

Bill Gipson

*Veteran Perry County Justice of the Peace
farms and dabbles in a lot of politics*

By RANDY KEMP
County Lines Editor

Bill Gipson is known in county government circles as a Perry County Justice of the Peace; has been for 18 years. But Gipson, a minority Republican in a county of Democrats, has dabbled in politics and business at an impressive number of levels. And at age 80, despite double bypass heart surgery last summer, he doesn't appear to be slowing down.

He and Alma, his bride of 54 years, live just a mile or two down the road from the rural town of Bigelow. This farmer/rural statesman graduated high school in 1948 and attended welding school, auctioneer school, two semesters at Arkansas Tech, then what is now University of Central Arkansas. He's worked for the railroad, as a union pipefitter, a livestock auctioneer, a frontline Marine, and through the course of it all, as an Arkansas River Valley farmer.

'Friends Kept Calling'

Bill was working as a pipefitter with Local 155 at Arkansas Nuclear One outside of Russellville in 1992 when he started getting phone calls from some of his friends about an opening on the Perry County Quorum Court. Gipson, a lifelong Republican, decided to run. His opponent, a Democrat, was also one of his cousins and a classmate. "I won by 23 votes," he recalls.

Since then he's had one opponent, whom he beat with 67 percent of the vote. Another man filed for the position a few years ago, but ended up not running.

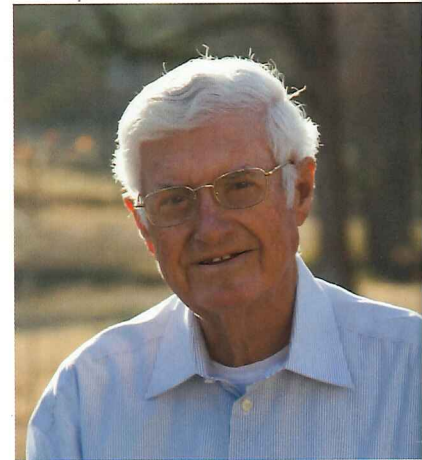
He is a charter member of the budget committee in his county – in fact, the only charter member still serving on the three-person panel.



Bill Gipson (center), who just started his 10th term on the Perry County Quorum Court, is flanked in this file photo by former Gov. and First Lady Mike and Janet Huckabee

As a county JP, he has worked with four judges: George McNeal, Gary Lawson, True Robinson, and now Baylor House. "I've been asked over the years to consider running for County Judge and other offices, but being a JP suits me. The JP thing just fits my schedule, with all the other things I belong to. In fact, this job gets overinflated sometimes."

He is not only a native of Perry County, he and Alma today live more or less next door to the 1912 house where he was born and raised, just south of Bigelow. "I'm a native; a lot of people call me about things – they actually want my opinion!" he smiles with a touch of self-deprecation. "People around the county know me, and a lot of them do respect my opinion." He admits, though, that he's not in sync with some of the younger citizens of the county, or newer residents who have migrated in from Little Rock or other metro areas, to the same degree as the older citizens of Perry County.



Gipson out on his Perry County farm

Bill logged six years as vice-president of the Quorum Court Association, then followed Dewayne Mack as president for four years after Mack was elected to the Legislature. He currently serves on the 12-member executive board of the Quorum Court Association, representing the Second Congressional District; is on the AAC Legislative Committee chaired by Debbie Wise; and aspires to one of the two JP seats on the AAC Board of Directors. "I was president of the Quorum Court Association when we got the legislation to allow us to marry people anywhere in Arkansas; before that it had to be in our district," he said. "I do quite a few weddings," he added, noting that nearby Toad Suck Park and Petit Jean Mountain are popular sites for outdoor weddings.

Slight Detour to Korea

Drafted into the U.S. Marine Corps in 1952, he saw frontline action in the Korean War. "I was there for one year and eight days," he recalls with clarity. "We lost 38,000 Americans in Korea," he adds grimly. "I lost a lot of good friends over there..." He trails off, and the reporter delicately poses the next logical question: "And did you ever... come close?" "Yes," he replies in a whisper that still bears dark shadows nearly 60 years later.

In fact, superiors turned in the paperwork recommending Gipson for the Purple Heart, "but I got that stopped." Another quizzical look

from the reporter and he explains, "I didn't want my folks to know. You know, they're worried enough when they've got a boy gone."

He also hints that just maybe there is too much dependence on diplomacy in the region in these times: "As many people as we've lost over there... I think we ought to tell them, 'If you boys don't shut this thing down, we're gonna lay a big egg on you.' They have no respect for freedom."

Taking A Job At Machine Politics

Gipson had an early interest in politics, running for state representative in 1964. He lost by only 212 votes to incumbent Democrat Paul Van Dalsem, an associate of Gov. Orval Faubus, who won his sixth and final term as governor that year by defeating Winthrop Rockefeller. Rockefeller, a businessman, philanthropist and political reformer, lost his first gubernatorial race that year, but in 1966 would become the state's first Republican governor since Reconstruction.

"I ran a Cadillac campaign" in 1964, Gipson said, and felt positive about coming so close to toppling Van Dalsem – who had become a lightning rod for efforts to reform objectionable "machine politics" of the time. "I worked at it hard, and made a lot of friends, met a lot of people," he said. "I was a good candidate. I lost to a 28-year incumbent by only about 212 votes."

On the heels of the 1964 election, Rockefeller offered Gipson a job as one of eight regional Republican "field representatives". But he declined. "I chose not to, for family considerations. When you have a political job, you may have it one day and not have a job the next." Perry County neighbor Len Blaylock – who would later chair the GOP in Arkansas – ended up taking the position.

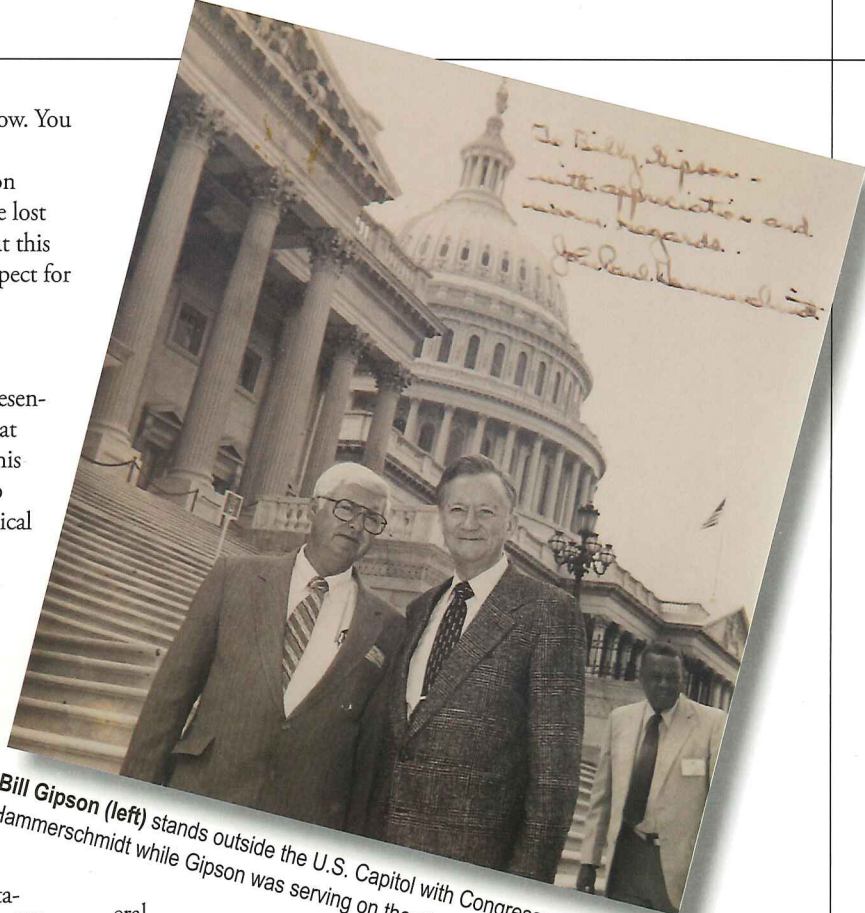
Roadblock Just Leads To A Different Path

One lost election in the 1960s turned out to be a blessing in disguise. "I ran for business manager for Local 454 (in Hot Springs at that time), and I lost by one vote!"

But it wasn't too long before it merged with the Pine Bluff local, "and they broke us," he said ruefully. "But everything that happens to you puts you on another tangent," he says philosophically.

Diverse Career

His career has been diverse, including 10 years on the local school board, and another 20 on the local Selective Service board. A charter member of the Wye Mountain Water Department, he has served 25 years on the 550-customer utility. In 1986, he was appointed by then-Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt, a Republican, to the fed-



Bill Gipson (left) stands outside the U.S. Capitol with Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt while Gipson was serving on the state ASCS Committee.

eral Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) State Committee, on which he served for four years. He was also on the Arkansas Rural Development Commission for a couple of years, but resigned that post to take a position on the Arkansas Livestock and Poultry Commission. "Tommy Lewis of Conway was on it; he sold his salebarn, and I filled his unexpired term for two or three years, then I was appointed for a full seven-year term," he said. That appointment is set to expire October 2012.

His best skill: "Well, you just have to deal with every situation as it is presented. I don't really have a recipe; you just have to take things as they come up," he said, although he has observed that some situations, if left to simmer for awhile, can work themselves out. He also observes that "It's not the legislation that passes, but the legislation we keep from passing" that sometimes is more important.

And Then There's The Farm

Bill and Alma are no slouches when it comes to farming, either. They were named the Perry County Farm Family in 1992. Their main crops are cattle – about 200 head – and hay, soybeans and rice. "We used to strictly raise cotton, way back. Then, we didn't have a tractor; it was horse and mule."

However, they've always had cattle; "in fact we used to run them open-range," said Bill. And while he was gracious to give his full, unhurried attention to the scheduled interview back in December, he was biding his time until he could change back into his farm clothes and go chase a bunch of cattle that had stampeded the evening before, breaking through three fences.

'Many Hats'

The bottom line to Bill Gipson's life? "I've worn many hats, and I've enjoyed that."



Bill and Alma Gipson in the kitchen of their Perry County home near Bigelow.