

Interview with Dr. Terry McAteer

Son of J. Eugene McAteer, California State Senator and author of the McAteer-Petris Act

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Dr. McAteer: My dad is a native San Franciscan, and in the 1950s he became a San Francisco supervisor. In 1958 he was elected to the state senate to represent the City and County of San Francisco. I have three brothers-Tim, Tom and Terry. My parents had a lot of imagination. My three brothers are still alive. My parents passed away a long time ago. My dad was 51 when he passed away in 1967 while still in the Senate. I am happy to answer whatever I can to help your project along. Ask any question you would like.

Ian McKernan: I read that Kay Kerr was the person who approached your father about helping the Save San Francisco Bay Association. Was your father interested in urban conservation or the environment before his involvement with Kay Kerr and the Save San Francisco Bay Association?

Dr. McAteer: I wouldn't say that my father was a huge environmentalist. That wasn't a term that was even around in those years. My dad owned a restaurant in San Francisco, in Fisherman's Wharf, called Tarantino's Restaurant. It is quite well known. That is what the family business was and he owned one in Sausalito called the Spinnaker. I, as a young kid, can remember very vividly going down to the restaurant and my dad was very much talking to the fishermen, especially the crabbers, who were getting their crabs out of San Francisco Bay. The crab supply was diminishing rapidly. When I was a young kid you used to get dungeness crab all the time. It was a staple. Now it comes in a very short season and it is very expensive. In those days, crab was cheap and plentiful. It was a mainstay at the restaurant because tourists would come there for crab. The supplies in San Francisco Bay were dwindling dramatically. My dad was very concerned about that and realized that it had something to do with the water quality, something to do with the flows of water coming into San Francisco Bay, and a lot to do with the filling of San Francisco Bay. I would say that my dad was interested in his own business, which piqued his interest. How he heard about this was there was a radio personality on the air and I can't remember his name. On KGO. News Talk 81.

Ian McKernan: Was it Don Sherwood?

Dr. McAteer: Yes, Don Sherwood! Don Sherwood really got involved with these ladies. And one of the ladies contacted my dad, probably because my dad was the majority leader in the state senate. So that meant that the Democrats were in charge of the state senate and my dad was in a powerful position in the senate. So he had more influence in the senate, representing the Bay Area, and being the senator from San Francisco was probably more prestigious than being the senator from San Jose, just because of the nature of San Francisco. My dad was young and dynamic and they picked the right guy when they picked my dad to help them with the save the bay legislation.

Ian McKernan: Do you think Urban Conservation was a new issue for the state of California when the McAteer-Petris Act was passed in 1965?

Dr. McAteer: I think that it was so far ahead of its time that you would actually get something that would stop growth, that would focus on water resources. The idea of conservation and ecology and a green movement...this led the nation and it actually spawned many other legislative acts. The Coastal Commission actually came out of BCDC legislation so that you could protect the California coast, similar to what my dad helped do in San Francisco Bay. The amazing about that piece of legislation was getting Governor Brown to sign it. Pat Brown was a very close friend of our family. He is from San Francisco, and he was the DA when my dad was a supervisor. Pat was incredibly lobbied by economic and developer interests to veto that piece of legislation. It took all of my dad's friendship with Pat Brown for him to sign that piece of legislation. If anything, how that legislation passed was due to the friendship between Pat Brown and Gene McAteer because all of the cities and all of the economic interests were lined up against it. Foster City is an example. It is one of the last developments of bay fill, and there were many others on the books for developing, with each city moving out farther into the bay. And that was the problem. It wasn't that people didn't recognize the bay was being filled or that people didn't recognize that the bay was more polluted. It was that all of these little communities, Foster City, Berkeley, Alameda, all of these cities had their own vested interest. For the state to come and tell them, "I'm sorry but the water is the state's water and you are not impinging upon it. We are going to have an agency overseeing all of your activities because we have to act in the best interests of the entire bay" was really the biggest issue there with all of the economic interests. So while the ladies were all from the East Bay and the Berkeley area, it was all these other cities that were fighting, all the developers were fighting this legislation.

Ian McKernan: Do you think that the passage of the McAteer-Petris Act changed San Francisco Bay and what do you think would have happened without this legal protection for the bay?

Dr. McAteer: I know that it would have. I have a cartoon in my study out of the Chronicle, where they are picturing my dad with a banjo, sitting not on the dock of the bay, but a river. I think that it would eventually have come about, but not until the seventies, when the environmental movement came about. In those ten years you would have really seen the demise of San Francisco Bay. I think they got it just in time. One of those things. They got lucky. The stars were aligned in the legislature, the relationship my dad had with the governor, all of these things were critical to make this piece of legislation happen. I don't ever want to put my dad ahead of the ladies because the ladies really drove the initiative, to get someone to carry the piece of legislation, and that person was my dad. But I will say that it is one of family's most proud things of my dad. There were a couple pieces of legislation, but that would be his number one piece of legislation, saving the bay.

Ian McKernan: Do you think any other politicians would have responded in the same way as your dad did when the ladies approached him?

Dr. McAteer: No. My dad was one tough character. When he got a burr in his saddle that something needed to be done and I think that he also realized that it was in his best interest because of his fish restaurant. My dad was a tiger. Unfortunately that is also probably why he died at age 51 of a heart attack. He was in full motion constantly. He knew how to get legislation done. Think, when he was in his mid-forties and he is elected the majority leader for the senate and he hadn't been in the senate that long. His peers recognized that he was a dynamic person. I think that and the prestige of being a senator from San Francisco really helped. My dad then

got Nick Petris, who was in the Assembly. He wanted a west bay and east bay person on the legislation. Nick Petris was an assemblyman representing Alameda and Oakland, and that's why he got Nick on board to be the co-sponsor in the Assembly.

Ian McKernan: How important was the McAteer-Petris Act and the BCDC to your father's legacy as a lawmaker?

Dr. McAteer: I think that it is one of my father's crowning moments. The other was compensatory education, so I have gone into education, mainly because of what my dad did for poor and disadvantaged kids. I was so proud of it that my son went and worked as an intern at BCDC one summer. I wanted him to see what his grandfather's legacy was, so he worked as an intern for them. When your father dies at only age 51, I think that it is pretty amazing to have such a legacy when they only lived to 51 years old.

Ian McKernan: His work inspired so many other citizens and governments to protect their natural environment. What do you think your father would think of all of the laws and environmental protections that came about because of the McAteer-Petris Act today?

Dr. McAteer: I think that he would be very proud. I am sure that he is looking down and being very proud about it. I think that he also, while he was a Democrat and cared about legislation, he also was a businessman. Have we created too big of a bureaucracy? Does the bureaucracy work? Can we do things again to refine? You have a whole bunch of other entities that have come about on different levels of bureaucracy. I think that while my dad was a democrat because of some social issues, I think that he was a realist in terms of being a businessman. He would want to see that it is being done efficiently and effectively, not as a means to stifle business, but as a way to make the bay a much more vibrant entity for business and tourists. I think that is what has happened. San Francisco has become the number one city of tourism in the country. The main draw to San Francisco, people may say it is the hills and the fog, or the Golden Gate Bridge, the reality is that it is all about the bay.

Ian McKernan: When Kay Kerr approached your father about passing legal legislation against filling and polluting the bay, how did this change any conservation laws from the past, if there were any?

Dr. McAteer: The amazing thing was that they weren't any. Every town had its own jurisdiction over the bay. Berkeley put that Berkeley marina in, which got the women interested. Many towns were using the bay, filling the bay, and that became their garbage dump. My father saw that. You would take the garbage out there and that would become fill. My father saw that in San Francisco tremendously because being a native San Franciscan, born in 1916, he saw how San Francisco was filling the bay, especially in those areas down by Candlestick Park. His biggest interest was what is the effect on the water quality? What is the effect on the environment? How is this hurting or helping business? I wouldn't call him an environmentalist, like the women were. My dad was a realist, who when these ladies approached him, his first question was, "How can I get a bill passed? What can we do?" So there were compromises, as there is with any legislation. One of the people that he helped get involved in BCDC was a guy by the name of Bill Lane. But he realized that this could not just be Democratic legislation. He had to get some Republicans. Bill Lane, who was not in the senate, was the owner of Sunset magazine. He knew Bill and realized that Bill could help him out. Bill realized the importance of

the bay and the conservation of the bay. Bill Lane had a huge impact with getting the legislation passed by helping with Republicans and landowners. That is the kind of thing that my dad was about. "How am I going to get a piece of legislation through? Yes I have a friend who is the governor, but I still have to get Democratic votes and Republican votes to move some environmental, and I wouldn't even use that word, some conservation legislation through." I think my dad was a realist. If he was going to get the legislation through, he was going to have to get some compromise.

My dad was a Cal graduate and he knew Clark Kerr quite well, so this was also about gee, all these ladies are associated with Cal, and so I am going to give back to my alma mater. So there are all these strands through it: between Don Sherwood, between Bill Lane, between the ladies, between Cal, between Pat Brown. All those characters are swimming around in this together, in how you get something through Sacramento.