

A MAN FOR ALL REASONS

A LOOK BACK OVER THE LIFE OF SENATOR "MAC" MATHIAS

BY SHIRLEY G. EBRAHIMIAN

Roughly three-quarters of a century ago, a young boy nicknamed Mac shoved a boat into Carroll Creek, thrilled at the prospect of traversing the waters in a craft of his own creation. It promptly sank. Luckily, his friend, Mason Hendrickson, helped rescue it.

"He was a hero from that time on," says today's Mac, now 82. Grief tempers his mirthful, nostalgic expression and darkens his blue eyes as he recalls his lifelong friend, who passed away this past December. "I'm going to miss him," he says.

The boat venture was a washout, but that hardly dampened the spirit of a boy who went on to sail the political waters from the city of Frederick to the U.S. Senate with the poise and skill of the most dexterous captain. Serving four terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and three in the Senate, Senator Charles McCurdy "Mac" Mathias, "The Conscience of the Senate," leaves a true statesman's legacy of how steadfast effort, patient diplomacy, and thoughtful forbearance result in tangible successes and a singular compassion for the human spirit.

So how does a man create such a lasting impression that Interstate 270 is named after him? Senator Mathias, the most surprised of all, says he had no idea that would happen. But a closer look reveals that back in the 1960s, during the I-270 construction, Mathias was involved. The issue: how to connect the new highway to the downtown area.

"They couldn't make up their mind on it, so they started to build 270 in Frederick and build south rather than what you'd normally expect—start at Washington and build north," says Mathias.

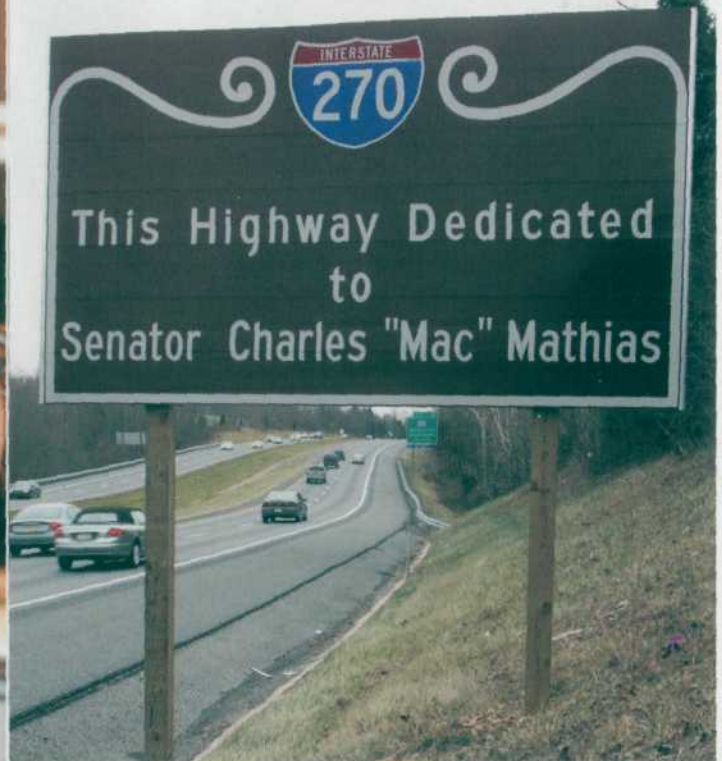
Panning out shows a man who enacted the I-270 metaphor over and over again: Take on a project, encounter problems, keep thinking, discussing, and working to accomplish the task.

And accomplish he did.

He started the legislation to build a memorial to the Vietnam War, pinpointing its location on an old Esso road map in the Senate reception room. His 1973 five-day tour of the languishing Chesapeake Bay spurred the EPA and Congress into cleaning it up. He spearheaded the endeavor to televise the daily goings-on of the Senate. His quiet bravery sustained him and other like-minded congressmen as he fought steadily for civil rights year after year, once bailing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. out of jail. Teamed with fellow congressmen John Lindsey of New York and Bill McCulloch of Ohio, Mathias pushed President John F. Kennedy into making good on his campaign promise of immediately introducing a civil rights bill post-election. He also pressed hard for a national holiday to memorialize Dr. King after his assassination.

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As Frederick City Attorney in the mid-1950s, Mathias worked with John Durr, Frederick mayor and Mathias' friend, to desegregate the Opera House—now Brewer's Alley Restaurant & Brewery on Market Street—a playhouse where blacks could only sit in the back gallery. In 1959, during his half-term stint as a Maryland Delegate, Mathias added a serendipitous feather to his civil rights cap when he became one of the few people alive who voted for the 100-year-old 14th Amendment, which grants equal protection and application of law to all U.S. citizens. (Originally ratified by the necessary three-fourths of U.S. states in 1868, Maryland, a border state, failed to do so until April 5, 1959—nearly a century later.)

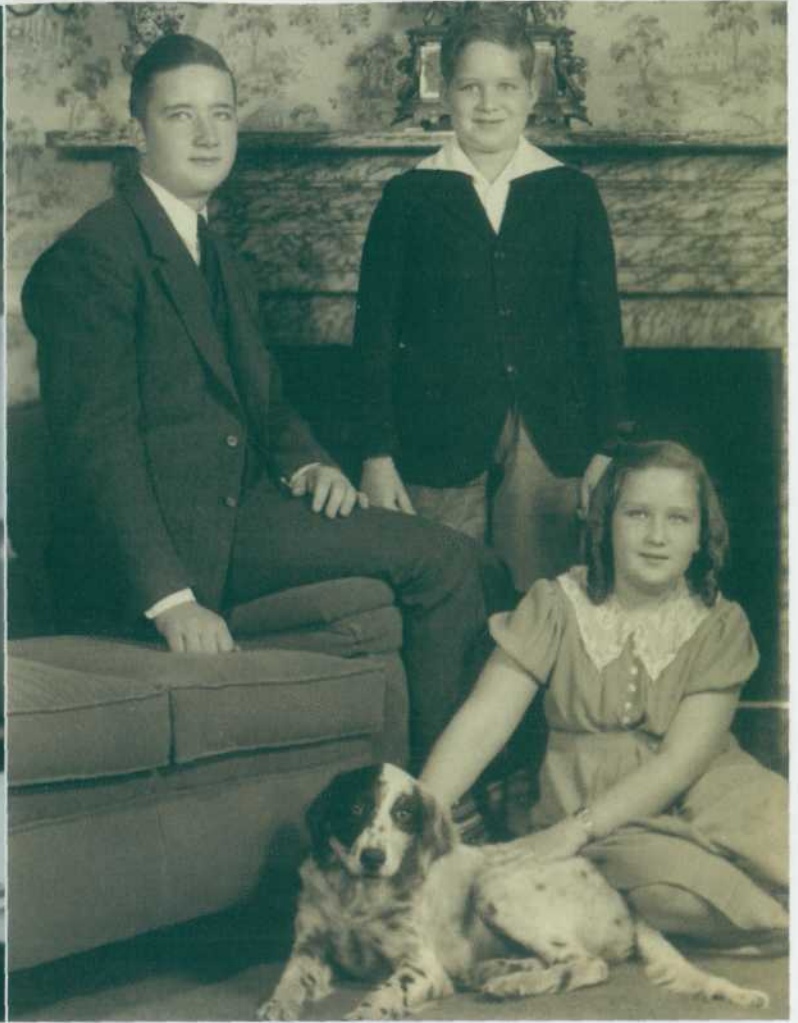
Former Frederick mayor Paul Gordon says Mathias “never forgot where he came from or who he was.” Together, they worked on the relocation of the Frederick post office. Turtles bask and people play at the C&O Canal because Mathias made sure it developed into a park. Fort Detrick, nearly shut down by President Richard

Nixon, was converted from biological warfare research to cancer research because Mathias noticed the unique potential of the facility.

Across the world, Mathias embraced foreign policy, finding ways through such challenging diplomatic impasses as Indira Gandhi by chatting her up about her beloved Golden Retrievers before addressing world affairs. He urged leaders both foreign and domestic to engage in “energetic discussion” rather than pre-emptive force when addressing issues of global economy, the arms race, and national security.

That's how a man gets a highway named after him.

Not that everything went perfectly. Voting for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to kick off the Vietnam War caused Mathias a great deal of consternation. Washington, D.C., is still awaiting statehood. Despite his urging for quick, full disclosure, Watergate leaked out its truths “in the most painful sort of way.” Senator Strom Thurmond elbowed Mathias out of the chairmanship of the prestigious Judiciary Committee,



Mathias as a young lawyer, age 26 (left), and at age 16 with Theresa, 12, and "Trail," 11 (right).

effectively tripping up progress for civil rights. Fort Detrick's makeover proved a complicated process, with John Ehrlich, then Nixon's domestic advisor, slamming shut the door of communication—*You senators are all alike!*—on saving jobs versus military base closings. He tried unsuccessfully every year to get the government to reimburse the city of Frederick's Civil War ransom debt, some \$200,000 paid to Confederate troops.

Although a lifelong Republican, he grew to be such an independent thinker that he sometimes found himself standing in muddy, nonpartisan no-man's land, beyond the security of the GOP platform, and thus, less than supported. But a little mud never bothered Mathias, nor did impasses. He shrugs his thin but still stately shoulders, saying, "You hit a wall, you just find another way."

"Never a Dull Moment"

Nestled in the Monocacy Valley at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Mathias remembers Frederick as a simpler place—a true small town of about 14,000 people. Without modern zombie-fying video technology, he and his younger siblings, Theresa (Mathias) Michel and Edward "Trail" Mathias, played with the dozen or so other kids in the Courthouse Square neighborhood and made their own fun. Family often visited, including cousin Tom Fenton, just-retired CBS News' Senior European Correspondent eight years junior to Mathias.

"We could walk anyplace we wanted to go," explains Theresa Michel. She smiles at her memories. "The most exciting thing you could do was [go to] a People's drugstore and you could

"I think [my World War II stint in the Navy] was the greatest education I got."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FREDERICK NEWS-POST

(clockwise, from top left) Mathias at a Chesapeake Bay press conference in 1983; giving a boost to Edwin Mason "Hank" Hendrickson, Jr., at a dedication in Baltimore; and with former President Dwight D. Eisenhower at Mac's Frederick farm home (circa 1963).

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order a Coke, which we were not allowed to drink anyway because my father thought it was terrible.”

Money was plentiful, although during the Depression years the family, like others, lived on much less. “At Christmastime, my mother used to bake cakes and sell them,” Mathias says, describing his family’s version of make-do. They subsisted off the bounty of their outlying family farm, the Hermitage. Theresa Michel learned to hate the ever-present taste of pork.

The children used their historic house as a playground, from the fourth floor dormer level—where each child had a personal hideout, warning off trespassers with “Keep Out!” signs—on down each level, with its bedrooms and parlors replete with antique heirlooms, a ballroom on the third floor, even former slave quarters out back still flecked with original yellow wash.

The Roots of Public Service

Political blood runs through the Mathias family, including his great-grandfather, Colonel Charles E. Trail, who served in the mid-19th century Maryland Legislature and ran on the Lincoln ticket, and his grandfather, State Senator John Mathias, a Bull-Mooser who campaigned with Theodore Roosevelt.

Thanks to his politically active father, Charles Mathias Sr., 6-year-old Mac met President Coolidge right in the Oval Office; a year later, President Hoover. Mac recalls how kind both presidents were to him; one of his earliest memories of politicking is of campaigning for Hoover in 1932 while his close friend, Arthur Potts, stumped for Roosevelt.

The family fostered patriotism. Two great-aunts still living in the Trail



Mathias' great-grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Trail (left), and 3-year-old Mac with his parents in Ocean City, Maryland (right).

Mansion on East Church Street—now a funeral home—during Mathias' childhood had the Mathias children over on Saturdays for what he describes as “an indoctrination into Frederick history and customs. It was a wonderful occasion...[My aunts] were great Unionists during the Civil War, and they sang Civil War songs while we marched around the house.”

He sees his eventual turn to the national level as gradual rather than pivotal. “I never had pre-conceived notions of being a senator,” insists Mathias. “I never thought I would aspire to the Senate. I looked forward to being a Frederick lawyer.”

Others saw signs, though. “There was always something senatorial about Mac,” claims Tom Fenton, “a senatorial gravitas.” Mathias' sister notes his enduring calmness and how protective he was of her while growing up. She remembers her grandmother remarking how “‘Mac was the most mature member of the family.’ And this was at age five.”

Mathias remains rather fatalistic about it all: “In political life, it's the circumstances that govern your life.”

He describes a scenario where the path to the House of Representatives was unwittingly cleared for him when Democrat John Foley defeated incumbent Republican DeWitt Hyde in the previous election. Foley then hobbled himself during the following run by supporting the *Star* newspaper strike, which proved unpopular. “If all these things hadn't happened, I wouldn't have had a chance to get close to the Senate.” He acknowledges his own hard work but maintains, “you have to be somewhat philosophical about these things. There are very few people who control their lives totally.”

Mathias credits his World War II stint in the Navy with helping him to perceive the wider world. “I think it was the greatest education I got,” he says. “You learn something about the world, and you learn something about yourself. I remember one night in a storm, I thought, if I can do this, I can do anything. That gave me a sense of confidence I hadn't had before.”

The Navy also showed him the direct effects of an atomic bomb, when

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he found himself in Hiroshima just days after the explosion. "It was simply horrendous," he says. "You'd walk down the street and see tricycles in the dirt and you knew that some child had been riding it and was hit. It was a very sobering experience....In all my work in Congress in dealing with security questions and military questions, I've kept it in mind, what I saw there in Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

Ties That Bind

"We had what was called the Wednesday Club," says Mathias of his senatorial friends. He ticks off some names on fingers so gnarled only a few still function. Clifford Case of New Jersey. Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania. Jake Javits of New York. Ed Brooke of Massachusetts. They discussed the issues at hand, of which there were always many. Smiling, he says, "They were great people...hospitable, helpful, not dictatorial at all."

They were also very liberal, and as the years passed Mathias became more and more so, taking stands on abortion, the ERA, and defense that seemed more aligned with the Democrats than the GOP, but although he'd definitely considered—and discarded—the idea of starting a third party, he insisted to people at his retirement announcement that he'd never considered switching parties.

Although he scuffled with the Dixiecrats over civil rights, Mathias maintained his squire's demeanor. "I didn't let differences stand in the way of human understanding.... Believe it or not, I even got along with Jim Eastland," Mathias says of one of the staunchest objectors to desegregation.

He scuffled with his own party too, voting as he saw fit, which caused him to suffer some GOP disfavor. When asked if he ever felt people misunderstood him, he nods. "Some did. One of my conservative friends used to call me a liberal pig." He looks slightly pained at this breach of manners. "I think I have some liberal ideas. But I'm not a wild-eyed pig. I have some balance about it."

That balance was administered and advised by those who worked for him; Mathias is quick to acknowledge their support, especially that of his former editorial director Margaret Nalle, whom he terms "the head honcho of the senate office."

She sniffs at this compliment, and quickly points out others she deems "more interesting." People like attorney Joseph DiGenova, Mathias' former administrative assistant and legislative director, now an attorney who went on to such high-profile cases as the prosecution of Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard; and Colbert King, purportedly the first black legislative assistant on Capitol Hill, now the deputy editor of the *Washington Post's* editorial page. Of those who worked under Mathias, "almost all have gone on to become extremely successful, which shows he had a good sense about him," says Nalle.

DiGenova sees Mathias as a man who "brought a kind of dignity that really had an effect on people." He still has lunch with the senator regularly, remarking how most senators don't sustain such relationships. Did they ever have disagreements? "Oh, all the time," says DiGenova, "but we discussed them. He was a great listener." He takes time to articulate his next thought—just like his old boss. "It really was, for all of us, an honor to work for him." A kindly testament echoed repeatedly.

But one woman proved to be the biggest supporter of all: Ann, his wife of more than 50 years, and mother to their two sons, Charles and Robert. The two met at would-be Senator Danny Brewster's 25th birthday party—she, woefully misinformed about the formal dress requirements, and he in a "magnificent, horse-blanket tweed you could have seen a mile away."

Mathias credits her with keeping all in order throughout his career, even if it meant she had first to extricate a pet raccoon from a tree onto her head while wearing an evening gown so her son would stop crying before attending a senatorial reception. Maintaining a normal life for their sons was difficult,

“The Senate is a hard life, and I didn't mind that. I enjoyed it every day I was there. But there were some other things that needed to be done, with family.”

Tom Fenton: Frederick Summers with Cousin Mac

Mac Mathias delighted in spooking his younger siblings and cousins with ghost stories. One such wide-eyed first cousin was little Tom Fenton, who just retired as CBS News' Senior European Correspondent. "I half-believed him," says Fenton, chuckling.

Born in 1930 and raised in Baltimore, Fenton now resides in London. He describes the many happy summers he spent at the Mathias home, calling Frederick "a magical place."

"These were the Depression years. People didn't take fancy vacations," he says. He talks about going over to the Bakers' house to swim, noting how unusual it was for someone to have a pool back then.

He treasures the times he spent with the Mathias family. "The house was always full of fun and games," he says. "Most families have tensions. This one didn't."

Theresa Michel, Mac's sister, loves Fenton's rare gift of communicating with people. She sees many parallels between her big brother and her cousin. "Both of those two are remarkable in ways that most men are not capable of. I don't know what you call it, like their minds are open."

Fenton made a permanent contribution to family lore at eight years old when, at the end of a visit, he was asked whether he'd had a good time. His prompt assessment of "Yes. Never a dull moment," portended the award-winning journalist he would become.

The Mathias Mansion: More Than Four Walls

Situated on tiny Council Street with a wide-open view of the front grounds of Frederick City Hall at Courthouse Square, the Mathias Mansion was built in 1816 on a former prison site by Revolutionary War Colonel John McPherson. The house was once used as a headquarters for General Robert E. Lee.

Senator Mathias' great-grandfather, David C. Winebrener, a banker, businessman, and merchant, purchased the house in 1878. Today it has become what his sister, Theresa Michel, who resides in the house (while her daughter, "T," lives in the mirror-image one next door), calls "a Mecca for generations who moved away."

Multitudes of extended family have passed through this house. Senator Mathias was born there. Countless wedding receptions were held there. A distant cousin committed suicide there. Cousins came for summer visits. Uncle Louie from Italy would come longer than others thought necessary. But he was family, and so, welcomed.



PHOTOS FROM THE PERSONAL COLLECTION OF THERESA MICHEL

Michel acts as family historian, and remembers her matriarchal grandmother, Grace Winebrener Trail, with whom they lived, as "warm and generous and wise and loving, and all the good things you could imagine." To Michel, her grandmother's influence made the house into a true family home.

"It's the continuous life and death and everything else in between—weddings, funerals, everything this house contained for 120 years of our family."

both admit, but nonetheless they stayed connected by going on expeditions to the Eastern Shore and insisting the boys do regular chores like any other kids. "It's always a problem for people in public life," says Mrs. Mathias, and, as the daughter of former Massachusetts Governor Robert F. Bradford, she should know.

Letting Go, Moving On

Is there a Senator who doesn't contemplate running for president? In 1976, Mathias went through this requisite navel-gazing, but rejected it because "you have to be terribly thirsty for that job." He preferred to serve the American people in a closer way. Finally, in 1986, after much private deliberation, with the full knowledge that Maryland was unlikely to fill his seat with another Republican—and indeed, it has embraced feisty, fearless Barbara Mikulski ever since—he decided it was time to go.

"The Senate is a hard life, and I didn't mind that. I enjoyed it every day I was there. But there were some other things that needed to be done, with family," he says, with no regrets. Mathias returned to practicing law, pursuing projects as they interest him—such as the State Department's Museum of Public Diplomacy—speaking at gatherings when invited, living the life of a gentleman farmer at his West Virginia farm, and now, so many years later, spending as much time as he can with his granddaughters, one of whom was a squirrel in the latest Washington Ballet's *Nutcracker* production.

A Challenging Legacy

Ever the champion of self-accountability, Senator Mathias charges each of us with the task of educating ourselves about "the great opportunities that exist, and the need to fully discharge your responsibility and to exercise your responsibility...Our society provides the opportunity to do a great deal. I

think that we have to nurture that in society and pursue it, but at the same time keep exercising our responsibility."

How to do this? Attorney Joseph DiGenova says that Mathias showed by example that, "public service can be dignified. People can make a contribution without being blowhards. It takes rigorous intellectual work."

And what does a man like Mathias hope to be remembered for? As he ponders the question, suppressed Parkinson's tremors resurface and undulate softly through his jaw. "I don't know of any single quality...understanding, perhaps."

Finally, the senator who, despite his gentrified demeanor, still thinks of himself as a farmer, who advocated for the common man, who makes you want to sit up a little straighter and try a little harder, nods with certainty. "Understanding. Which involves a certain degree of compassion, a certain degree of respect, a certain degree of pride in the world around you." ❖

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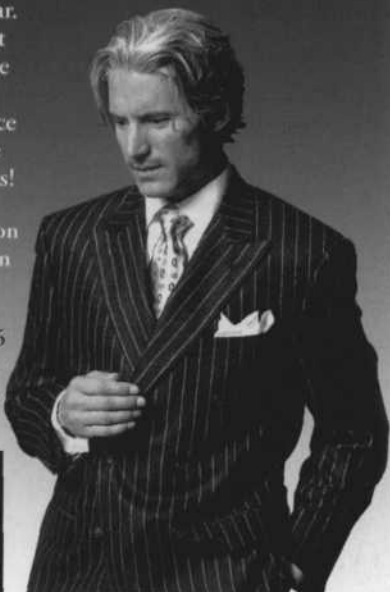
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