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## Backstory: The iron man of state politics

**Wisconsin Sen. Fred Risser has been a state legislator for 50 years, longer than any current lawmaker in the nation.**

**By Frank Bures** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

**MADISON, WIS.**

Fred Risser is showing off his canes at his new apartment in downtown Madison, Wis. He's got canes from all over the world, in all lengths and sizes. There is a camel-bone cane from Morocco. A cane with a knife in it. A cane carved in the shape of his favorite flower, the Lady Slipper. Mr. Risser has collected them, hundreds of them. But he doesn't use them. At 79, he doesn't need anything to support his 6 ft., 2 inch frame.

In fact, the man who is the longest serving state legislator in the United States is something of a dynamo. He walks a lot. He dances. He bikes 25 miles on his lunch break on trails around Madison. He takes no elevators. Instead, he lopes up the marble stairs to his capitol office, where he's sat in one legislative house or the other since 1957 – the year Dwight Eisenhower was president and Elvis Presley debuted "Jailhouse Rock."

But even though the stairs are the same, the place is different than when he made his first ascent half a century ago.

"Things have changed tremendously," says the soft-spoken president of the Wisconsin state Senate. "Legislators didn't have any offices or secretaries or stationery. Our office was our desk. There was only one woman in the legislature, out of 133. They didn't even have a women's washroom on the same floor as the chambers."

Things have changed, indeed. Back then, the cold war was just beginning to intensify as the Soviets launched Sputnik. Joseph McCarthy represented the state in the US Senate. The Brooklyn Dodgers were just moving to Los Angeles. The word "Beatnik" entered the vernacular in 1957, though Madison itself was still a decade away from its antiwar and counterculture upheaval.

All this has given Risser an institutional memory and sense of history that differentiates him from many who work under the capitol dome here. "[Risser] is able to take the long view in a way that a lot of people aren't," says Bill Lueders, news editor at Madison's Isthmus paper. He sees power in the legislature "in geologic terms."

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Risser is a tall man with thinning gray hair and a tight-cropped beard that give him the look of a genial grandfather, which he is, several times over. When he's not wearing his lycra cycling gear (he logged 100 miles on his 79th birthday – he wanted to bike his age but just kept going), he dresses in conservative suits and bright ties. During his tenure, he has served as Senate president four times, including again this year, as the parties have shifted power.

Risser, a Democrat, has been an unflagging liberal, reflecting the views of his district in Madison. He is not a firebrand, but is considered tenacious in fighting for causes he believes in. These include protecting abortion rights, regulating smoking, and securing funding for the state university system.

He sponsored one of the first gay rights bills in the country in 1982. A passionate champion of building preservation, he likes to point out – with notable irony – that the state is now demolishing buildings that he once voted to erect.

"One thing about Fred, he's been very consistent, even when the tides shifted right," says Jeff Mayers, president

of WisPolitics.com, a newsletter. "Because he represents a very liberal constituency, he's been able to maintain his principles, from the environment to education. He hasn't wavered."

More than anything, Risser has been a master of legislative rules. He decided to immerse himself in the minutiae of parliamentary procedure shortly after first being elected to the Senate in 1962 as a way to move up.

"I'm not the greatest orator, and I'm not the greatest backslapper," Risser says. "So when I started out, I made my expertise the rules."

His strategy worked. By 1966, he'd become the senate minority leader. He set to work messing with the GOP agenda, which they didn't always appreciate. Once, they disconnected the phone line at his Senate desk. Another time, a Republican member slammed Risser's telephone down in anger and broke his hand.

"He's really quite a remarkable legislator," says Brian Rude, who served as GOP Senate president when Risser was the minority leader. "A word that comes to mind for me is tenacious. When Fred got an issue, he would persist to try to get some action on it, and persist sometimes further than his minority status might indicate."

Risser became so adept at using the rules to thwart the opposition that he once inspired an unusual counterattack. "I argued so much against the rule changes the majority wanted, they just said, 'We don't need rules,' " he says. "So they operated for two years without rules."

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Risser grew up on farmland his family owned on the shore of Madison's Lake Mendota. He knew what he was going to do, as he puts it, "from the time I knew anything." Politics was in his DNA. His great-grandfather, Col. Clement Warner, served in the state Assembly. His father was a lawyer and state lawmaker, whom Risser campaigned for by nailing posters to trees.

By the time Risser entered politics, he was the fourth generation in his family to represent Madison in the state legislature – each under a different party label (Unionist, Republican, Progressive, and now Democrat). "My ancestors have been consistent," he says. "But the parties have changed their philosophy."

Risser served in the Navy in World War II. Afterward, he attended Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., and ran cross-country ("I never finished first, but I never finished last," he says).

He got a law degree from the University of Oregon in Eugene before returning to Madison in 1952. A few years later, he worked to get his own representative, Ivan Nestingen, elected mayor of Madison. He had a good reason. "I knew I wanted to run for his seat," he says. "No one else knew it, but I knew it."

Risser won the seat in 1956, earning \$200 a month. He was elected to the Senate six years later. While a dogged Democrat and shogun of parliamentary maneuvering, he has become an elder statesman in recent years.

"One thing he was able to do was bring some maturity to the Senate," says Joe Strohl, a former Democratic Senate leader. "When I was majority leader, we thought we could cut some corners and move things quickly.... But Fred always warned that if we do that, when the Republicans take over, they can do the same thing."

Yes, things have changed today. Women legislators now have bathrooms on the capitol's second floor. Senators now have offices. Smoking is on the verge of being banned in public buildings statewide – largely because of Risser. And there is an enormous amount of money in politics, something he would like to change.

"My father always said, 'Never rely on a political income for your living,' " Risser says. "That's why I always kept my law practice going."

Personally, things have changed for Risser, too. He and his wife recently sold off the old home on Risser Road and moved into an apartment with a view of the capitol. Looking out at the building he's worked in for 50 years, he won't rule out another run when his term is up in two years. But then, he won't rule out anything. "You only live once," he says.

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