

THE BOYS OF BOISE: 60 YEARS LATER  
VIDEOS: LEARNING FROM THE EVENTS OF 1955

IN THE STATESMAN  
The story was in a prominent place on the front page and editorial pages when it broke.

STATESMAN EDITORIAL

West Ada trustees flunk their first major test

It is a shame that longtime West Ada School District Superintendent Linda Clark resigned Friday as a result of a totally manufactured crisis.

Whatever the differences between Clark and the “new regime” Board of Trustees — as Clark referred to them Friday in her announcement — the animosity created over the past four months overshadowed any potential trustee initiatives on behalf of students and created an increasingly divided community.

Though this new board has every right to scrutinize and question administrators about past and present procedures, and evaluate salaries and benefits, its mostly toxic public attitude toward Clark reveals a regrettable management style that will not serve trustees well going forward. Referring to any part of Clark’s contract as “profane” is not just over the top, but also inaccurate. One reasonable look at compensation packages for other superintendents with Clark’s experience and standing tells you that.

Clark, an award-winning superintendent from a highly successful district, has earned the respect of educators all over Idaho. Instead of recognizing that and working with her to do what is best for students, the board criticized her for speaking out about issues in other districts, second-guessed her wish to hire a testing director, and publicly questioned her ability to serve as superintendent and sit on the State Board of Education at the same time.

That was a silly concern, considering the key role she had on Gov. Butch Otter’s education task force.

On the sad day of her resignation — after 11 years as superintendent and 37 years serving students in the area — Clark displayed the class to advocate for the district’s upcoming levy, a \$28 million, two-year measure on the Nov. 3 ballot. She did this because she knows the district’s financial needs are more pressing than any personal disappointment.

We also urge voters to pass the levy because it will benefit students, regardless of who is in charge. This is, after all, about children and their futures.

We have deep concerns about the largest school district in Idaho being without a superintendent of Clark’s caliber, which is now being managed by a group of trustees who have lost our trust — the majority of whom face a possible recall election. We advocated for a more patient, peaceful, collaborative approach from the new leaders — to no avail.

What now, West Ada School District Board of Trustees? Linda Clark is gone. Be careful what you wish for.

Statesman editorials are the unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman’s editorial board. To comment on an editorial or suggest a topic, email editorial@idahostatesman.com.



How did 1955 scandal affect city and Idaho?

In the wake of McCarthyism, gay men in Boise were targeted and prosecuted during a witch hunt that’s still difficult for some to discuss

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The day after Halloween in 1955, a Tuesday, a DC-6 crashed in Colorado, killing 44. The story led Wednesday’s editions of the Idaho Statesman. Below it was a story and photo of the 82nd birthday fête at the Arid Club for Boise businessman C.C. Anderson, whose landmark Downtown Golden Rule department store would later become a Macy’s.

Right next to that ran a story about a trio of Halloween night arrests made by an Ada County probation officer. It was the opening curtain in a morality play that would spin out over 14 months and come to be known far and wide as “The Boys of Boise,” the title of a 1965 book.

Sixty years later, the social mores and attitudes of the period are as dated as tailfins on a Cadillac. Almost all who were involved are dead. But as removed as they are from the present, the events make Boiseans squirm with discomfort even now at the retelling. Several prominent Idahoans declined the Statesman’s request to be interviewed for this story.

Why? Here’s the brief synopsis: Three men were arrested for engaging in what the Statesman described as “immoral acts involving teenage boys.” The arresting probation officer said the investigation had only “scratched the surface,” alleging that more than 100 young men and teenage boys were involved in sexual acts

with a ring of adult homosexual men. Eventually, 16 men would be charged. It was the mid-1950s. McCarthyism, the Red Scare and rampant, secret homosexuality all seemed to merge. Boise was convulsed. The Statesman, with its editorials, led the

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THEN AND NOW

October 1955 in the U.S. saw the television premiere of “The Honeymooners,” “Captain Kangaroo” and “The Mickey Mouse Club.” The Brooklyn Dodgers won their first and only World Series, beating the Yankees in seven games. In San Francisco, Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg read his seminal poem “Howl” for the first time. Overseas, Ngo Dinh Diem proclaimed both the formation of the Republic of Vietnam in the south and his installation as its president.

In Boise that month, the Cash Bazar on Main and 11th was holding a 49th anniversary sale. The Mode Ltd, at 8th and Idaho, was advertising women’s leather-lined alligator handbags for \$25.50, while two blocks away, at 10th and Idaho, Skaggs Drugs was selling Halloween costumes for \$1.49. “Blood Alley,” starring John Wayne and Lauren Bacall, was playing at the Ada Theatre — that is, The Egyptian — which promised a Saturday midnight show for Halloween. On the crime beat, a woman reported the theft of her black suede purse, containing \$2 in bills, some small change, a red billfold and a green compact, from the Hi-Ho bar in Garden City.

Today, Boise is five times larger than the city of 45,000 that existed in 1955. Same-sex marriage was barred in Idaho by state statute in 1995 and constitutional amendment in 2006. Those bans were overturned in court decisions in 2014; after a U.S. Supreme Court decision this year, freedom to marry is law of the land. State lawmakers this year refused to broaden Idaho’s civil rights protections for the LGBT community, but 13 Idaho cities have enacted their own equality measures.

And today, marriage equality and civil rights protections for all are causes supported on the Statesman’s editorial pages.

READ OUR 1995 STORY ON THE BOYS OF BOISE AND SEE THE 1955 ARTICLES AND EDITORIALS  
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## BOYS OF BOISE

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charge to “crush the monster” that threatened the city’s good name. Time magazine picked up the story, writing in December of Boiseans who were “shocked to learn that their city had sheltered a widespread homosexual underworld that involved some of Boise’s most prominent men and had preyed on hundreds of teen-age boys for the past decade.”

It took until January 1957 for the witch hunt to finally subside. Some 1,500 people had been questioned. One, the gay son of a city councilman, lost his appointment to West Point when investigators questioned him there and would eventually commit suicide in a squalid Boise hotel. Of the 16 men charged, only one was acquitted at trial. The rest received sentences ranging from probation to life in prison, although the longest-serving inmate was released after nine years.

The inquiry went beyond charging men who committed crimes with underage boys to convicting men who had encounters as consenting adults. At the time, homosexuality was considered a mental illness, and homosexual sex was a criminal act. The prevailing attitudes of the era conflated morality and criminality, and Boise was no exception.

Still, that it happened here seems to conjure up a kind of shame, perhaps not without cause. Consider: A taboo subject was thrust onto the unsuspecting city’s collective consciousness at a time when even divorce was an edgy topic. A private investigator’s probe, its resulting charges and a community’s rush to judgment all were abetted and wildly mishandled by civic leaders and authorities. And people innocent of any crime were nonetheless swept up in the hysteria, their lives and livelihoods destroyed. No wonder it’s hard to talk about.

The Statesman spoke to four noted residents, asking them to put the events of 60 years ago in context for Idahoans of 2015. Each brought a different perspective — a historian, a civil rights lawyer, a current elected official and a former elected official — and focused on different facets of the legacy: the role of the press, marriage equality, prejudice and civil rights.

### HISTORIAN MARTY PETERSON: ‘NOBODY EVER WANTED THE DOOR OPENED AGAIN’

Peterson has a record of Idaho government and civic engagement a mile long. He worked for one Idaho senator, two governors, served as state budget director, led the Idaho Association of Cities, helped organize Idaho’s 1990 statehood cen-

tenial, and was the longtime special assistant for government relations at the University of Idaho, serving seven presidents there. He is president of the state Historical Society’s Foundation for Idaho History and serves on the Statesman’s editorial board. He’s observed Idaho politics and journalism since he arrived nearly 50 years ago.

In the 1950s, the Statesman was still family-owned. Publisher Margaret Cobb Ailshie had taken over after the 1928 death of her father, Calvin Cobb. The paper was a champion of the Boise business establishment and a civic booster, as most papers were at the time. The paper greeted the news of the initial Halloween night arrests with an alarmist editorial that decried the “evils of moral perversion.”



Martin Peterson

“The newspapers in that era, going clear back to the beginning of Idaho territory, they were the Chamber of Commerce, the local cheerleader,” Peterson said. “Readers wanted to read about how great things were going, and about all the good things that they and their neighbors were up to, and the businesses that were advertising sure didn’t want to see their business blighted by anything in the community.”

“I think (Statesman editor) Jim Brown just took a deep breath and said, ‘OK, in the short term this might look a little ugly, but in the long term we’re going to rid the community of these folks and Boise will be a better city for it. And the word will get out that people like that aren’t welcome here.’”

“And I suspect Jim Brown was being really urged ahead on this by (publisher and owner) Margaret Ailshie. The Cobbs had been around here almost from the beginning. She learned from her father to take an active role, maybe sometimes on the surface, sometimes behind the scenes, in civic things.”

On Nov. 20, 1955, after its initial fire-and-brimstone editorial, the Statesman published a longer opinion that signaled a change of heart. Today, it looks for all the world like a belated attempt to quell the uproar it had itself helped create. Boise, editors wrote, “comes now to the time when shock and disgust must be replaced by calm and calculated analysis and consideration.”

But the genie was already out of the bottle. Eventually the matter was “put away, and really put away, on both ends of the issue,” Peterson said. “The door was slammed and nobody ever wanted the door opened again.”

“I think that’s to be expected. I think what’s happened in Boise with this issue is pretty similar to what happens most places.”

### LAWYER DEBORAH FERGUSON: ‘THERE’S JUST BEEN A DRAMATIC CHANGE’

Lawyer Deborah Ferguson came to Boise from Chicago in 1995. She read about the Boys of Boise events later that year in stories the Statesman wrote on the 40th anniversary. Ferguson, a former federal prosecutor, was lead attorney in 2013 for plaintiffs who successfully challenged Idaho’s same-sex marriage ban. She also successfully represented U.S. Navy veteran Madelynn Taylor in her suit to be buried with her wife in Idaho’s veterans cemetery.

With its overtones of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, the Boys of Boise episode was tragic and sad, she said, but at great remove from the Boise of today.

“In the era, I think it could have happened anywhere,” she said. “And also, I think it’s probably important to remember, too, with some of the situations we were dealing with adults having sex with minors, and those are crimes. But it seems like it completely just drove all the gay men underground or away, and why wouldn’t it?”



Deborah Ferguson

“When I look at the Idaho marriage case, and I think now that it’s becoming the law of the land, you already just get quickly adjusted to it. But when the case was brought two years ago this month, it was considered just kind of ‘out there.’ I had many, many attorneys say to me, ‘Do you know what you’re doing? Are you gonna scare away other clients?’ ...

“So I looked at and asked law firms if they had clients who would be willing to step forward and join a friends-of-the-court brief on some of these issues. And the reaction at a personal level was like, ‘Yeah, I think you’re doing the right thing, but we can’t be out there on these issues. Our clients are too conservative.’ That was two years ago. There’s just been a dramatic change.”

### FORMER REPUBLICAN GOV. PHIL BATT: ‘I WANTED TO SEE PEOPLE GET TREATED EQUALLY’

Phil Batt was Idaho’s governor from 1995 to 1999. As a state senator in 1969, he led the effort to establish Idaho’s Human Rights Act and has long advocated for universal civil rights. His support prompted him to criticize other Republicans earlier this year when the GOP-controlled Legislature, voting along party lines, killed a move to add anti-discrimination protections based on gender identity or sexual orientation to the law he helped create.

The attitudes reflected in the events of 1955 echo across the years, he said.

“The refusal of the Legislature to add equal protections for people of different sexual persuasion certainly can’t be argued to be right. I don’t know why they keep refusing to add it. I think it’s a matter of personal pride with a lot of people. To refuse to rent a room to a gay, give him a meal at a restaurant, is ridiculous. I think that most people feel that way. Why the Legislature didn’t add the words?”



Phil Batt

Beats me.”

In 1955, Batt was working on his farm in Wilder and not keyed in on the events in Boise. He has spoken of being appalled at the “No Mexicans allowed” signs he saw businesses post, and he resigned from his Elks Club when it refused to serve his Japanese-American friend and business partner. The 1969 legislative hearings he held on civil rights “went on for practically every day of the session, and we were able to pass a comprehensive Idaho civil rights law, the first in the state.”

As far as extending and enforcing civil rights protections for the LGBT community, Boise today is “probably quite progressive on it at this point,” he said. “Idaho, along with other rural states and rural settings, I think is not ready to come to terms with that issue.”

“The evolution of equal treatment for everybody has been a slow process in Idaho as well as many other places. It was not easy to get people to even say that we should have equal rights for anybody when I started in on the issue. ... But that was a matter of importance to me, and I have had a lot to do with people of unequal circumstances and different races and different occupations, and I wanted to see people get treated equally across the board.”

### COUNCILWOMAN MARYANNE JORDAN: ‘YOU WANT TO MAKE IT BETTER AND YOU WANT TO MOVE ON’

In 2012, Maryanne Jordan and fellow Boise City Council member Lauren McLean co-sponsored the city’s anti-discrimination ordinance. Boise was the second Idaho city to pass one, after Sandpoint the year before. Today, following Bellevue’s passage this summer, 13 Idaho cities have them.

Jordan, now council president as well as a state senator, took the time to read journalist Frank Gerassi’s 1965 “The Boys of Boise” book before an interview. The book documents what she called “the politics of fear.”

“We look at where we are now and how in some respects I think our society has evolved tremendously, and in others I’m not sure there’s been much progress at all,” she said.

“Just look at the country today. Look at the behaviors and the actions since the Supreme Court decision on marriage. ... A very good portion of the country accepts that, celebrates that, feels like it’s been a long time coming and that this is how it should be. And then there are others who are still fighting it every step of the way and feel like it is somehow an affront to their way of life.”

After the initial burst of attention for the scandal in 1955, Boise seems to have “virtually lost interest,” Jordan said.

“It was so terrifying to so many people at first. And I think it got ginned up by a lot of gossip, and at a time where there just wasn’t the awareness that there was now. ... I don’t know that Boise is where it is today because of this, but on the other side of this, none of us can say that it didn’t have something to do with it either. ...

“I have a niece who is 11 and she’s starting to really show an interest in a lot of history and government ... and she’s just appalled that we would even have this conversation, that things like that would ever have happened. It makes no sense to her whatsoever.” Boise’s story,



Maryanne Jordan

Jordan said, “could have been anywhere. I think that what made this happen was the times.”

“Things go awry in communities all over the place, but Boise has a way, in the rare instances that that happens, of coalescing as a community and getting past it. And once they’ve kind of gleaned what they need from the experience to move on in a better way, they’re done, and that’s a good thing.”

“To me there’s not a lot of value in revisiting drama. And I’m not saying not to revisit as history, but once you learn your lesson, to just keep going back over it, I’m not sure there’s a lot of value there. I think there’s value in telling the story as a piece of history. ... But when something big and kind of traumatic happens in the community, you want to make it better and you want to move on in a more authentic way.”

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Bill covers politics, government and accountability for the Statesman. He joined the staff a year ago and is beginning twice-a-day training drills preparing to cover his second legislative session.

