

LEE



RULES

The Alabama Senate's veteran secretary has kept the chamber running smoothly for 46 years.

BY SEBASTIAN KITCHEN

McDowell Lee had quite a résumé before he took his latest job. He'd been a mayor, legislator, banker and FBI agent.

But the current job has taken up quite a bit of his time—46 years, to be precise.

At 84, he is the longest serving secretary or clerk of any legislative chamber in the United States. Lee was elected secretary of the Alabama Senate in 1963 and is only the second secretary since 1923.

Ask anyone who knows him, and the same words keep coming up—loyal, trustworthy, crack knowledge of parliamentary procedure and love for the Senate.

He has succeeded as secretary because of his kind treatment of staff, his ability to stay out of the politics and policies, and his even-handed treatment of senators, says Dave Avant, Lee's administrative assistant who has worked in the Senate since before Lee's tenure.

Joe Fine, a powerful Montgomery lobbyist and former senator, echoes Avant. "The great thing about McDowell Lee is that he treats every senator the same."

Former Governor Albert Brewer says

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there were occasions when strong political powers in the state wanted to get rid of Lee because he wasn't supporting things quite the way they wanted. "Even very powerful political figures were unable—and realized they would be unable—to convince a majority of the senators to change secretaries," Brewer says. "He has been very strong in the loyalty he has enjoyed from the members of the Senate, and he has

reciprocated."

Lee will discuss rules and strategy with any senator, Fine and Avant say, and will maintain confidence with all of them. "His integrity is just beyond question," Fine says. "His word is his bond."

Lee is remarkable, Fine says, for serving under so many governors and lieutenant governors while maintaining his independence. "He is a very good public servant."

LONG HISTORY IN POLITICS

Lee's political roots go deep in Alabama.

Since the first session after the constitution was passed in 1901, members of Lee's family have served in the Legislature. That is until Lee lost his seat in a court ruling in the early 1960s.

Lee served as campaign manager for one of four-time Alabama Governor George Wallace's runs for the state's top office.

"The only one he ever lost was the one I handled. He never asked me again," says Lee, who grew up in the same county as Wallace.

Despite those setbacks, Lee has had a storied history of his own in Alabama politics. But that will end when he retires at the close of this four-year cycle in the state Legislature in January 2011.

A FORTUNATE CALL

In 1948, at age 23, Lee made his first run for office and was elected mayor of Clio. He resigned to become an agent in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, where he served in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

After returning to Alabama, Lee ran for a House seat in 1954 and defeated the man who had replaced George Wallace. He had no opposition in 1958, and won again in 1962, but U.S. District Judge Frank Johnson reapportioned the state and abolished the seat before Lee took office. While Lee did not return to the Legislature that year, Wallace did win his first term as governor, and Lee joined his administration.

Then a phone call set him on a new course.

While Lee was helping Wallace with legislative affairs in the governor's first term, a state senator called one morning to say secretary of the Senate Jesse Earl Speight had died and asked if Lee wanted the job.

The senator thought he had the votes to elect Lee, and he decided to make a bid for the job. The vote was unanimous. "I have been here ever since," he says.

In a bit of understatement about Lee's 46-year tenure, Brewer says, "No one would have dreamed he would be there that long."

'TOTAL RECALL'

Brewer has known Lee for more than 50 years. They became friends when they were first elected to the House in 1954 and remained close as Lee became secretary and Brewer became speaker, lieutenant governor

and governor.

"He was a very, very effective legislator even as a freshman," Brewer says. "He was young. He was smart. He learned the parliamentary rules in the House early on." Lee has "total recall," Fine says, telling people the rules and procedures before bothering to pull out *Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure* or the state constitution to show them.

Lee is known nationally for his knowledge of parliamentary procedure and his effectiveness as secretary of the Senate. He served on the *Mason's Manual* review committee from

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1980 to 2000 during which the "bible of legislative procedure" was rewritten twice.

Lee says knowing the rules and how to use them helps a lawmaker be effective. "When the senators know the rules, it makes me feel good to watch them," he says.

Senator Roger Bedford, chairman of one of the state's budget committees, says he was "scared to death" of Lee when he arrived in the Senate at age 25 in 1982. "He was the rules of the Senate," Bedford says. But Lee was "kind enough to teach some of us the nuances."

And if a lawmaker knows where to look, the senator says, Lee's "facial expression

will tell you whether to shut up or press on. He taught me a tremendous amount, and I am grateful for it," Bedford says. Lee is not a lecturer, but shares his knowledge with anyone "who has the wisdom to ask him, which I have done year after year."

PARLIAMENTARY CONNOISSEUR

Lee enjoys the parliamentary portion of the job. When the Legislature is in session, he sits next to the lieutenant governor as he presides over the Senate. Lee has trained every lieutenant governor from his election until now, Avant says.

There have been times, Brewer says, that presiding officers were lax in applying the rules. "It upsets him very greatly, so greatly that, on occasion, he has been known to leave the Senate chamber rather than participate in a presiding officer's heavy-handedness."

The dwindling decorum in the Senate also is a trend Lee dislikes.

"There's not as much order now," he says, and senators show less respect to their opponents than they once did. "It bothers me. Anybody who likes parliamentary procedure likes to see decorum and order."

Most people agree Lee is tough. "But all you have to do is to do the right thing," Avant says. He added that what most people do not see is Lee's kindness. "He loves his staff like family. He looks after us. People do not see that. He is like a father to me."

BIG CHANGES

Lee served as secretary while the first African Americans were elected to the Senate in 1975 and when the first female senator came to the chamber in 1983. The biggest change during his tenure was following the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The secretary also has seen the transition of the Legislature from pen and paper to computers. He's not been a laggard in introducing technology to the Legislature. The website for the Alabama Legislature and its research tools are as advanced as any in the country, Avant says.

On the other hand, Lee's personal style is distinctly anti-technology.

"I don't even know how to turn one on," he says of the computers throughout the Legislature. He doesn't even have a cell phone.

"I'm old-fashioned," he says, in a bit of understatement. And that seems to have worked out just fine for the past 46 years. ■



SENATOR
ROGER BEDFORD
ALABAMA