

Why Idaho's 17th governor was the first to serve nonconsecutive terms



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East Idaho
Governs

Posted: Nov 13, 2022, 6:00 pm

Updated: Nov 13, 2022, 6:41 pm



Clarence Bottolfsen was elected Idaho's 17th governor in 1938. He was the state's first chief executive to serve nonconsecutive terms. | [National Governors Association](#)

Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of stories about former Gem State Governors from eastern Idaho.

IDAHO FALLS – Idaho's Republican sweep of statewide and federal offices in Tuesday's general election adds to the state's long history of conservative politics.

Governor Brad Little ended up with 60% of the vote, for a total of 318,479 votes. The results for Lt. Governor, Attorney General and State Superintendent showed a similar breakdown with Republican candidates coming out on top.

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It's been nearly three decades since the Gem State's last Democratic Governor, Cecil Andrus, left office. Democrat John Evans occupied the seat for a decade before him.

While Democrats have only held the state's highest office three times in the last 75 years, it's worth noting that there was a time when both parties had equal appeal to voters in the Gem State.

Clarence Bottolfsen became the state's first Republican Governor in seven years when he was elected in 1938. (A governor's term was only two years at that time.) The 48-year-old journalist from Arco had beaten the Democratic incumbent, [Barzilla Clark](#), with 57% of the vote, or 106,268 total votes, according to voting records.

In the book "Idaho's Governors," Robert Sims points out that at the time, Idaho voters had become "disillusioned" with FDR's New Deal policies and Bott, as he was known to people across the state, had emerged victorious by promising to reduce taxes (Clark's predecessor, Ben Ross, sought re-election in 1938 after serving three terms and had reportedly implemented sales and other taxes during his time in office) and clean house.

Bott was sworn in as Idaho's 17th governor in January 1939 and would become the state's first chief executive to serve nonconsecutive terms.

Life before the governorship

Bottolfsen was born in Superior, Wisconsin on Oct. 10, 1891. [A biographical sketch](#) from the University of Idaho shows he attended high school in Fessenden, North Dakota, where he worked as "a printer's devil in the local printing shop."

"The man who owned the shop moved to Arco, Idaho and purchased the Arco Advertiser, a weekly newspaper. Soon he sent for Bottolfsen, then 19, to work for him," U of I reports.

As Bottolfsen gained experience in the printing business, his interest in the newspaper industry grew. He eventually took over the Arco paper during an economically challenging time and "turned it into one of Idaho's leading weeklies."

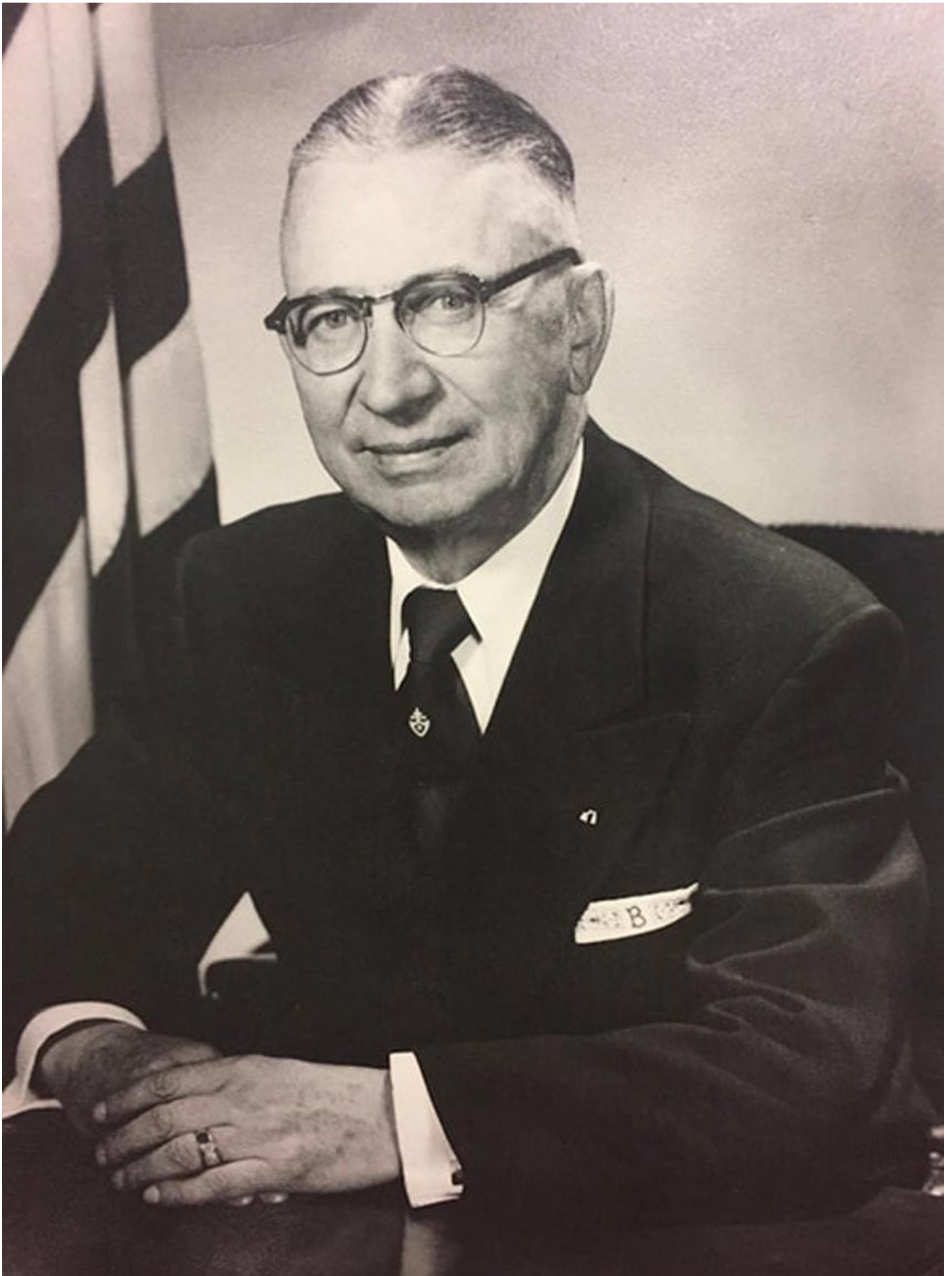
"He arrived in Arco on Oct. 3, 1910, and assumed management of The Arco Advertiser, soon converting that newspaper into a paying proposition," Sims writes.

Bott worked as a state legislature throughout the 1920s while running the paper. He became the editor in 1934 and two years later, acquired the Blackfoot Daily Bulletin, which he also managed.

He retired in 1947, but reportedly continued to work as a correspondent for several newspapers and even did freelance work.

The Arco Advertiser [still exists today](#). It also provides commercial printing services for businesses.

It's not clear what motivated him to run for office, but after years in the Legislature, he surprised his opponents when he become the Republican nominee for Governor.



C.A. Bottolfson | [Speaking of Idaho blog](#)

Accomplishments as Governor

Bott called for a \$5 automotive license fee during his inaugural address. Sims notes he also called for administrative changes to the state liquor dispensary, something that may have contributed to his unsuccessful re-election bid in 1940. His Democratic opponent, Chase Clark, voted against the administrative changes and ended up earning a narrow victory.

“Two years later, the gubernatorial candidates in the general election were the same. This time, they both had to run on their records, and Idaho voters had trouble deciding which one they wanted. When the results were final, Bottolfson became the first ex-governor to regain the office, but by fewer than 500 votes,” writes Sims.

Bott’s second term was much more eventful, according to Sims, and one issue was to blame. In the election of 1942, voters approved the Senior Citizens Grant Act, a measure that added \$40 to the state’s monthly relief payments for people 65 and older.

The impact of the Depression and the start of World War II made funding this measure a challenge.

“In his second inaugural address, Bottolfson declared that ‘economy must be the session’s watchword.’ He ... asked for ‘frugality which borders on parsimony,’” Sims writes.

Cuts in state personnel and other departments did not create a savings to help fund this initiative and Bott knew that a tax would have to be implemented to pay for it. Despite running on a platform of no new taxes, Bottolfson reluctantly implemented a 5% sales tax.

“He believed the Legislature had an obligation to fund the pension plan since it had been approved by the voters,” Sims writes. “While it was clear that Idaho’s voters liked the pension plan, they disliked a sales tax more.”

Legislators ultimately rejected the Governor’s plan and voted overwhelmingly to repeal the bill voters had approved.

Bott later approved the Legislature’s action in a joint session, saying the pension plan “has joined all other patriotic endeavors of Idaho and gone to war.”

Ultimately, Bott did not convince even the strongest supporters of the pension plan and it led to his political demise.

After an unsuccessful run for U.S. Senate in 1944, Bott went on to serve two terms in the Idaho Legislature before retiring in 1961.

“Not only did this service make him the only chief executive to later serve in the state legislature, but his last election came 40 years after his first, an Idaho record,” writes Sims.

Post political life

In 1961, the 70-year-old man had provided decades of public service for the Gem State. Failing health prompted him to step down at the end of his Legislative term.

The University of Idaho reports he had suffered from emphysema for several years, and he died at the Veterans Hospital in Boise on July 18, 1964.

“While Bottolfsen was neither the most effective nor popular Idaho chief executive, it must be remembered that he served in the most difficult of times, depression and war,” writes Sims.

He is buried at the Hillcrest Cemetery in Arco.

As a person who had given many speeches throughout his life, Bottolfsen used a lot of the same stories and quotations. At the height of World War II, he was often asked to deliver memorial addresses for local men who were killed.

One of his favorite passages to quote was the last stanza of John McCrae’s poem “In Flanders Field,” written specifically for fallen soldiers.

But it is the second stanza that could serve as a tribute to the life of a public servant.

*“We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.”*

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