

The Oregon Capitol, according to Frankie Bell

[Capi Lynn](#), Statesman Journal 4:22 p.m. PST March 5, 2016



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(Photo: ANNA REED / Statesman Journal)

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Only the Oregon Pioneer has more seniority at the Oregon State Capitol and is more popular than Frankie Bell. She has been a fixture at every legislative session since 1966.

Her 50th session goes down in history as “the weirdest session I’ve ever been a part of.”

Explaining why would take too much space, so we’ll leave that up to the legislators and their staffs, instead focusing on 50 things you should know about Bell.

50. Frances Estelle Mueller was born the same year the Oregon Capitol was built, in 1937.

49. She grew up in Portland and Eugene, the only child of a single mother, graduating from what is now South Eugene High School in 1955.

48. She studied art at the University of Oregon before dropping out to get married to her first husband and having two children, Kellie and Ken Hargis.

47. The children were school age when she applied for a job as a tour guide at the State Capitol in 1966. She was hired, and has called it a second home ever since.

46. Two years later, Bell was promoted to "Chief Capitol Guide," the first female to hold the post, which was under the transportation department at the time. "I think I got the job because no man would come work for that low a salary," she said.

45. Bell also worked part time at Meier & Frank in the will-call and postal office departments to make ends meet. By now, she was divorced and raising her kids on her own.

45. It took months for Capitol cronies and others to recognize that a woman could do the job. One news article started like this: "If things get dull when you are on a tour of the State Capitol, just watch the guide." It described her as "a statuesque, 5-foot-7-inch redhead" before noting that she "has a thousand facts and tidbits tucked away in her head."

44. Another article published around the same time referred to her by her given first name, although she's gone by Frankie since she was a child. "I always knew if somebody called me Frances, they didn't know me very well," she said.

43. She married George Bell, former Oregon assistant secretary of state, in 1971.

42. Funny story how they met. Frankie was lobbying to get new carpet for the secretary of state's office, and he originally said no. She eventually got her way, a sign of the gentle persuasiveness she would use again and again to make things happen.

41. The wings were added to the Capitol in 1976-77, almost doubling the interior space. It was Bell who recommended a centralized kiosk be included in the plan so that visitors would see somebody as soon as they entered through the revolving doors.

40. The price tag for the circular kiosk made of golden oak was a whopping \$20,000. "Did I get teased or what?" Bell said. "Somebody had to take the heat. I didn't expect it to be so grand."



Frankie Bell pictured at the Oregon State Capitol in the 1970s. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

39. A black and white photograph of Bell, taken in front of the state seal sometime in the 1970s, is tucked in a corner in the Senate offices. She's hardly recognizable, not because of the updo hairstyle, but because her trademark smile is missing.

38. Around 1977 is when her job and others were conveyed from transportation to the legislature. She was the Capitol Guide Supervisor.
37. She later was given more responsibilities when she took over Capitol Use Services, which then became Visitor Services. She coordinated just about everything that happened in the building.
36. Under her leadership, Visitor Services focused on taking care of the needs of the public. "They had always said it's the people's building, but didn't really act like it," Bell said.
35. It has been written before that she has been the conscience of the Capitol, always making sure it looked stately and always making visitors feel at home.
34. She was behind the launch of the gift shop in 1984, providing a place to showcase Oregon products.
33. She was promoted to Visitor Services Manager in 1985.
32. She helped start the volunteer program that same year, partly out of necessity. "We had a budget cut, I'm sure," Bell said. The program currently has approximately 65 volunteers.
31. Bell has been the driving force behind many initiatives, but with the grace of a great ambassador, she defers credit: "One person doesn't do anything."
32. She should get credit for making people care about the Capitol, not just then and now, but for the future. She was one of the founders of the Oregon State Capitol Foundation, established in 1997 to promote the building's enhancement and preservation.
29. Bell has been called the "fourth branch" of state government. Her reputation is that ingrained.
28. She counts among her friends influential people such as former Gov. Barbara Roberts. She has served under nine different governors.
27. To Bell, the unsung heroes in the building are those on the facilities staff, such as those who keep the Capitol polished. "Imagine dusting in this building," she said.
26. Arguably no one is more knowledgeable about the building and the inner workings of the statehouse, though. She has been a mentor and a confidant to hundreds of legislators.
25. The key to her popularity and her effectiveness, put succinctly by colleague Evelyn Wood, is this: "She's good to everybody. She knows how to communicate."
24. The secret to Bell's success is really not a secret. "It's all about customer service," she said, "and we're all customers, too."
23. She retired in February 1998, after nearly 32 years of stellar customer service.



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Longtime statehouse ambassador Frankie Bell, with husband George Bell to her left, reacts to a video in her honor at a retirement party at the state Capitol in February 1998. (Photo: Statesman Journal file)

22. Former Gov. Vic Atiyeh spoke during the sendoff: “Part of the sparkle in the Capitol will walk out the door with her. She was so in tune with wanting to help people. There will not be another Frankie.”

21. Former Gov. Bob Straub referred to her as a ray of sunshine. Many things Capitol-related do revolve around Frankie Bell.

20. She has such a positive personality, no matter how divisive the rift between House and Senate chambers. There are occasions when she gets a little crabby, such as “when we’re getting to the end of the day and somebody has to get up and speak, I think, ‘C’mon.’ But that’s what this is all about.”

19. Bell couldn’t stay retired long. She has returned to work during each session since in a variety of capacities, including manager of the lobby message center, legislative assistant and, most recently, receptionist outside the Senate chamber.

18. If there’s a kink in her armor it’s that she can’t remember dates and years. “I’m a word person, not a number person,” she said.

17. She has been the Cal Ripken of the Capitol over the decades, rarely missing a day of work during the session.

16. Bell figures there must be someone who has served as long if not longer than her. She mentioned Roger Martin, a former legislator turned lobbyist. Ramona Line worked in the legislature for 42 years, 30 as chief clerk in the house, before retiring in 2014.

15. With everything that Bell has seen and done, she does have one wish: “I have never been to caucus. I would love to go sometime, be a fly on the wall.”

14. Imagine the secrets she must have about lawmakers and dealings behind closed doors. “I think they’ve all been exposed,” she said. Her friends have suggested she write a memoir, but some stories would have to wait until certain people were no longer alive.

13. She doesn’t much believe in ghosts, although she’s quite familiar with the book “Ghosts in the Capitol,” a collection of paranormal experiences compiled by Sandra Allen, Oregon State Capitol Foundation board member. With as much time as she’s spent in the building, you would think she would have something to add. “A lot of people swear they’ve run into ghosts, but not I,” Bell said.

12. Her favorite place in the Capitol? The rotunda beneath the 106-foot-tall dome. “It’s so gorgeous. The architecture is representative of Oregonians — simple, clean lines, unique.”

11. Everybody else’s favorite place? The Oregon Pioneer. Her trips to the observation deck are much less frequent these days, and not just because she no longer leads tours. Managing the 121-step spiral staircase isn’t as easy as it used to be. “That would be a busman’s holiday for me to go up there. It’s quite a climb.”

10. Her most memorable climb to visit the 22-foot-tall sculpture cast in bronze and finished in gold leaf, was the morning Mount St. Helens blew, on May 18, 1980. “You could see it spewing,” she said.

9. Bell loves the art collection on display throughout the building. The works were taken down in 2008, when the building went through a renovation, and she successfully lobbied to have them restored. Appraisals at the time found the collection that had cost about \$90,000 was worth 10 times more.)

8. Bell is a talented artist in her own right, working with oil pastels. But the hobby was put on hold while she was busy being a devoted caregiver for her husband.

7. George Bell died Dec. 19, 2015, following a long illness. He was 88. Former Gov. John Kitzhaber was among the dignitaries who spoke at the celebration of life.



Cooper is a rescue dog from Hopes Haven. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

6. The love of her life these days is Cooper, a rescue pup from Hopes Haven. “He’s the best dog I’ve ever had,” she said.

5. She has a big heart for animals. When she found a \$100 bill signed by the mystery philanthropist Benny, she donated it to Willamette Humane Society.
4. Most people think Bell is a Democrat, but she refers to herself as unaffiliated. She describes herself as liberal, but fiscally conservative. “I’ll register for whichever party in which race is most important to me,” she said. “You can’t really be partisan if you’ve been in the building as long as I have.”
3. When Norma Paulus ran for governor in 1986, for example, Bell registered as a Republican.
2. For the record, she is currently registered with the Democratic Party, but that could change. She’s not sharing what her plans are for the upcoming elections.
1. Even before her 50th legislative session was in the record books, she went on record to say that she plans to be back next year — “if they’ll have me.”



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Frankie Bell, far right, and other people on the Senate floor line up to see across to the House of Representatives during Sine Die to adjourn the 2016 legislative session at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem on Thursday, March 3, 2016. (Photo: ANNA REED / Statesman Journal)

“Forward This” appears Wednesdays and Sundays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. Contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6710, or follow her the rest of the week on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.