

OBITUARY

ON THE PASSING OF GOVERNOR GEORGE M. LEADER, 1918–2013

Pennsylvania lost a leader on Thursday, May 9, 2013. Yes, a leader and a Leader. As his biographer I'd like to convey to the readers of *Pennsylvania History* several highly relevant points about this man's remarkable life.

First, he ranks among Pennsylvania's very few reform-minded governors and he is firmly placed in a league with reformer Gifford Pinchot who served twice as governor (1923–27 and 1931–35). Leader served as governor from 1955 to 1959 and was elected at the remarkably young age of thirty-six (second only to the late-nineteenth century's Robert Pattison who was thirty-five). He was a progressive Democrat, so rarely seen in today's political environment. He wasn't shy about labeling himself a liberal and his compassion for the poor, the disabled, and the forgotten was remarkable. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine the week after his November 1954 upset of Governor John Fine's lieutenant governor, Lloyd Wood. *Time* credited Leader with leading a solid, honest campaign that garnered the agrarian and labor vote and noted that by winning he had upset "that bulwark of Republicanism: Pennsylvania." (Leader also served in



Governor Leader with Pennsylvania's Miss Cherry Pie. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania State Archives.

the Pennsylvania State Senate in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was a World War II Navy veteran, and, with his wife Mary Jane, started a York County chicken farm using a GI Bill loan after the war.)

George Leader once commented to me that he “didn’t want to put state government on cruise control” when he was elected governor. He used the accelerator instead. To name just a few of his achievements: he expanded Pennsylvania’s state park system as a model for the nation; created the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority as a partnership between state government and private industry to create jobs; mandated that school districts provide education to children with special needs; and signed a law granting women equal property rights in instances of divorce or death of a spouse. He also created a Fair Employment Practices Commission to police employment discrimination in an era when the national civil rights movement was gaining steam and he signed Pennsylvania’s first antilittering and strip-mine reclamation laws, considered by some to be major steps toward protecting the environment.

Later in life he was an entrepreneur and established nursing, long-term care, and retirement facilities for seniors. The multiple campuses of Country Meadows and Providence Place retirement communities throughout

Pennsylvania stand as a proud part of his legacy and have been widely recognized for their excellence.

Second, Governor Leader was a true humanitarian. Among other contributions, he established a prison ministry program, a computer literacy initiative program for inner-city school children, and a major mission program in Ghana. He was deeply devoted to causes that targeted the marginalized. He often told me that he and his family had been granted much in life and that it was his moral obligation to give back as much as he could. He was the most generous person I've ever known.

Third, this was a man who, well into his nineties, could intelligently converse on many subjects. He and I spent countless hours together at his office, traveling in his car, or at his favorite lunch spot—Bob Evans in Hershey—engaged in wide ranging and in-depth conversation on domestic and foreign political affairs, Pennsylvania politics, religion and spirituality, the state of the economy, the latest article he read on a major medical breakthrough, how the Phillies were doing, and many, many other topics. Governor Leader was also deeply troubled by the corruption that plagued the Pennsylvania General Assembly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This was a frequent topic of our discussions. He never could quite understand how it is that people in places of public responsibility would abuse that trust for personal gain. To him that type of behavior was abhorrent.

Fourth, he was a poet and produced two books of poetry in his eighties and nineties. His poetry was an outlet for him to express his innermost thoughts on many subjects, especially those that might be controversial or sensitive. For example, his poems show empathy for immigrants to the United States—legal or not—and preached understanding for those who lead alternative lifestyles. His poems discussed a caring for the disabled, children who grow up in poverty, and those housed in correctional and mental health facilities. And his poetry frequently reflected his deep spiritual views and tolerance for all beliefs.

When Governor Leader asked me to write his biography in 2008, I didn't have to think twice about it. I had known him for twenty-five years and knew that he had a remarkable story to share. We sat for over twenty hours of oral history interviews that comprise the bulk of his biography—the only oral history-based biography of any Pennsylvania governor. At my insistence he agreed to subtitle his biography *Challenging Complacency*. Indeed, his entire life was about challenging the status quo. It was part of his intellectual composition. Historians are supposed to be objective. I'm the first to fess up that, in this case, I didn't abide by that rule too much. We understood each

other too well, shared many of the same beliefs, and had developed a close friendship that was generationally transcendent.

I last lunched with him three weeks before he passed. Despite his being as mentally sharp as ever, I could tell that he wasn't doing well physically. As we parted I sensed that it might be the last time we would see each other. We shook hands and I thanked him for all he had done for so many, including me. But he insisted that no thanks were necessary. I have to admit getting a bit choked up as I turned to walk away.

During the overnight hours the following week I suddenly awoke shaken and in the proverbial "cold sweat." My wife, Cherie, awoke as I sat on the edge of the bed in the darkness. She asked what was the matter? I told her that in my dream I had just attended Governor Leader's funeral. She told me to call him the next day to see how he was. I never did. I regret that.

Yes, Pennsylvania has lost a leader, his dear family has lost its patriarch, I have lost one of my best friends. Yet, rest assured that if, indeed, there is a hereafter (and he never doubted it for a moment) Governor George M. Leader is there reforming the status quo and telling those in charge how things can be done better. He's also sharing his poetry and living out his mantra—engraved on his tombstone in a cemetery at a Jacobus, York County, church—"The Essence of Life is Non-Judgmental, Unconditional Love." He was interred in the shadow of that tombstone on May 16, 2013, joining his wife, Mary Jane, and son Fred. Governor Leader is survived by his sons G. Michael and David and daughter Jane as well as numerous grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

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