Alaska founding father George Rogers dies at 93

He came to help Army serve fish, stayed to shape a new state

By RACHEL D'ORO
The Associated Press

George Rogers, an unassuming giant among Alaska's founding fathers, has died at 93.

Rogers died at his Juneau home on Sunday, said his daughter, Sidney Fadaoff. He had been ailing for a year but his condition worsened a week ago, she said. His exact cause of death was not disclosed.

Rogers was considered an economic architect who helped shape the territory into the nation's 49th state.

He was a technical consultant to the Alaska Constitutional Convention that convened in the 1950s before Alaska became a state in 1959.

When the convention secretary took sick leave, Rogers stepped in to do that job as well, said Vic Fischer, former Democratic legislator and a convention delegate who became a good friend of Rogers'.

"He was totally modest and unassuming," Fischer said. "Even while he was managing the convention, hardly anyone outside the convention was aware of that. That was very typical of his way of functioning."

Rogers served as an economic adviser to two territorial governors, developing a revenue system. After statehood, he

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ROGERS: Gruening talked him out of leaving Alaska for Berkeley

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persuaded lawmakers to pass a bill creating the University of Alaska Anchorage's Institute of Social and Economic Research and was an early member and chairman of the board of the Alaska Permanent Fund Corp., which manages the state's $36 billion oil savings and investment account.

Rogers was born April 15, 1917, in San Francisco.

After studying economics at the University of California, Berkeley, where he met his wife, Jean, he arrived in the Alaska territory in 1945 on a World War II Army assignment. His mission was to help the Army serve fish on Fridays.

"They said, 'George, you're going to Alaska to roll back the price of raw fish,'" Rogers told the Empire in 2008.

He never planned to stay past the war and wanted to pursue a doctorate at Berkeley. Territorial Gov. Ernest Gruening talked him into remaining longer with assurances of getting him into Harvard University instead.

"I couldn't resist that. I stayed on," Rogers told the Empire.

Rogers returned to Alaska after graduating from Harvard in 1950 and continued his government work in various roles, including the quest for statehood and the constitutional convention.

Among his other accomplishments, he served on the Juneau Assembly, acted in community theater and documented his travels with sketches that captured the essence of the places he visited, according to Fischer.

"I would describe George as a renaissance man," he said. "This generation of leaders should revisit George Rogers." Rogers also wrote two books and was among the first to coherently understand and explain Alaska's economy, said Anchorage-based economist John Tichotsky. He said Rogers was part of a movement that used history to comprehend economic development.

"Understanding how the economy worked allowed people he consulted with to put together institutions and implement policies that addressed reality," Tichotsky said. "This generation of leaders should revisit George Rogers."

Rogers is survived by his wife of 69 years and five of six adopted children, including Fadaoff. She said the family is planning a private service in Juneau. A public celebration of his life is tentatively set for mid-April.