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Topstory

The new kid in town

Brackett steps into familiar role

By Patti Murphy

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BOISE -- On his first day at the Idaho State Legislature, Rep. Noy Elbert "Bert" Brackett, III, (R-Rogerson) arrives at the majestic Idaho Statehouse by 8 a.m., ready to start his first day in office. True to his ranching roots, he is dressed sharply in a dark Western-cut suit, black cowboy boots and a tie with horses printed on it.



ASHLEY SMITH/The Times-News Rep. Bert Brackett jokes with Rep. Maxine Bell in the Capitol during the morning of his first day on the job in Boise.

Brackett literally is a "new kid in town."

Appointed by Gov. Dirk Kempthorne this past November to fill a vacancy in District 23, he only had a few weeks to pack up and move to Boise from his home in Three Creek in time for the first day of the legislative session.

Brackett, a fourth-generation rancher, has left his 15,000-acre family ranch in the hands of his three sons --Ira, Gus, and Jake, who will tend to the 1,500-head of cattle while their dad is serving as a citizen legislator.

"I'm a fan of the part-time citizen legislature," Brackett says. "It's a cross-section of society as opposed to professional politicians. It's your neighbors and friends who pack up and come down to do the people's business.

"Of course, then we have to go back and live with it," he says with a smile.

It's the same smile that hasn't left Brackett's face all morning. Soft-spoken with a hint of a western drawl in his voice, Brackett seems genuinely happy, yet humbled, to be sitting at his own desk in the stately chambers of the Idaho House of Representatives. He admits to feeling a little overwhelmed, but it seems to be

more a testament to his sense of honor and responsibility than apprehensiveness.

Getting Settled

It is 8:30 a.m. and the House chamber is still mostly empty. A few lawmakers mill about the hall, chatting, laughing and welcoming each other back from their hiatus. Some are moving their belongings into their desk space.

Seat assignments have all been shifted over by one space since last year, and legislators have had to clean out their former desk and move into a new one. Brackett finds his seat, which previously belonged to Rep. Robert Ring (R-Caldwell). The top drawer still has some of Ring's belongings -- notepads and other office supplies -- which Brackett sifts through and decides what to keep.

"I probably won't have any staff person," he says. Then he grins and adds, "My wife is very helpful."

He and Paula have been married for 36 years, and together they raised five children and work their family ranch in Three Creek, about 65 miles southwest of Twin Falls. If ranching is the family's first line of business, politics surely is the second. His daughter, Jani, lives in Washington, D.C., where she works for U.S. Rep. Butch Otter (R-Idaho). Brackett's son-in-law, John, also works on Capitol Hill for U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho).

Throughout the morning fellow representatives stop Brackett and introduce themselves, shake his hand, welcome him aboard, and tell him they look forward to working with him. Many mention that they had known his father, Noy Brackett II, when he served in the House from 1975 - 1986.

Camaraderie

"We call him the new guy," says Assistant Sergeant at Arms Jim Borton, pointing at Brackett as they stand together in the foyer. State Sen. Bert Marley (D-McCammon) approaches and shakes Brackett's hand. Brackett smiles and says, "I'm the new kid."

Marley responds with a smile, and says, "I think you will find it one of the most enjoyable -
- and frustrating -- experiences."

Rep. Maxine Bell of Jerome stops to welcome Brackett and, after chatting for a few minutes laughs and says, "Today's your easy day, and it goes downhill from here." During the morning several legislators kid Brackett in the same vein. But, it's clear that the fellow lawmakers are engaging in a sort of fraternal derision, as if to say, "We know what you're facing, we can kid about it and have fun, but we'll be there to help when you need us."

"They treat you like they've known you forever," Brackett says. "There's a lot of camaraderie here."

Rep. John Stevenson (R-Rupert) approaches the new legislator and shakes his hand. Stevenson is the chairman of the Resources and Conservation Committee and has been appointed as Brackett's mentor. "I was honored to know I'd be working with you and I'm glad to have you on the Resources Committee," Stevenson says.

"We have some great people on the committee, and a man with your experience will do what's right," he adds.

Brackett already has been assigned to three committees: Agricultural Affairs, Resources and Conservation, and Education.

He comes prepared.

Brackett served as chairman of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission and also as president of both the Idaho Cattle Association and of the University of Idaho College of Agriculture Consulting Council.

A legislative page walks through the chambers handing out the weekly social calendar and meeting schedule. Today, there is a 2 p.m. meeting in the Gold Room that Brackett wants to attend. It is a legislative briefing on water issues, hosted by the Idaho Council on Industry and the Environment. This is the only meeting Brackett is scheduled to attend on his first day on the job.

Brackett then glances over the legislative social calendar, which is nearly twice as long as the meeting schedule. Among the week's invitations are luncheons, ribbon-cuttings, breakfasts, tours, receptions, dinners and even a high school theatre production of "Les Miserables."

"It's been advised that I go to as many receptions as I can to meet the players," he says, scanning the sheet.

The session begins

It is 9:44 a.m. on the 9th day of January and Rep. Bert Brackett is about to be sworn into the 58th Idaho Legislature. House Speaker Bruce Newcomb (R-Burley) invites Brackett's friend and fellow rancher Scott Bedke (R-Oakley) to serve as a witness. The House Speaker administers the oath.

"I do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of Idaho, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of State Representative, Legislative District Number 23, according to the best of my ability."

He signs the certificate Noy Elbert Brackett, III.

By 10 a.m., Brackett must have shaken hands with more than two dozen legislators. One after another the lawmakers approach Brackett to introduce themselves and welcome him to the job.

"I imagine my arm might be sore tomorrow," Brackett said. "I should have worn my sling today."

He is referring to a shoulder injury he suffered last summer when the horse he was riding fell, slamming him to the ground and breaking his shoulder and tearing his muscle loose. "I don't bounce like I used to," he says with a grin.

He underwent rotor cuff surgery and said he is doing fine. But, with all the hand shaking he was starting to look a little stiff.

At noon, the gavel goes down with a crack and the Speaker of the House calls the roll. The session opens with a prayer and a scripture reading from the third chapter of Proverbs, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. The Speaker then reads the Governor's official appointment of Brackett, who is one of 13 freshman legislators this year, and welcomes Brackett publicly.

Brackett will cast his first vote as a representative today. Up for approval is House Concurrent Resolution No. 30, which allows for a joint session of the House and the Senate for the purpose of hearing the Governor's State of the State address later that evening. Brackett, like the other 69 Representatives, votes "yes."

"It is probably the easiest vote I'll have to cast," he laughs, then adds, "It's an honor and a challenge and a lot of responsibility. We will make decisions that affect a lot of people's lives. That's the importance of it."

"I'm a real small part of a big picture."

The first day's session ends in less than an hour, and Jim Haddenbrook, the Chaplain of the House, comes over to greet Brackett. "It must be quite an honor to be appointed to this position," the chaplain says.

"Yes, it is. It's quite a challenge," Brackett responds. "I feel a little overwhelmed, but there are a lot of people willing to help. I'm confident it will work out."

State of the State

After lunch Brackett begins to make his way over to the Gold Room to attend an afternoon session hosted by the Idaho Council on Industry and the Environment. He is stopped in the hall by a man who introduces himself and asks if he has a few minutes to chat.

Brackett is friendly, but quickly asks the man if he has a name tag, as all people doing business with the legislature n media, staff, lobbyists, and legislators alike n must wear a certain color name tag to identify their reason for being there.

The man pulls out a green name tag -- a lobbyist -- and apologizes for not wearing it. Brackett then continues the conversation with the man about energy issues and afterwards says, "I had a feeling there was a green name tag involved. It's really important to know who you're talking with."

The 2 p.m. briefing features a panel of speakers from a plethora of interests: Idaho Grain Producers Association, Idaho Cattle Association; Idaho Mining Association; Forestland owners, Idaho Water Users Association and Association of Taxpayers of Idaho. It's designed as an informative meeting to explain some of the issues affecting those particular industries.

Brackett listens attentively and takes notes during the 90-minute meeting, and afterwards is pulled aside by a Capitol reporter.

It is nearing 4 p.m. and Brackett is free for the afternoon. He says he will be leaving the Statehouse soon to pick up Paula and come back for this evening's State of the State address by the Governor.

It is the end of the first day as a lawmaker and Brackett has returned to the Statehouse with Paula this evening to listen to the Governor's State of the State address. Tonight, Brackett wears an arm sling over a dress suit. Sitting at his desk in the chambers, waiting for the ceremonies to begin, he looks up into the gallery above the floor and waves at Paula, who is sitting in the front row of the audience.

The Governor begins his speech and Brackett listens attentively. Over the next hour, the presentation is peppered frequently by applause. Brackett claps along with the rest of the audience, but guardedly takes care not to hurt his slinged arm.

At the end of his address, the Governor presents Purple Heart medals to four Idaho servicemen who had been injured in the line of duty. The presentation is solemn and serious until the reverence is broken by a loud "Hoo yah" cheer from the gallery, an obvious passionate welcome home to the four heroes from a fellow Idahoan.

Gov. Kempthorne concludes the evening by saying, "After all has been said tonight about the state of our state, I hope these soldiers leave no doubt: Idaho is in good hands."

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