

who rose from poverty to power but who never forgot his friends and neighbors back in the hollows.

Byrd was born Robert Sale in Wilkesboro, N.C., in 1918, and was packed off to live with his aunt and uncle after his mother died ten months later. His father didn't want to be bothered with him.

His foster father, Titus Dalton Byrd, was a coal miner, and Bob spent most of his youth in the dreary company town of Stotesbury, W. Va. There were many nights with virtually no food on the table.

He was graduated from high school at 16 and was class valedictorian. But there was no way for a poor boy like Byrd to go to college, so he knuckled down to work in a grocery store. He learned to be a butcher, an occupation he pursued until he went to work in the shipyards at Baltimore during World War II.

When he came back from Baltimore, Byrd and his wife—a coal miner's daughter named Erma James who was his high school sweetheart—opened a grocery store of their own. Byrd also decided to run for the legislature. He had played the fiddle in the Mark Twain High School band, and he brushed up on mountain tunes. His violin became his principal campaign attraction. "He could sure play," remembers a longtime friend, Basil Deck. "He could make that fiddle sing."

First victory

Byrd won handily, entering the legislature and Morris Harvey College near the state Capitol about the same time. In 1950, he bought a black Chevrolet sedan, his first car, and decided to run for the state Senate. This put him on a schedule even more grueling than the one he follows now. He was at once a member of the House of Delegates, a candidate for the Senate, a college student and a grocery store operator. The pressure gave Byrd an ulcer which still troubles him.

In 1952, Byrd ran for the U.S. Congress and faced his first political crisis. In mid-campaign, his opponent revealed that Byrd had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. It was a bombshell. But Byrd went on radio, much as Richard Nixon did about the same time, and tried to talk his way out of the jam. He had belonged to the Klan from "mid-1942 to early 1943," he said. "Being only 24 at the time, I joined the order because it offered excitement and because it was strongly opposed to communism. After about a year, I became disinterested, quit paying my dues and



Byrd with wife, Erma, and grandchildren. He puts in a virtual seven-day week: romping with the kids on a Saturday afternoon is one of his few diversions.

dropped my membership in the organization. During the nine years that have followed, I have never been interested in the Klan, but on the other hand, I have directed my energies toward the upholding of my community, my church and my fellow citizens of every race, creed and color."

The radio statement got Byrd through the primary all right. But the disavowal of any association with the Klan since early 1943 came back to haunt him in the general election. The Republicans produced a letter dated April 8, 1946, from Byrd to the Klan's Imperial Wizard in Atlanta. "I am a former Kleagle (organizer) of the Ku Klux Klan," it said. "The Klan is needed today as never

before and I am anxious to see its rebirth here in West Virginia. . . . Will you please inform me as to the possibilities of re-building the Klan in the realm of W. Va."

Now Byrd was really in trouble, it seemed. The Democratic candidate for Governor, Okey Patteson, demanded that Byrd resign from the ticket. His newspaper support dwindled. Byrd, however, responded by calling his critics "power mad" and accusing them of trying to divert attention from "the real dangers of communism, organized crime, the decay of moral values and the degeneration of religious life." The public was with Byrd and sent him to Congress in 1953. Six years later, he ran

successfully for the U.S. Senate.

The emphasis on religion in Byrd's responses was calculated to appeal to the strong religious-fundamentalist sentiments of a great number of West Virginians. He has addressed innumerable congregations on Sundays up and down the state, sometimes punctuating his sermon with handclapping: "God created man in his own image (clap). I believe that and I believe he did it from the dust of the earth. I believe in a personal God (clap)—one who hears my prayers (clap)—and one who punishes the wicked (clap). . . ."

Making enemies

The part about punishing the wicked seems to be a major preoccupation with Byrd. When he was chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee for the District of Columbia, he took it upon himself to enforce the man-in-the-house rule for welfare recipients which the Supreme Court has since struck down. Result: the undying enmity of Washington's black community, a feeling he didn't soften by his snuggling up to the Southern power bloc in the Senate and his all-night, last-ditch filibuster speech against the 1964 Civil Rights Bill.

Aware that he will need broadly based support if he is ever to become Majority Leader, Byrd has begun muting his positions on such issues as race, referring to his Klan membership as a youthful mistake. He speaks with pride of his dark-skinned Iranian son-in-law who came to this country a stranger to the language and has now earned a Ph.D. in physics. But he may find it hard to live down some of his past pronouncements.

Traits to admire

Whether Byrd succeeds or not in winning over his critics, it is certain he will make all possible progress by being thorough, considerate and fair as assistant floor leader. As always, he will work tirelessly. Whatever his colleagues may think of his views, there are few who don't admire his resourcefulness. What impresses them perhaps the most is his return to college after his election to the Senate and his graduation cum laude from American University Law School in 1963.

No one denies that he tends his political fences with perhaps more care than anyone in Congress and that he is driven by an overpowering ambition. It is a combination that might make Robert Carlyle Byrd the next Senate Majority Leader.



At chamber table, from left: Sen. Ted Kennedy, whom Byrd defeated for the post of Whip, Sen. Mike Mansfield, present Majority Leader, and Bob Byrd. Byrd backed Nixon on Vietnam, Haynsworth and Carswell, the ABM and SST, says he voted with liberals on housing, health, education, minimum wage.