

# **Mike Matson**

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## **AUTHOR & COLUMNIST**



## **Throwback**

He always struck me as a 20th century older man's model of a younger man. Not surprising, really. He came by it naturally.

As a child, Bill Graves was surrounded by wisdom and sagacity, borne from experience. The Graves' lost the family farm in the Great Depression, his father answered his country's call to war, learned logistics, came home, and with his brothers, started what would become Graves Truck Line, one of the most successful carriers in the middle of the country.

In addition to this column, another of my side hustles is volunteer interviewer for the Kansas Oral History Project, a non-profit that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans involved in shaping and implementing public policy during their time serving. Last week, he returned to the governor's office where he served for eight years – longest ever for a GOP governor in our state – and I sat down with the son of Helen and Bill Graves, Sr., and reminisced.

As a kid in Salina, sweeping and loading the trucks, there was never a question about his life plan. He wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and take over the company when the old man hung 'em up. Graves the Younger was in Lawrence, pursuing a graduate degree, when a phone call from Dad changed everything.

The good news? Set for life. The bad news? Those career aspirations you've had since childhood? Your birthright?

Gone.

His father sold the company.

With no business to run, Graves chucked his MBA studies, did what young men have done in college towns for generations and wondered, "now what?" This new aimlessness did not go unnoticed. Parents, uncles, aunts, old football coaches, and a high school debate teacher had a message.

To those whom much is given, much is expected.



## Election night 1994.

Beneath those wings, Graves found his way into the 1980 Kansas Presidential Primary, working for George H. W. Bush, which opened the door to a job in the office of the Secretary of State in the Kansas Statehouse. In 1986, at 34, he was elected Secretary of State. Friends and mentors peeled a young introvert off the walls and shoved him in front of voters. Re-elected in 1990, elected Governor in '94, re-elected in '98 with 73 percent of the vote, a record that may never be broken.

Even then, his governing style was a throwback, rooted in modesty and humility.

"People don't get up in the morning thinking about their governor. People expect you to do your job."

He's proud of his policy accomplishments and admits the '90s was a good time to be governor. The tech boom fattened state coffers and we couldn't shovel tax refunds back fast enough.

Last of the centrist, moderate Republican Kansas governors? The pendulum will swing back, he insists, with the relaxed peace of mind that comes with knowing he's no longer in the trenches.

Listen carefully to Bill Graves today and you can hear the influence of Kaye Pearce, his football coach at Salina Central, the mentorship of Gene Bissell who coached him at Kansas Wesleyan, the sound advice of erstwhile high school debate teacher Gary Sherrer, who served in his administration. But most of all, you see and hear the son of Bill and Helen Graves. Members in good standing of the Greatest Generation, who did what was expected of them.

When I worked for Gov. Graves, managing his message, the spin came easy, because it was legit. What you saw was what you got. He didn't need communications coaching. Well... maybe once. On the stump, in front of the Rotary Clubs, with the media, he'd constantly refer to his "tax plan." Governor, uh... it's a tax *relief* plan.

His life was his message. Lessons learned from older men and women.



"I'm willing to sit down and talk with anyone who's willing to sit down and talk with me."

"Load 'em high and tight."

"Plan your work. Work your plan."

These are the sentiments that transcend ideology. These are the values that help shape aimless young men, ground

them with confidence and help them navigate through difficulty on their way to the stars. It's baked into the Kansas ethos.

On the way out, Graves stopped and purposefully chatted up Gov. Laura Kelly's young staffers. He apologized for disrupting their day with our interview. Today, at 69, Bill Graves is aging gracefully into one of the older men who helped shape and mold him.

Not surprising, really. He came by it naturally.

*After video post-production and transcription, the interview with Gov. Graves will appear on the Kansas Oral History Project [website](#).*

163 views

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