

## *PART IV*

### *THE 1994 REPUBLICAN STATE ASSEMBLY*

#### *CHAPTER 15*

##### *OPENING MOVES*

On Thursday, June 2, 1994, the Bird for Governor campaign staff began packing up and getting ready to head up to Denver for the Republican State Assembly. The Colorado Springs headquarters was characterized by a carefully hidden mood of rising confidence. Bruce Benson's recent public statements had made it clear he would not be coming to the state assembly. In fact, Benson announced that he would be campaigning elsewhere in the state on Saturday, June 4, the day of the assembly.

If Benson ever had any thoughts of putting his name in at the state assembly, they probably were dashed completely by the hot water he got into by criticizing Roy Romer for the many delays at Denver International Airport. The general view was he now needed the time from the state assembly to the August 9, 1994, Republican primary to clean up his image a bit. Benson also would be in better shape once the state assembly was behind him. Telephone calls by Bird volunteers to El Paso County delegates turned up a lot of resentment against Benson for "bypassing the caucus/assembly system."

The Bird campaign team also was buoyed by the fact that Bird's three challenges to Benson (come to the assembly, come to the debates, outline your program) received good coverage in the news media and appeared to be hurting Benson in the eyes of many Republican voters. Clearly Bird had enjoyed going on the offensive against Benson and felt good calling him to task for not campaigning in the traditional way.

Bird's inner mood on the eve of the state assembly appeared to be that he had done all he could to win the support of the delegates. He was ready to accept the outcome, even if things went badly and his campaign for governor ended somewhat prematurely.

The telephoning of assembly delegates by the Bird campaign also had quietly increased the confidence in the Bird camp. A great deal of support for Bird turned up as the state assembly date drew closer and closer, particularly in El Paso County and in southern and eastern Colorado. It would be interesting to see if the support from delegates the Bird volunteers were detecting in their telephoning really did turn out to be substantial numbers of votes for Mike Bird at the state assembly.

Dick Sargent's support appeared to be fading. Delegates reached by telephone usually cited his past record of losing two statewide races for state treasurer. The only worrisome thing at this point was that Sargent did seem to be getting the support of gun enthusiasts who wanted their "right to bear arms" protected from any and all incursions.

In the weeks prior to the Republican State Assembly, the media attention to and excitement about the Republican portion of the governor's race greatly increased. Most of the credit for stirring up all the interest had to be attributed to Bruce Benson and his wealth and his unorthodox campaign techniques.

By this time all three of the major candidates had developed a clear-cut image in the news media. Mike Bird was the nice guy, the highly qualified candidate who would make the best governor but who did not have the "charisma" to beat Roy Romer in the fall. Dick Sargent was the tough-talking veteran campaigner who was attempting the amazing feat of turning two statewide losses for treasurer into positive credentials for running for governor. Bruce Benson was the "millionaire candidate" who "doesn't play by the rules."

One joke going around at the time was that the perfect Republican candidate for governor in 1994 would have Mike Bird's brains and knowledge of state government, Dick Sargent's combativeness and

feistiness, and Bruce Benson's money.

The sense in the Bird camp was that Bird would get the most votes at the state assembly and be listed on the top line on the primary ballot. Sargent would probably make the ballot also, but it could be very close for him. Benson would not make any trouble at the state assembly of an organized sort, leaving it to each individual Benson delegate to do whatever he or she pleased. One guess was that most of them would make an honest effort to choose whom they liked the better between Bird and Sargent.

As they were packing up to leave for Denver, the Bird campaigners were wondering whether the 1994 Republican State Assembly would be as quiet - and successful - as they thought it was going to be.

#### THE BENSONITES MAKE THEIR MOVE

The peaceful and victorious scenario described above for the Bird forces at the 1994 Republican State Assembly did not come to pass. Two days before the state assembly was to take place, the Benson campaign began openly asking Benson supporters to "spoil" their punchcard ballots by writing Benson's name on them and turning them in unpunched. Ballots cast in this way would increase the total number of persons present and voting, thereby making it more difficult for Mike Bird and Dick Sargent to get the 30 percent of the delegate vote needed to qualify for the August 9, 1994, Republican gubernatorial primary. The Benson people clearly were trying to knock Bird or Sargent out of the race by tying up delegate votes that might otherwise have gone to Bird or Sargent.

Mike Bird heard about this last minute ploy by the Benson forces while giving a speech in Denver. The request to "write-in" Benson's name at the state assembly came in the form of a letter from Kathy Arnold, one of Benson's two campaign co-chairmen. Thousands of copies of the letter had been printed and were ready to be handed out personally to the Republican delegates as they arrived in Denver. The

recommendation to vote for Bruce Benson came in a P.S. at the bottom of Arnold's letter. It read:

"I have been contacted by many delegates asking me how I plan to vote. When it's time to cast my ballot for our Republican gubernatorial candidate, I'm going to write 'Benson' across the ballot and turn it in."<sup>1</sup>

It later became clear that another goal of the Benson "write-in" tactic was to perhaps steal so many votes from both Bird and Sargent that neither of them would get 30 percent and make the August primary ballot. This would cause a second ballot to be taken at the state assembly, with the top two finishers automatically going on the primary ballot. Forcing a second ballot was something that would greatly weaken the credibility of the eventual assembly winner and suggest that the winner did not have very widespread delegate support.

The next day - the day before the Republican State Assembly - the political columnist at the *Rocky Mountain News*, Peter Blake, devoted almost his entire column to Kathy Arnold's letter urging a write-in vote for Bruce Benson. Blake went on to explain in great detail just how difficult that would make things for Bird and Sargent.<sup>2</sup>

Additional word soon reached the Bird campaign that the Benson forces were indeed trying to discredit Bird and Sargent by forcing the state assembly to go to a second ballot. Donna Scherer, the wife of Bird's campaign manager, Jim Scherer, was at a Republican Party dinner the night before the state assembly and a prominent woman in the Benson organization was sitting at the same table. Donna Scherer and the woman had been friends for some time. At the end of dinner Donna Scherer mentioned the Benson letter asking assembly delegates to write in Benson's name on their punchcard ballots. Donna then said: "Where is your integrity?" The conversation ended with the woman who was working for Benson saying: "We'll see on the second ballot, won't we?"<sup>3</sup>

Mike and Ursula Bird both had been saying all along that Bruce Benson had advisers who would counsel him to be manipulative and pull some swift maneuvers at the state assembly. The Benson camp attempt to stage a write-in vote for Benson appeared to prove Mike and

Ursula Bird to be correct.

Early in the morning on Friday, June 3, 1994, the day before the Republican State Assembly, the Bird for Governor campaign staff gathered in the campaign headquarters in Colorado Springs. Mike Bird wanted to get a press release out immediately that would criticize Benson sharply for staging his write-in tactic and which would once again accuse him of "undermining the system." Jim Scherer, the campaign manager, thought it would be better to "memo" the assembly delegates on the subject the morning of the assembly. It was decided to get the press release out right away *as well as* distribute copies of the press release to the assembly delegates.

For two hours, in an atmosphere of great emergency pressure, the entire Bird for Governor campaign staff worked on the press release. The press release grew more aggressive and confrontive with each successive rewriting, because by this time the entire Bird organization was convinced that Mike Bird could only defeat Bruce Benson by relentlessly attacking his unorthodox campaign tactics. The final version of the press release read:

"Mike Bird, running hard for the 1994 Republican nomination for governor of Colorado, today charged that 'Bruce Benson has hit a new low in Colorado politics by manipulating to disrupt the vote for governor at tomorrow's Republican State Assembly.'"

*"Bruce Benson is trying to undermine the very contest he didn't have the political courage to enter,"* Mike Bird said. "This is the political equivalent of Nancy Kerrigan getting hit in the knee by one of Tonya Harding's goons."

That last sentence referred to a recent highly-publicized news event in which friends of Tonya Harding, an Olympic-hopeful ice skater, were accused of brutally clubbing and injuring the knee of Nancy Kerrigan, one of Harding's Olympic competitors.

The press release carefully outlined the complex way in which casting write-in votes for Benson would make it more difficult for Bird and Sargent to get the 30 percent of the vote each needed to get on the

Republican primary ballot. The press release continued:

"There has been ample evidence all this week that the Benson people were going to try to 'spoil the assembly by spoiling their ballots,' Bird explained. 'I think this makes Bruce Benson a first class *Spoil Sport*.'"<sup>4</sup>

This press release highlighted a difficult paradox facing the Bird for Governor campaign. The press release clearly portrayed Benson as someone who simply "does not play by the rules." The paradox was that this was precisely the image that Benson's consultants were purposely trying to generate for him. They *wanted* him to be perceived as an "outsider" who does not do things the way they are ordinarily done, as a "different player" who does not do "politics as usual." Despite that fact, however, the Bird campaigners had come to believe it was essential to turn Benson playing "fast and loose" with Republican Party rules into a negative issue to be used against him.

Once the press release was completed, the Bird campaign staff headed up to Denver to begin putting up wall signs and posters for Mike Bird inside McNichols arena and around the Denver Hyatt-Regency, the headquarters hotel for the state assembly. One staff member was left behind to baby-sit the high-tech machinery that was automatically faxing a copy of the press release to every newspaper, television station, and news radio station in Colorado. As luck would have it, the automatic faxing machine broke down and, for a considerable number of nerve-wracking minutes, it appeared the Bird campaign's most strident anti-Benson press release might not be going out to the news media after all. As often happens with modern electronic marvels, however, a little trial and error with the controls got the automatic fax working again.

The press release turned into one of the best news media hits of the entire Bird for Governor campaign. A number of newspapers throughout the state carried the story and played it prominently.<sup>5</sup> Most important, after the press release was sent out, the Benson forces stopped distributing Kathy Arnold's letter with the P.S. calling for a write-in vote for Bruce Benson. In fact, the Benson forces more or less

withdrew for the remainder of the state assembly. If any new instructions went out to pro-Benson assembly delegates, they were passed by word of mouth rather than in writing.

As a result, the Benson campaign was stuck with several thousand copies of Kathy Arnold's letter that it had originally intended giving out to each and every delegate. The stack of copies ended up sitting forlornly at a Benson table, staffed by Benson volunteers, that was located on one of the promenades outside the seating area at McNichols Arena. Anyone who wanted to "pick up" one of the Arnold letters could do so, but they were not given out or pushed on delegates in any way.<sup>6</sup>

### THE DAYS BEFORE THE STATE ASSEMBLY

Party state assemblies in Colorado are always held on a Saturday. For a candidate for a statewide office such as governor, however, the state assembly activities actually begin the previous Thursday and Friday. Colorado has six seats in the United States House of Representatives, and the party nominees for these seats are voted upon at six congressional district assemblies, all of them held during the two days prior to the state assembly. By tradition as well as desire, candidates for the party nomination for governor address all six congressional assemblies.

The various candidates for governor also are *expected* to hold cocktail receptions at the official assembly hotel, which for the Republicans in 1994 was the Denver Hyatt-Regency. Not only do the delegates expect to get free drinks as they make their way from candidate reception to candidate reception, they also expect to get some delicious hors d'oeuvres and other forms of "finger food." Candidates for the party nomination for governor often compete to see who can hold the most lavish reception of all, with plenty of free liquor flowing and plenty to eat.

Michelle Provaznik and Ursula Bird, the candidate's wife, handled the arrangements for the Mike Bird reception at the Denver Hyatt-

Regency Hotel. One problem they ran into was the high cost of things at the Hyatt-Regency. A bowl of pretzels was \$10. Twenty-five cups of coffee cost \$25. The hospitality suite in which the reception was held, which the Mike Bird campaign somehow got away from the Sargent campaign (it was the largest suite available and Sargent had reserved it first) cost over \$1,000 just for the one night. Due to these high costs, it was decided to hold the Bird reception at 8 o'clock on the Friday night before the state assembly and serve dessert-type hors d'oeuvres - tasty little cakes and pies. The assumption was the delegates could bum their free dinner hors d'oeuvres at earlier receptions given by the other gubernatorial candidates.

The Bird suite at the Denver Hyatt-Regency Hotel was large and luxuriously appointed. It consisted of a reception room with a sofa and fireplace at one end and a large table for serving the hors d'oeuvres at the other. The room could easily hold 100 persons if it needed to, and after the Bird reception got going it seemed that many more than that were in attendance. The party was greatly enlivened by the presence of a Dixieland jazz band from Colorado Springs. The clarinetist was a retired English professor, a former colleague of Mike Bird's at Colorado College in Colorado Springs.

By the time assembly delegates arrived at the Bird reception, they had plenty of other places to go and get a drink and eat a snack earlier in the day. Even though he was not putting his name in contention at the assembly, Bruce Benson held a late afternoon reception at the Hyatt-Regency that was well-attended by assembly delegates. Each attendee was given a small Benson sticker to wear on their coat lapel or dress. Some of them still had these stickers on when they showed up at the Bird reception. Dick Sargent also held a late afternoon reception which overlapped with and competed with the Benson reception.

As the evening went on and the crowd grew in size at the Mike Bird reception, the party developed that loud conversational buzz that is the hallmark of a successful social occasion. Most important, the Bird campaign staff was able to meet and speak at length with the county



coordinators and assembly delegates they had been speaking with over the telephone the previous days and months. These Bird county coordinators and committed assembly delegates also were able to socialize with Mike Bird, his wife, Ursula Bird, and their two children, Chris and Andrea, who had flown into Denver for the occasion. Seeing the Bird county coordinators and committed assembly delegates at the reception buoyed the Bird campaign staff's confidence that Mike Bird really was going to make a strong showing at the Republican State Assembly the next day.

As the crowd at the Bird reception grew larger and the music got louder, someone actually got a Conga line going for a few minutes. After Mike and Ursula Bird and their children left the reception, however, the delegates slowly drifted away and the party ended.

The great cliché about the receptions held before state assemblies is that delegates come and drink the candidate's liquor, eat the candidate's food, tell the candidate what a great person he or she is, and then cast their votes for somebody else the next day at the state assembly. Assuredly some of that goes on, but that was not the feeling of the Bird staff when the Mike Bird reception ended on the Friday night before the 1994 Republican State Assembly. Seeing so many people from all over the state of Colorado, talking with them, answering their questions, making plans with them for ways to show support for Mike Bird at the assembly the next day - all of these activities at the reception seemed worthwhile and important. In the short run they clearly helped to produce unity and spirit in the Bird for Governor campaign. In the long run, it could be argued, they were also producing unity and spirit in the Colorado Republican Party.

#### DAWN PATROL AT THE STATE ASSEMBLY

"He who snoozes loses!" According to Jim Scherer, Mike Bird's campaign manager, that is the motto of those who would come in first at a Colorado political party state assembly. He called for the Bird

campaign to have a small army of volunteers to rise at dawn on assembly day and put up Bird for Governor signs at the most visible spots in the parking lot of the assembly hall - Denver's McNichols sports arena. Those who sleep late, Scherer said, get to the parking lot at "Big Mac," as McNichols Arena is known, and find all the good sign locations already taken.

Getting up early was no problem for the Bird organization in 1994. Paul Vander Veer, a campaign staffer in the Denver office, was to get up at 5 A.M. to put up Bird signs in the parking lot at McNichols Arena. For a practical joke, one of his friends called him at 3 A.M., said it was 5 A.M., and told him to get up and get going. Too groggy to figure out what was really happening, Vander Veer crawled out of bed and put his clothes on. Only then did he see it was 3 A.M. He decided to head out to McNichols Arena anyway and get the Bird signs up *really* early.

Paul Vander Veer had been the college roommate of Mike and Ursula Bird's son, Chris. He headed up a large crew of college-age and "recent college graduate" volunteers who helped with putting up signs, handing out flyers, and other important assembly day tasks. Most of the members of this spirited crew were former college classmates of Paul Vander Veer and Chris Bird.

Another early morning must on assembly day is to have a large recreational vehicle parked in the McNichols Arena parking lot with a big "Mike Bird for Governor" sign on it. The recreational vehicle was donated for the day by friends of Mike and Ursula Bird. Mike Bird county coordinators and other committed Bird delegates checked in at the recreational vehicle before the state assembly began, got their blue-on-white Bird for Governor T-shirts, a donut and cup of coffee or fruit juice, and last minute instructions and reminders of what to do at the assembly. The T-shirts were given out the morning of the state assembly, rather than ahead of time, because that way it was guaranteed that the person getting the T-shirt was going to be at the state assembly.

Bird volunteers then went through McNichols Arena placing a large white-on-blue placard on each assembly delegate's chair. All the

candidates put a flyer or a position paper on each delegate's chair, so it was important to have a colorful item that stood out in the crowd. The Mike Bird placard was large and colorful and, when turned over, had Mike Bird's positions on major state political issues printed on the back side.

A bit of a battle rages at every state assembly between the various items which the various candidates for office place on the assembly delegates' chairs. For instance, Dick Sargent's volunteers distributed a small newspaper with Sargent's photograph and a large headline promising a "20% Tax Rate Cut." The newspaper did not spell out which state taxes - income taxes, sales taxes, or property taxes - would be cut, nor did it specify which state services would be eliminated to produce the large tax cut. Given the conservative fiscal philosophy of most Republicans, however, it was a very good proposal to have sitting on every delegate's chair.

Those assembly delegates who looked really carefully found a phony \$3 bill nestled among all the paper on their chairs. The bill had a picture of Bruce Benson on it and a motto saying "Colorado For Sale." Another label identified this form of currency as "Benson Bucks," and in smaller print were the words "Will Spend \$5,000,000+" and the name of the city where the bills allegedly were printed, "Flip-Flop, Colorado." The \$3 bill also bore the signature of Ed Rollins, Benson's Washington, D.C., based campaign consultant. Those who looked really carefully could find, in very fine print, that the phony bills were being distributed by Citizens for Romer.

The customary battle of the T-shirts raged between Mike Bird's supporters and Dick Sargent's supporters. Sargent's T-shirt was white-on-red, and that bright red color made it really stand out, particularly at a distance. Bird's T-shirt was blue-on-white, somewhat less noticeable. On the other hand, Bird had about three times as many people at the state assembly wearing a Bird T-shirt than Sargent had wearing a Sargent T-shirt. The final result was something of a standoff.

**Notes To Chapter 15:**

1. Letter in author's files, Kathy Arnold to 1994 Republican State Assembly delegates, 4 June 1994.
2. Peter Blake, "Benson shadow falls over GOP Assembly," Rocky Mountain News, 3 June 1994, 5A.
3. Author's notes, telephone interview with Donna Scherer, wife of Bird campaign manager Jim Scherer, 6 June 1994.
4. Press release (untitled), Mike Bird for Governor campaign, 3 June 1994.
5. Fred Brown, "Convention shaping GOP election slate," Denver Post, 4 June 1994, 1B. Thaddeus Herrick, "Benson's spending under fire," Rocky Mountain News, 4 June 1994, 4A. Tom McAvoy, "Benson presence felt by other hopefuls," Pueblo Chieftain, 5 June 1994, 4B.
6. Personal observation of the author.