pocket during the depression, and he saw someone who was looking tired (and rundown), he would give them the money and say, 'Go to a movie and cheer yourself up.' Those are the kind of stories I've heard about the kind of public servant he was," Young says.

A story in Clark's obituary mentions a time when he held up a meeting in the Statehouse because he was chatting with a janitor in the basement about the problems of the day.

"Clark would show up humming some song of his boyhood and grinning the grin that won for him the appellation: 'Government with a grin,'" his obituary says.



Barzilla W. Clark, former governor of Idaho, many-term mayor of Idaho Falls and Upper Snake River valley historian, who died Tuesday night of pneumonia and complications.

A photo taken from Clark's obituary published by the Post Register the day after his death. | Museum of Idaho

A legacy of public service

In the years since his death, the Clark family's involvement in public service has been an ongoing tradition. Barzilla's son, Ferris, served on the Idaho Falls City Council and owned what used to be the Westbank Hotel by the greenbelt. Young served for more than 20 years as a Magistrate Judge in Boise County, and her husband, Byron Johnson, was a former Idaho Supreme Court Justice. He passed away in 2012.

And Young's father, Merlin Young, was a federal bankruptcy judge for the state of Idaho for many years.

Patricia recalls many lively political discussions in her family over the years and she says an oft-repeated statement from her mother has always stuck with her.

"If I was complaining about something, she'd say, 'Well, what are you going to do about it?' So that's kind of my motto. What am I going to do about it when I don't like what's going on?" Patricia says.

In the next installment, we'll trace the political career of Barzilla's brother, Chase Addison Clark, and his election as the Gem State's 18th governor. We'll also discuss the controversial political statement that some say tarnished his reputation forever.

[SUBMIT A CORRECTION](#)

*EastIdahoNews.com comment boards are a place for open, honest, and civil communication between readers regarding the news of the day and issues facing our communities. We encourage commenters to stay on topic, use positive and constructive language, and be empathetic to the feelings of other commenters. **THINK BEFORE YOU POST.** [Click here](#) for more details on our commenting rules.*

[sign in](#)

What did you think about this article?



Join the discussion here...

submit

cancel

9 comments

Highest-Rated Author



90
Ammonites 2 hours ago
Ammon



Great article and piece of history!



1



64
NOT brianwashed 3 hours ago



I also spent a lot of time in terre haute Indiana ,, but unlike Mr barillza I did not idolize the local socialist : Eugene Debbs !!



34
Sluggo 6 hours ago



Probably stole the elections he won.



1

Comment Has Been Removed



34
Sluggo ► **REMOVED COMMENT** 4 hours ago



2000 mules proves it.



59
Just Me ► **Sluggo** 4 hours ago
USA



That's no proof, they couldn't show proof. How many courts threw his BS out?



1



34
Sluggo ► **Just Me** 2 hours ago



How can you say that? Its actual data.
Democrats have been stealing elections since Tammany hall.



1



90
Ammonites ► **Sluggo** 2 hours ago
Ammon



Repeat a lie enough and you may start to believe it, but it's still a lie.

Sorry if that conflicts with your worldview.




1

 **8bbuckaroo** ▶ **Sluggo** an hour ago

EDITOR'S PICK

It doesn't prove 🤖.



 34 **Sluggo** ▶ **8bbuckaroo** 14 minutes ago

EDITOR'S PICK

How does it not prove it? Its not a science fiction movie. Facts.



The [Way of Openness](#) is Practiced Here

[feedback](#)