

## POLITICS

# Leon G. Billings, Architect of Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, Dies at 78

By SAM ROBERTS NOV. 17, 2016

Gretchen Garber grew up in Washington State but, afflicted with chronic lung disease, spent vacations with her grandparents in Montana. “By the end of the summer,” she said, “I would be able to stand up straight, finally, and go back to suffer another winter of asthma.”

She later settled in Montana, married Harry Billings and raised her family there, including a son, Leon.

Leon G. Billings became a lobbyist for public power companies. But he also became an important environmental aide on Capitol Hill, where he forged his greatest legacy: helping all Americans breathe a little easier as the largely unheralded chief architect of the 1970 Clean Air Act.

“Leon, having breathed clean air before he left Montana to go to Washington, D.C., knew the difference between that air and this air,” Pat Williams, a former congressman from Montana, said this year.

Mr. Billings died at 78 on Tuesday in Nashville, where he was visiting a grandson who is serving in the Army. He lived in Bethany Beach, Del. His son, Paul, the senior vice president of the American Lung Association, said the cause was a stroke.

As the first staff director of the Senate environment subcommittee and an alter ego of Senator Edmund S. Muskie, Democrat of Maine, Mr. Billings was also instrumental in drafting the 1972 Clean Water Act, as well as amendments, passed in 1977, to both landmark antipollution laws.

“We certainly were entrepreneurs — and maybe to a degree revolutionaries — because, to use a cliché, we went someplace that Congress has never gone before,” Mr. Billings told Greenwire, which covers environmental and energy issues online, in 2014.

“The idea of Congress actually, specifically, directing the executive branch what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and what the consequences were if they didn’t do it or didn’t do it adequately was precedential,” he said. “It had never happened before.”

The 1970 legislation, which passed the Senate unanimously, imposed national air-quality standards based on the “health of persons” rather than on the feasibility of technology or affordability of pollution controls, conditions that industry leaders sought. It also set statutory deadlines, mandated follow-up by the newly established Environmental Protection Agency, provided for judicial review and authorized citizen lawsuits.

“It was 38 pages long and is probably the most radical statute ever enacted,” Mr. Billings said in an interview last spring with the newspaper *The Missoulian* in Missoula, Mont. “We were in a full-scale war between protecting public health and welfare from environmental degradation and the profit motives of corporate America.”

Gruff and fiercely loyal to Mr. Muskie, he managed to offend all parties, from the consumer advocate Ralph Nader to General Motors. Once, while listening to a presentation by industry executives on auto emissions, he folded their talking points into paper airplanes.

His reputation apparently preceded him. When Mr. Muskie suggested that President Jimmy Carter appoint Mr. Billings to be an administrator of the E.P.A., Mr. Carter phoned the senator to raise one concern.

“Abrasive?” Mr. Billings recalled Mr. Muskie saying. “Abrasive, Mr. President? You’ve never met Leon Billings. You have no idea how abrasive he is.”

He did not get the job.

But after decades in which Congress had deferred to the states on environmental law, Mr. Billings pried open what he perceived correctly to be a window of opportunity.

The Cuyahoga River in Ohio, polluted with oil slicks, had recently caught fire; big cities were grappling with pollution; Senator Gaylord Nelson, a Wisconsin Democrat, had sponsored the first Earth Day, in 1970; and the Nixon administration, fearing a challenge by Mr. Muskie in the 1972 presidential campaign, was seeking to overcome the Maine senator's advantage in the emerging environmental movement.

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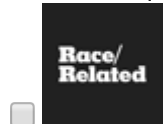
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With Mr. Muskie's unambiguous backing, Mr. Billings engineered his legislative coups as a shrewd, credible and dauntless negotiator, culling the characteristics he had admired most in his parents.

Leon Gregory Billings was born on Nov. 19, 1937, in Helena, Mont., the state's capital. His parents, Harry and Gretchen Billings, were editors of a weekly newspaper, *The People's Voice*. Owned by a farmer-labor cooperative, *The Voice* did battle with daily newspapers controlled by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company.

"My folks had one rule," Mr. Billings said. "Anybody's welcome at the house as long as they bring their own bottle of whiskey."

His father was a firebrand. Above Harry Billings's column in *The People's Voice* was a quotation: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of moral crisis, refuse to take a stand."

After graduating in 1959 from the University of Montana, where he majored in history and political science, Leon worked as a reporter and farmworker organizer in California. He met and married Patricia Harstad there. (When she died in 1990, he had by then been living in Maryland and succeeded her as a delegate in the Maryland General Assembly.)

In addition to his son, Paul, from his first marriage, he is survived by two daughters, Shannon and Erin Billings, also from that marriage; his second wife, the former Cherry Allen; and four grandchildren.

After lobbying for the American Public Power Association, Mr. Billings was recruited to join the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution of the Senate Committee on Public Works in 1966. He was Mr. Muskie's chief of staff from 1966 to 1978 and later followed him to the State Department when Mr. Muskie was named to the cabinet by Mr. Carter. Mr. Billings became Mr. Muskie's executive secretary.

He later taught and became a consultant, advising clients, including corporations, he said, on how to "live and profit" while complying with environmental laws.

“Leon’s work helped prevent any wholesale efforts at eliminating or rolling back those statutes,” Thomas C. Jorling, his counterpart for the subcommittee’s Republican minority, told The Associated Press.

Mr. Billings was wistful in recalling the climate of bipartisan compromise on the Senate panel during his years working for Mr. Muskie. Indeed, he said, he and Mr. Jorling would come to terms as they car-pooled to Capitol Hill together in a pickup truck.

***Correction: November 18, 2016***

An earlier version of this obituary misidentified the family member Mr. Billings was visiting in Nashville when he died. It was a grandson, not a nephew. The earlier version also misstated the year Mr. Billings graduated from the University of Montana. It was 1959, not 1960.

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