

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist and Dennis Myers, Journalist

---



This is among the most lurid and grotesque of Nevada's folk tales. U.S. Senator Key Pittman died on November 10, 1940, only five days after winning reelection. For years stories have circulated that Pittman actually died *before* the election. His friends, so the story goes, kept his body in a bathtub filled with ice at Reno's Riverside Hotel so that his Senate seat could remain Democratic (Pittman's successor would be appointed by Governor Edward Carville, who like Pittman was a Democrat.) The story made the rounds for years and was repeated in the sensational national bestseller, *The Green Felt Jungle* (1963) except the events took place at Tonopah's Mizpah Hotel in that version. At one time, the Mizpah's Key Pittman Restaurant had a history contained on the menu which erroneously claimed that Key Pittman, a Tonopah pioneer, died at the hotel and that his body was kept on ice there.

The real facts, though, are more elaborate and just as disreputable. According to a 1977 interview by myself with Pittman's personal physician, and witnessed by historian Phil Earl at the Nevada Historical Society, the elderly senator suffered a heart attack while engaged in a pre-election drinking spree at the Riverside. The physician, Dr. A. J. "Bart" Hood, was summoned by courier (no telephones were used to avoid eavesdropping operators) and examined the senator on the evening of November 4. Dr. Hood told Pittman's political lieutenants that there was nothing he could do to save Pittman. Quietly, the senator's cronies moved him into Washoe General Hospital. A coronary disease specialist who was flown to Reno from San Francisco concluded, once Pittman regained consciousness, that death was

imminent.

Democratic leaders chose to keep the facts secret and issued a cover story that Pittman was temporarily ill, thus allowing Nevadans to go to the polls on November 5 and elect a dying man. Reno's *Nevada State Journal* quoted Dr. Hood as saying that "the Senator was suffering from sheer exhaustion and fatigue, and the strain of the campaign through the state has been too much for 'an already overworked condition'. The Senator's condition is not critical but he will be kept in the hospital several days, principally for the rest."

As one of Pittman's biographers, Betty Glad, reported, attending physician Dr. Vinton Muller, mortician Silas Ross, and St. Mary's Hospital official Sister Seraphine later stated that Pittman was still alive on election day and that he died at Washoe General on November 10. The Senator's wife, Mimosa, arrived at his bedside on election day from Washington D.C. Her diary (now at the Nevada Historical Society) noted that she saw Pittman alive and conscious: "Went straight to hospital with Dr. Hood. Key happy." An embalmer further reported that Pittman's death certificate recorded no evidence of the tissue effects on Pittman's body that would have confirmed the ice story.

According to journalists Barbara and Myrick Land in *A Short History of Reno* (1995), "One political reporter, it was rumored later, asked one of Pittman's handlers why the senator was making no campaign appearances in this important final week. The handler replied 'We're keeping him on ice.' This may account for a bizarre tale that was widely repeated in the state after the election."

For a more detailed account see: "The Mysterious Demise of Key Pittman", Nevada Magazine (October 1996), pp. 80-83.

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

(Original version in Sierra Sage, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, March 1996 edition; revised and reprinted in Sierra Sage as Myth #88 in May 2003)