

U.S. Senator E. James Abdnor: A Life

In 1899, an 18-year-old Sam Abdelnour left the village of Ayn Al-Arab in Lebanon, which was then part of Greater Syria and within the Ottoman Empire, on a cargo ship bound for the United States. He could speak no English. At the time, it was reported that Sam “plans to set himself up in the business of peddling” and that “he is anxious to learn the language of his new country.” Abdelnour, who Anglicized his name to Abdnor, first opened a general store in O’Neill, Nebraska, but in 1904 moved to Lyman County, South Dakota, filed a homestead claim on 160 acres, and planted corn. His homestead patent claim was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt. Abdnor also continued his work as a “peddler,” selling to many of the new settlers in the area and to the Sioux Indians at Lower Brule. Abdnor said “the Greeks run restaurants, the German likes farming and manufacturing, the Italians and Poles go into mining. The Scandinavians turn to fishing and farming and my countrymen, the Lebanese, were noted as peddlers of fine linens and other light articles.” Abdnor sold overalls, shirts, linens, lace, buttons, eyeglasses, pins, needles and jewelry by walking from farm to farm and, later, using a two-seated buggy with a merchandise box built on the back.

At this time, Lyman County was on the edge of the homesteading frontier and many men in the area were working on the Milwaukee Road rail line, which would run through Reliance, Kennebec, Presho, and Vivian and into Jones County towns such as Draper and Murdo and on further West. In 1906, Senator John Thune’s grandfather Nicolai immigrated from Norway and immediately traveled to South Dakota to take his first job in his new home country working on the construction of the Milwaukee Road around Draper. Nicolai and his immigrant brother Matt would run hardware stores in Betts and Mitchell and Nicolai would later run a hardware store in Murdo, which was later taken over by Senator Thune’s father, Harold.

In 1906, the Lyman County town of Kennebec was officially organized and a school was opened. Classes were “held in the old log cabin just east of town, close to Medicine Creek.” In 1907, it was reported that “Sunday School will be held Sunday morning at 10:00 A.M. in the shanty of Sam Abdnor.” In succeeding years, Abdnor would attend the newly-built Methodist church in Kennebec. In 1908, after several years of peddling door-to-door, Abdnor opened a general mercantile store on the main street of Kennebec using the wages he earned by working for a short time in a packing house in Sioux City and by mortgaging his Lyman County homestead. In 1923, Sam also assisted his cousin Albert Abdnor’s effort to open a general store in Presho.

Abdnor’s future wife Mary Wehby immigrated to the United States from Lebanon when she was 14 years old and went directly to Wichita, Kansas to live with relatives. She later took a job at a “skirt factory” in Cedar Rapids, Iowa which made house dresses and children’s dresses. She made \$6.00 a week, but nearly half of that sum went to pay room and board. In 1916 at age 34, Sam married Mary in Cedar Rapids. It was reported that “her parents are friends of Sam’s parents and they all come from the same village” in Lebanon. Sam and Mary were married in St. George’s Greek Orthodox Church in Cedar Rapids. They immediately returned to Kennebec to run the general store and raise a family. The Abdnors became part of

a small but successful story of Lebanese immigration to South Dakota during the early twentieth century. The 1905 census listed fifty Lebanese immigrants living in South Dakota (officially designated as “Syrian”). In 1915, the number grew to 444.

Sam and Mary had three children, Joe, Marina, and James. Jim, as he would always be known, was born in 1923. During Jim’s early life in Kennebec, the region suffered through drought and depression. But unlike many of their neighbors, the Abdors were able to save their farm and general store. Jim attended grade school and high school in Kennebec and excelled as a running back on the football team. He also participated in debate, wrote for the town newspaper, the *Kennebec Advocate-Leader*, and played basketball. During the 1941 Lyman County basketball tournament, Jim scored a tournament high 37 points and led the Kennebec Canaries to a first place showing in the tournament by defeating Vivian, Presho, and Oacoma. Murdo won the District 29 championship in 1941 by defeating Jim and the Kennebec Canaries by a score of 27-14.

During the World War II years of 1942-43, Jim served in the U.S. Army and then followed his cousin Marlow to the the University of Nebraska, where he pursued a Business Administration degree. While at Nebraska, Jim began to display his strong interest in community involvement and civic affairs. During his time in Lincoln, Jim was president of the Sigma Chi fraternity and served on the University of Nebraska Student Council. He was also a lineman on the football team and is the first name listed on the Cornhusker football team roster for the 1943 season. Jim was also a boxer at Nebraska, but abandoned that pursuit after his nose was broken. To earn money, Jim worked at a shoe store in Lincoln.

In 1945, after graduating from Nebraska, Jim returned to Kennebec where he worked the family farm, growing primarily wheat and later raising livestock. He became a member of the South Dakota Wheat Growers Association, the South Dakota Crop Improvement Association, and the South Dakota Stock Growers. His farm would grow to be 4,400 acres by the late 1960s, 1,600 acres of which he owned and the rest of which he rented from his father Sam. For a few years after his return, Jim also taught five classes and coached two sports at Presho High School and also began coaching the Legion baseball team in Kennebec. Meanwhile, Jim’s dad Sam continued to run the general store on the main street of Kennebec.

During these years, Jim was encouraged to become active in politics by the prominent local attorney and Republican Party leader, A.C. Miller, who practiced law in Lyman County until 1955. Miller had served as state’s attorney for Lyman County, as a state representative in Pierre (1933-1940), as speaker of the state House (1937 and 1939), and Lieutenant Governor (1940-44). In 1955, Miller became a circuit judge and in 1960 he was elected South Dakota’s Attorney General. With Miller’s encouragement, Jim became active in local politics and civic affairs. Jim attended the 1949 Young Republican national conference in Salt Lake City and by 1950 he had become chairman of the Lyman County Young Republicans. He served in this post from 1950-52 and then served as State Young Republican Chairman from 1953-55. He also became the Farm Chairman of the Young Republican National Federation and traveled the

region and country on its behalf. In keeping with his family's strong history in small business, Jim became increasingly active in speaking out for the Republican Party principles of small government, balanced budgets, limited regulation, and free enterprise, which were widely supported in Lyman County, where the Republican Party was a strong force. In these early years of the Cold War, Jim also became more outspoken as an advocate of a strong national defense and as a critic of the Soviet Union.

During the early 1950s, Jim also began to be active in politics in the state capital of Pierre, which sits just north of Lyman County on the Missouri River. The county's prominence in state capital circles had been assured in recent years by the Lyman County attorney M.Q. Sharpe, who served as county attorney and state Attorney General and was elected governor in 1942. Following in the footsteps of Sharpe and with the advice of A.C. Miller, Jim began working in Pierre and developing his legislative skills. During the state legislative sessions of 1951, 1953, and 1955, Jim served as the First Assistant Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives in Pierre. In 1956, Jim decided to make his first run for elective office. In the fall of that year, he ran for the state Senate from District 29, which included Lyman, Jones, Haakon, and Stanley counties. He was elected by a margin of 3,076-2,662 over Louie Tevault. Because of his previous experience in Pierre, Jim was immediately named a chair of the joint appropriations committee. Jim was re-elected to the state Senate in 1960, 1962, 1964, and 1966. In 1968, Jim entered the race for the post of Lieutenant Governor. During this period of time, the GOP convention delegates chose the candidate for Lieutenant Governor and the Governor and Lieutenant Governor ran separate races. In the fall of 1968 Jim defeated Democrat George Blue by a margin of 149,253-118,327 to become South Dakota's thirtieth Lieutenant Governor.

During his time as Lieutenant Governor, Jim began to make plans to run for national office. The year 1970 saw the retirement of the long-serving Congressman from South Dakota's West River Congressional district, E.Y. Berry, who had taken over the West River Congressional seat from Francis Case in 1950 when Case was elected to the U.S. Senate. Berry, in another sign of Lyman County's political prominence during this period, had started his legal career as a lawyer in Kennebec. Jim decided to run for Berry's House seat, but was defeated by a margin of 21,264-19,538 in the 1970 West River GOP primary by Black Hills native Fred Brady. Brady was defeated in the fall election by an upstart Democratic lawyer from Wood, South Dakota named James Abourezk, who was also a child of immigrant Lebanese peddlers who settled in the West River region of South Dakota. In 1972, Jim again ran for the GOP nomination for South Dakota's West River House seat, defeating Mike DeMersseman by a margin of 31-780-17,312. That fall, then Congressman Abourezk ran for the U.S. Senate, leaving open the West River House seat, which Jim won by defeating Pat McKeever, who he had coached in Legion baseball, by a margin of 79,546-65,415. Jim won re-election to the West River U.S. House seat in 1974, 1976, and 1978 while focusing much of his legislative energy on farm issues, fighting inflation, promoting balanced budgets, and advocating rural water systems and defense projects such as a B-1 bomber.

Jim's political career coincided with the rise of George McGovern. In 1956, the same year that Jim was elected to the state Senate from Kennebec, McGovern captured the East River U.S. House seat. In 1972, the year that Jim was first elected to the U.S. House, McGovern captured the Democratic presidential nomination while embracing a strongly liberal platform. Although they respected each other on personal level, Jim found McGovern's increasingly liberal views and activities to be out-of-step with Jim's Lyman County roots and South Dakota voters more generally. Despite McGovern's national stature and his large war chest, Jim decided to mount a challenge to McGovern and seek his Senate seat in 1980. Jim cemented his place in American history by defeating McGovern in the 1980 election, dealing the Democrats in South Dakota and the liberal cause nationally a major substantive and symbolic defeat and helping to usher in the Age of Reagan.

Jim served with distinction in the U.S. Senate and confirmed his skills as a legislator. He was known for diligently working on bills important to South Dakota and for his love of committee work and the legislative process. He was named to the Appropriations Committee and immediately became chairman of three subcommittees. Jim continued his work on farm and water issues and authored the first substantive bill to check federal deficits, which Senator Gramm of Texas would later describe as a forerunner of the Gramm-Rudman deficit control legislation.

Jim's legacy can be seen on multiple fronts. Through his long political tenure, Jim was known for his work as a political organizer and party booster. From his earliest years as a leader of the Young Republicans in Lyman County until his final years in the U.S. Senate, Jim constantly reached out to young people to bring them into the political process. Whenever he visited a town, he would be sure to organize meetings with and talk to young people about the importance of becoming involved in government. Jim helped to launch many careers.

Jim was also a people person and a joiner. Wherever he traveled, he knew people. He actively sought out people to talk to, groups to address, and organizations to join. His level of involvement in community organizations typifies the activism and civic spiritedness of many South Dakotans, who are known for their high levels of participation in community affairs. A Harvard political scientist determined in recent years that Dakotans have the highest levels of civic and community engagement, or "social capital," in the nation. Jim's civic activities included membership in the Methodist Church; serving as president of the Kennebec Jaycees; membership in the Elks, Masons, Order of the Easter Star, Consistory, American Legion, South Dakota Wheat Producers, South Dakota Stockgrowers, Farmers Union, Farm Bureau, Izaak Walton League, and the Nature Conservancy; and service as South Dakota Cancer Crusade Chairman and South Dakota Easter Seal Chairman.

From his earliest years, Jim also was a sports fanatic. In addition to coaching baseball, Jim attended hundreds high school sporting events, especially basketball and football games. In 1975, Jim watched a high school basketball game between Murdo and Lyman County which included Murdo freshman John Thune. The next day, Abdnor ribbed the freshman about missing one of his six free throws during the game and future political career was set in

motion. Jim was also known as a major booster and promoter of the Post 22 American Legion team during the years he lived in Rapid City.

In addition to his political victories, his legislative skills, and his love of people and sports, Jim should be remembered for representing the great class of people which Lyman County has produced over the past century. Lovingly referred to as the “Lyman County Mafia” by some, these small town South Dakotans from the Lyman County area went on to serve their home region and state with distinction. They include William Williamson (Congressman), E.Y. Berry (Congressman), A.C. Miller (Attorney General), M.Q. Sharpe (Governor), John Lindley (Lt. Governor), Clint Roberts (Congressman), Frank Brost (Governor’s chief of staff), John Jones (federal judge), Vern Larson (state treasurer), Bob Burns (Chairman of the South Dakota Republican Party), Glen Rhodes (Chairman of the South Dakota Republican Party), Art Junke (chief of staff to U.S. Senator Karl Mundt), Pat McKeever (judge), Alma Larsen (Secretary of State), Phil Hogen (U.S. Attorney), Roland Dolly, and others. Also, the Woster brothers (Kevin, Terry, and Jim), Gordon Garnos, and Noel Hamiel all became prominent reporters from this area. Jim’s political leadership and his affection for his Lyman County roots brought attention to the people of central South Dakota at a time when the state was becoming increasingly focused on the twin population centers near its Eastern and Western borders.

In 1986, Jim defeated two-term governor Bill Janklow in a primary challenge but lost his Senate seat that fall to U.S. Representative Tom Daschle. In 1987, President Reagan appointed Jim as the head of the Small Business Administration. The son of an immigrant peddler and small town merchant had taken command of an agency which focused on the interests of the nation’s small businesses. Murdo native John Thune, who Jim had watched play basketball for several years and then brought to Washington as a Senate staffer, also worked at the SBA with Jim. In 1996, Thune won South Dakota’s lone seat in the U.S. House relying, in part, on the old Abdnor network of friends and supporters. In 2004, Thune went on to defeat Senator Tom Daschle. From the victory dais early that morning, Thune said “it may have taken 18 years Jim, but we got your seat back!” In this moment and in the lives and memories of thousands of South Dakotans, the Abdnor memory lives on.

Abdnor’s Elections:

State Senator

1956- District 29 (Haakon, Jones, Lyman and Stanley counties)

Louie Tevault-2,662 James Abdnor-3,076

1958- District 29 (Haakon, Jones, Lyman and Stanley counties)

Martin Samuelson-2,470 James Abdnor-3,014

1960- District 29 (Haakon, Jones, Lyman and Stanley counties)

Alfred S Boe-2,577 James Abdnor-3,523

1962- District 29 (Haakon, Jones, Lyman and Stanley counties)
Leroy Hutchinson- 2,745 James Abdnor-2,954

Lieutenant Governor-1968

James Abdnor- 149,253 George Blue-118,327

United States House of Representatives – South Dakota Second District (West River)

1970 (GOP primary) Fred Brady- 21,264	James Abdnor-19,538
1972 (GOP primary) Abdnor- 31,780	Mike DeMersseman- 17,312
1972 James Abdnor-79,546	Pat McKeaver-65,415
1974 James Abdnor-88,746	Jack Weiland-42,119
1976 James Abdnor-99,601	Mickelson-42,968
1978 James Abdnor-70,780	Bob Samuelson-55,516

United States Senator

1980 James Abdnor-190,594	George McGovern-129,018	Wayne Peterson-7,866
1986 (GOP primary) James Abdnor-63,414	William Janklow-52,924	
1986 James Abdnor-143,173	Tom Daschle-152,657	

Abdnor Committee Assignments:

Senate committees, from Congressional Directory (1981, 1983, 1985):

Assignments to Senate Committees in EACH of above:

- Appropriations
- Environment and Public Works
- Joint Economic Committee

Additional Assignment listed in 1985 Directory:

Select Committee on Indian Affairs (along with Senators Andrews, Goldwater, Gorton, Murkowski, Melcher, Inouye, DeConcini, and Burdick)

House committees, from Congressional Directory (1973, 1975, 1977, 1979):

Assignments to House Committees in EACH of the above:

Public Works (beginning 1975, committee was called Public Works and Transportation)
Veterans Affairs

Additional Assignment in 1977 and 1979:

Select Committee on Aging