

# War and environmental disaster saved Alaska finances in the past: What will save us this time?

Dermot Cole, Alaska Dispatch News, September 16, 2016

FAIRBANKS—In the two years before the trans-Alaska oil pipeline began pumping in 1977, the state government avoided a distress sale of state assets or a government shutdown by borrowing hundreds of millions from the North Slope oil companies.

The \$900 million collected from the giant 1969 lease sale was almost gone and as pipeline construction began, the state faced a financial crisis.

Steve Cowper, a Fairbanks lawyer and freshman legislator in 1975, recounted this chaotic chapter in state history in a presentation here Wednesday morning.

His audience at the Osher Life Long Learning Institute included about 40 people, most of whom have been around long enough to know that the name of the former Alaska governor, who has been in Texas the last 15 years, is pronounced “Cooper.”

Now 78, Cowper has long since gone gray, but he has not lost his North Carolina drawl or his ability to spin a yarn. I knew that when he started talking about how he had almost become an oil and gas adviser to Somalia some years back and was told, “We’re going to fly you guys over to the Mogadishu airport and you’re going to jump out in parachutes.’”

He never made that leap, but 30 years ago he was elected

governor on his second try, claiming to be the oldest rugby player in Alaska. An Anchorage Daily News story by Hal Spencer in early 1986 set the stage for how he was portrayed: "Steve Cowper's fellow state legislators nicknamed him the High Plains Drifter after a Clint Eastwood character – a loner whose strong, silent ways carried a hint of danger."

I did see him kick a trash can once like a soccer ball as a legislator, and there is a famous story about how he tossed a telephone out a state Capitol window in frustration, but Cowper always settled down fast after volcanic episodes, and he inspired a dedicated following during those difficult years of the first big oil collapse.

A former boss, the late Attorney General Edgar Paul Boyko, once said with Cowper's penchant for always trying the unexpected, he never knew whether Cowper was about to "take a year off to enter a monastery in Tibet or be a war correspondent in Vietnam."

In 1974, Cowper followed through on a threat to run for the Legislature. He said Wednesday the four years he spent in the state House were the "most remarkable experience of my life."

It was a time when pipeline construction overwhelmed every aspect of life in Alaska and two things – the disappearance of the \$900 million windfall and the need to borrow money to run state government – helped ensure the creation of the Alaska Permanent Fund.

There is truth in the proverb, "Success has many fathers and failure is an orphan."

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