

William Robert Belcher, Fresno parks visionary, dies

By George
Hostetter



Bob Belcher, left, superintendent of the city parks division, and Mrs. William M. Hill, right, president of the Fresno Garden Center, participate in a 2005 dedication of its Liberty Tree and Bicentennial Grove at Woodward Park to honor America's Bicentennial. RICHARD DARBY — FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

Fresno has lost one its most faithful environmentalists.

William Robert Belcher -- "Bob" to all who knew him during his nearly four decades at the city's parks department -- died Tuesday.

He was 83, and hadn't been a city employee since 1990. But Belcher's 37-year legacy, much of it spent as parks manager, is felt daily by all among Fresno's half-million residents who love green space.

"Bob was a great person to work with and for," said Rudy Castillo, a parks retiree who teamed with Mr. Belcher for nearly 20 years. "We planted a lot of trees, planted a lot of grass. Those were great times."

Mr. Belcher's parks career spanned a pivotal era for Fresno. It began in the early 1950s when Fresno's population was pushing the momentous 100,000 mark. The rush to turn fields north and east into suburban homes was on. The people of a town transforming itself into a city needed recreation and the public parks to serve as host.

Such a stage was ideally suited for Mr. Belcher.

He was born in 1931 to William and Muriel Belcher of Fowler, grew up on a Fresno County ranch and in 1953 earned a degree in ornamental horticulture from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. Mr. Belcher

learned early the value of dirt.

Sheepskin in hand, Mr. Belcher went to work at Fresno's parks department.

"He raked leaves," said his daughter, Lindsey Miller.

But, she added, her father "was never one to put in only an eight-hour day." Superiors took note of Mr. Belcher's talent and diligence. He was soon in positions to offer advice and influence policy on some of Fresno's biggest quality-of-life projects: the birth of Fulton Mall, the landscaping of Storyland, the development of Woodward Park.

Mr. Belcher "was extremely competent," Castillo said. "Back before Proposition 13 (the 1978 initiative limiting property taxes), we had money to develop lots of parks."

The parks department in those days had three divisions: parks, recreation, the zoo at Roeding Park. Mr. Belcher advanced to become a division manager. That meant he had high-stress bosses -- a parks director immediately ahead of him, then the city manager, followed by the city council, with the sovereign people at the top.

Mr. Belcher could walk a political tightrope as deftly as plant an oak or cedar.

There was the time in 1987 when a Fresnan complained that tree-trimmers appeared to be destroying perfectly good 12-foot-tall wood tree stakes (\$2.50 each) along with pruned limbs. Mr. Belcher, according to The Bee, soothed the disgruntled taxpayer.

"It has not been our practice to do this because nails in tree stakes used to attach a tree tie can cause serious damage to the cutter blades on the brush chipper," Mr. Belcher wrote.

Mr. Belcher was among those urging City Hall in the late 1980s to embark on an aggressive tree-planting campaign. The goal was 200,000 new trees by year 2000. But council members, sensing Fresno voters loved their money more than trees, balked at approving a special taxing district to pay the bills.

"Until the council sees some support not much is going to happen," Mr. Belcher told The Bee in 1989. "They don't want to be out on a limb by themselves."

Mr. Belcher stayed busy in retirement. He farmed 120 acres in Fowler. He served on the Rotary Playland-Storyland board. He was a member of the Shinzen Garden Society. His list of civic duty goes on and on.

Mr. Belcher journeyed to Europe this spring, but relished coming home to Fresno, his daughter said.

Trees and grass come and go, but green space and people who love it are eternal.

On Friday at noon, a Chevy pulled into the parking lot of a six-acre park in northeast Fresno. Autumn Robertson, the mom, wasted no time getting 2-year-old Reagan and 3-year-old Noah out the door and pointed toward the playground equipment. Steve Robertson, the dad, followed with a couple of soccer balls.

"I like it," Steve Robertson said of Bob Belcher Neighborhood Park. "It's good for the area. It's good for the young ones."

William Robert 'Bob' Belcher

Born: July 21, 1931

Died: Sept. 30, 2014

Occupation: Parks manager, city of Fresno

Survivors: Daughter and son-in-law Lindsey and Joe Miller; grandchildren Brooke and Will; sister and brother-in-law Ann and James Duvall; companion June Riechel; son-in-law David Pistacchio

Preceded in death by: Tootsie, wife of 50 years, and daughter Susan Pistacchio

Visitation: Whitehurst, Sullivan, Burns & Blair Funeral Home, Sunday, 1 p.m.-4 p.m.

Funeral: Friends Community Church, Monday, 10 a.m.; interment at Belmont Memorial Park

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