



## Legislative Birdwatchers

BY JOAN REINHARDT REISS

As a skilled organic chemist with a Master's degree and many years of experience, my heart yearned for a Ph.D. In 1965, my husband Mark, a diagnostic radiologist, was hired by a Baltimore hospital and I was accepted in the biochemistry department at John Hopkins Medical School. With two toddlers, we moved to the suburbs. Hopkins and the biochemistry world was a male bastion with few females and no mothers. Rigorous science classes had graduate students competing against medical students while I struggled between children and academia.

The written exams required to enter the Ph.D. research world were intense. I failed; a Ph.D. dream ended. In my devastated state, a professor met with me. To insure my permanent exit from science, he said, "Just go home and take care of your children."

A year later, we returned to California, where Mark joined a large Sacramento radiology group. In the early 60s, we'd spent three delicious years in Palo Alto during Mark's Stanford residency. I held a high-powered research position with Syntex, a pharmaceutical company known for the birth control pill. Nobel Prize winners came to brown bag lunches to review our work.

When Mark received the invitation to join the Sacramento radiology group, we celebrated our California return with warm champagne and hugs. But Mark cautioned, "Just remember Joan, Sacramento isn't Palo Alto."

Sacramento, capitol of the Golden State—often called "Cow

Town” or “Tomato Capital”—was boiling hot in the summer and foggy in the winter. However, beckoning nearby was the biochemistry department at the University of California at Davis. Unfortunately, the Chairman knew both my Hopkins professor and my old problems. I explained that I now had solid childcare and a fellowship was unnecessary. He said, “If you take two years of undergraduate science, I’ll be happy to review your grades and decide if you’re graduate material.” What an insult! I couldn’t possibly revisit the undergraduate world. I realized my Ph.D. desire would be unfulfilled indefinitely.

When Earth Day arrived in 1970, I decided if I couldn’t get a Ph.D., I would join the Sierra Club and save the world. I barely understood my intentions, but this decision was to change my life forever.

The Sacramento Sierra Club was committed to supporting environmental legislation, but a huge problem existed. The California legislature consists of two houses: Assembly and Senate. When an entire house votes on a bill, it is called a “floor vote.” With a floor vote, each vote is recorded, printed, and easily obtained by the public. However, votes in the smaller legislative committees were never recorded. A few casual “Ayes” and some mumbled “Nays” meant that the committee Chairman often killed good laws before they had a chance. Those responsible for the “Nays” were anonymous.

So a Sierra Club colleague and I founded the all-volunteer corps to attend committees and record the votes on environmental issues. Our small but energetic group was comprised of high school students, senior citizens, teachers, and committed conservationists. We called ourselves “the Legislative Birdwatchers.” For easy recognition, we wore tags with yellow canary-like birds and a tree in the center. Thus armed for battle, we attended committee sessions to record votes on key environmental bills. We observed that there were devious ways to vote: a stealthy note to the chairman, finger movement up or down, and the ubiquitous mutter. Votes were difficult to decipher—but

we tried. Two or even three Birdwatchers went to each committee hearing. In order to validate a legislator's vote, we phoned his office and asked, "In committee today, Senator Smith voted on Senate bill 385. Could you tell me how he voted?" Common responses were: "He never tells me that" and "I have no idea."

When the legislative session ended, we had a dishearteningly small amount of data but an overactive publicist. Our thin photocopied report began, "Who Murdered the Environment? Now the killers can be known!" Overnight we were a media sensation. Along with making some legislators disgruntled, we also upset the Sacramento Audubon Society, a rather apolitical organization. I appeared before the Executive Board and was accused of bird watching blasphemy! The Audubon Society demanded an immediate name change. I pleaded with them, "Please understand, we have media attention, a recognized name, and a need to continue shining light on environmental committee votes. We just can't remove Birdwatchers from our name." These details did not mollify the unhappy Audubon board. Nevertheless, our environmental vote counts continued as did our reports.

As the 1972 legislative session began, we had an unexpected champion: Senator Peter Behr, an urbane, elegant Republican from Marin County. His district began north of San Francisco, across the Golden Gate Bridge. As a leader of many environmental causes, he was influential in the creation of the Point Reyes National Seashore. When Peter Behr introduced legislation to record all committee votes, several of his less honorable colleagues mocked him for capitulating to those pesky Birdwatchers. But the bill passed, and the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper wrote that "the people of California should be forever grateful to the Legislative Birdwatchers for recorded committee votes." Personally, I was hooked onto a career as an environmental policy advocate.

Now after 38 years as a public policy advocate for the environment and environmental health, I am a writer, occasional

commentator on public radio, and grandmother (aka Bubba). True I failed a Ph.D. exam; but I'm leaving the state of California just a tiny bit better than it might have been had my original scholarly plan worked out. Life is so good. I am committed to enjoying it and protecting it. Afterall, with a 49 year marriage to the same person, I am an endangered species myself!



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