

RICHARD C. WHITE
Dies at 74

by Lenore Harris Hughes
El Paso Inc March 8-14, 1998

Former U.S. Rep. Richard C. White, who represented El Paso in Congress for almost two decades, died Feb. 18 at age 74.

Through White's long civic career, he also had been a state representative and chairman of the County Democratic Party. He was recipient of the outstanding El Paso Senior lawyers award in 1997.

Jonathan Rogers, former El Paso mayor who awarded White the Conquistador award for his outstanding work in the community said, "He was a standout in helping Fort Bliss."

"During the 18 years that he represented El Paso, he served with dedication and commitment, and obtained the admiration of all his colleagues," said U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes in a written statement.

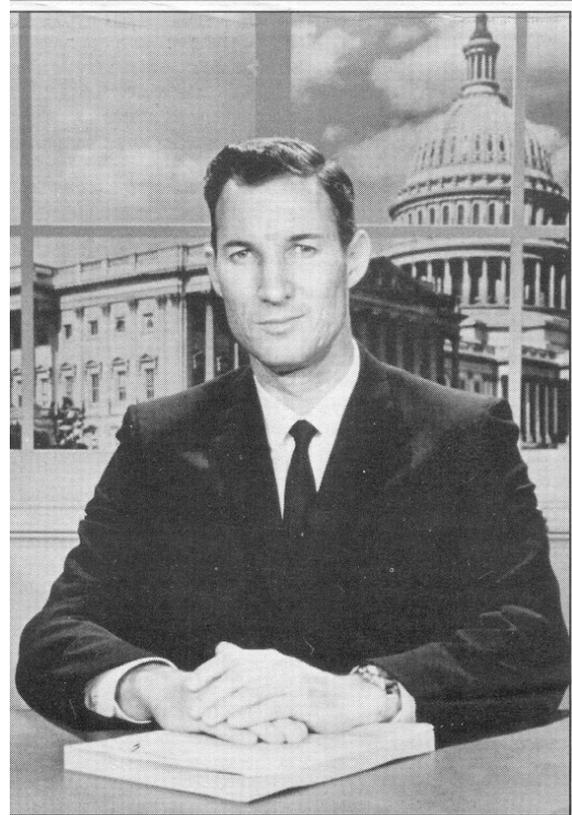
White's oldest son, Rod, said, "His legacy was not just buildings, although they were welcome, but truthfully it was what he contributed to his constituents. He always considered this his most important work. His office was par excellence in solving the problems of people. I have been in homes where my father's letters had been framed and placed on their walls and everyone wanted his picture."

Richard White was born April 29, 1923, to James C. White and Lela Meiller White. He was the youngest of three children.

"Dad always said he was born on a piano," Rod White recalled. "Back in his boyhood days, he was a bugler and had a set of bagpipes which he played occasionally. He had a great ear and could play any tune he ever

heard. He loved the opera as well as the symphony and was a frequent attender."

At El Paso High School White devoted his time to the ROTC department as company commander. He also acquired a love of books.



After high school, White joined the Marines and was involved in the Pacific Theater as interpreter of the Japanese language. "He would go into the tunnel first, and try to get the Japanese to come out," Rod White said. "The Japanese had a system of underground tunnels and strategically moved about. Snipers were everywhere. While in a foxhole in Guam, a grenade came by and caught Richard's leg. He was given a Purple Heart."

After returning to El Paso, White enrolled in Texas Western College (now UTEP). He

then studied law at the University of Texas at Austin.

He met Katherine Huffman in 1948; they were married in 1949.

After law school White came back to El Paso and set up a practice. He served in the state Legislature from 1955 to 1957, then continued practicing law full time.

In 1962 he ran for County Democratic Chairman and won a two-year term while still practicing law. In 1964 he decided to run for Congress.

“From a child, he had wanted to be a part of the U.S. Congress,” Rod White said. “He felt he could make an impact there.”

Rod White gave an example of this humility: “While traveling he did not like to use taxpayer's money to the limit but traveled coach. If he was late for dinner when he went to the cafeteria, he stayed at the back even when urged by others to go to the head of the line. He never considered himself better than anyone else.”

Katherine White died March 2, 1973.

As the family story goes, Richard White was leaving the Capitol building one day after Katherine's death and saw Kathleen Fitzgerald drive by. The next day he left his desk early to go find where she worked. They were married in the summer of 1973.

After 18 years in Congress, White retired in January, 1983. A huge gathering met in the Civic Center to honor him.

“One thing that touched his heart” Rod pointed out, “was the founding of Guadalupe Mountains National Park. He was able to get the bill pushed through Congress. In

1997 he was invited back to the 25th anniversary of the park's founding. I was with him on both occasions.”

White was a lifelong member of the El Paso Historical Society, for which he served as president. An active Rotarian, he created a program called El Paso County Sheriff's Department “Eyes and Ears,” in which every person in El Paso could become involved.

He is survived by his wife, Kathleen; his seven children, Roderick, Richard, Raymond, Kenneth, Bonnie, Sean and Brian; and five grandchildren.

“He was a private I even though he was a public figure,” Rod reflected.

* * *