

# Lee Metcalf (1911–1978)

## *Public Servant and Statesman*

*“No U.S. senator – ever – was more committed to sound resource management. And no present or former senator can proffer a record of accomplishments to match that commitment.”*

Dale Burk, author and journalist, 1999

Lee Warren Metcalf was born in Stevensville, Montana on January 28, 1911. Throughout his life Metcalf was a committed public servant passionately working for the people of Montana and the protection of her resources.

Metcalf attended public schools in the Bitter Root Valley, went on to receive two degrees from Stanford University, and then received his law degree from the Montana State University Law School. He was admitted to the Montana bar in 1936. In 1935 he married Donna Hoover of Wallace, Idaho, a UM journalism graduate. She was to be his closest friend and advisor throughout his life.

He was elected to the Montana Legislature in 1937 and served as assistant attorney general from 1937 to 1941. During World War II he served with the 1st Army and the 9th Infantry Division



in five campaigns throughout Europe. Upon returning to Montana he was elected associate justice of the Montana Supreme Court and served in that position from 1946 to 1952. He then served three times as U.S. representative

from the state's First Congressional District. He ran for the U.S. Senate in 1960 and was re-elected to the Senate in 1966 and 1972.

Throughout his career Metcalf worked tirelessly to protect the interests of the working people and family farmers. He was an early sponsor of legislation for clean water, Federal aid to education, and reclamation of strip-mined land. He became a guardian of the public interest in regard to utilities and was an advocate of congressional reform and budgetary control.

Metcalf was intensely concerned with preservation of natural resources and was instrumental in creating the Montana Wilderness Study Act, the Missouri Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the establishment of wild river status for the three major forks of the Flathead River.

Planning to retire after completing his last term, Metcalf described how greatly he missed his beloved Montana, “I want to go home, I really want to go home. For 30 years, except for the war, I have been running for public office in difficult, complex and involved political activities. And I think 30 years is long enough.”

Metcalf died Jan. 12, 1978, before he could achieve his goal to establish the Great Bear Wilderness in northwestern Montana and the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. The Absaroka-Beartooth and Metcalf's beloved Great Bear Wilderness now exist largely due to the wilderness study legislation he introduced. After his death, the Ravalli National Wildlife Refuge near Stevensville was renamed Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge to honor the late Senator who was instrumental in its establishment. In 1983, an act of Congress created the Lee Metcalf Wilderness area in southwestern Montana in honor and recognition of his life-long commitment to conservation and the people of his state.