

**Recognition for the Late Senator
Frank O'Brien Papen**

Frank O'Brien Papen

Frank O'Brien Papen was a native of Las Vegas, New Mexico. Papen was the son of John and Helen O'Brien Papen a pioneer family in northern New Mexico. He began his business career as the manager of a general store in the mining camp of Terrero where he won his first political appointment as the postmaster at the camp. At the same time he began selling insurance agent in 1939, he moved to Las Cruces to work at a local insurance agency which he subsequently purchased. The agency soon became one of New Mexico's largest insurance operations.

In 1954 Papen was named to the First National Bank board of directors and three years later acquired controlling interest in the bank which at the time had assets of \$8 million. At his death the First National Bank had grown to more than a third of a billion dollars with assets of some \$345 million. During some forty-two years with First National Papen held a number of positions including president and chairman of the board, a position from which he retired from in 1993.

In addition to the First National Bank, Papen founded the Rio Grande Bankshares, a multi-bank holding company which owned not only the First National Bank of Dona Ana County but also the First National Bank of Chavez County. An innovative banker, Papen was responsible for the construction of the then revolutionary ten-story First National Bank tower in Las Cruces, the tallest building in southern New Mexico. In addition he developed the first enclosed shopping mall in southern New Mexico, the Loretto Mall in downtown Las Cruces.

Papen was not only a successful insurance man and banker, he was a notable success in politics. His first venture was his election to a two-year term in the NM House of Representatives in the late 1950s. In 1969 he was elected to the NM Constitutional Convention and the same year appointed to fill an unexpired term in the New Mexico State Senate. He subsequently was re-elected three times. During his tenure as a state senator, Papen chaired the Senate Education Committee. But it was as chairman of the powerful Senate Finance Committee and the watchdog Legislative Finance Committee that Papen became a power in the state legislature. He was perhaps proudest of being one of the authors of the state public school funding formula, a model program for providing funding for New Mexico's schools.

Papen was also co-sponsor of legislation which created the NM Severance Tax Fund, which annually provides tens of millions of dollars to public schools and universities.

His efforts to strengthen ties with Mexico were responsible for his receiving from former Mexican President Miguel Aleman the Metalico de Oro Award. In addition Papen ramrodded legislation creating the NM Border Act, and the NM Border Authority and was a key behind-the-scenes mover in establishing the Santa Teresa Port of Entry on the US Mexico border. Papen, until 1995, was one of the original commissioners appointed to the New Mexico Border Authority.

Long a friend of New Mexico State University, Papen was responsible for creation of the President's Associates, the NMSU Foundation's principal fundraising organization. Papen was honored by NMSU in 1988 with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.

Papen helped lead successful efforts to stop the city of El Paso from acquiring much of the Mesilla Valley's underground water supply.

In addition he played a major role in attracting industry to the Mesilla Valley including the L'Eggs Plant in the 1960s and working with the NM congressional delegation to expand programs at White Sands Missile Range and to establish NASA's Johnson Space Center adjacent to White Sands.

A past president of the Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce, Papen was a Paul Harris Fellow of the Las Cruces Rotary Club, was named Citizen of the Year by the New Mexico Association of Realtors. In 1993 Papen received the NM Distinguished Public Service Award and the previous year was inducted into the NM Democratic Party Hall of Fame.

The NM legislature designated Papen as "Senior Statesmen" the first time this honor had been conferred. He was also a charter member of the NM Amigos the state's goodwill ambassadors.

Papen was deeply involved in the Catholic Church serving as member of the Finance Council of the Diocese of Las Cruces and as a member of the Board of Governors of the Foundation of the Diocese. He was a Knight of the Grand Cross of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, and a fourth-degree Knights of Columbus member.

Papen was a strong supporter of Memorial Medical Center, where he was cared for prior to his death. He was chairman of the Orthopedic Bed Campaign and honorary chairman of a fund drive to renovate the hospital's Pediatric Unit.

In 1941 he met Julia Stevenson who moved to Las Cruces to manage the Las Cruces Coca-Cola Bottling Co. A year later they were married in Chicago by the groom's uncle. Monsignor Frank O-Brien. They had three children, Michele and Frank Jr. who died at the age of 10 in a traffic accident in Las Cruces, and an infant son who died at birth. Julie Papen died on December 31, 1989 following a lengthy illness. He remarried in 1991 to the former Mary Kay Kuper, a longtime resident of El Paso, TX and Las Cruces.

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