

Aging Lifestyles: Bob Ball's service still benefits millions

by Joe_Volz

If you are one of the 37 million Americans who receive Social Security benefits, take a moment out today to remember the man who played such a towering role in running the program for so long - "Mr. Social Security," Bob Ball.

Robert M. Ball, 93, an affable, self-effacing man, who kept working to strengthen the system right up to the end of his life, died recently at a Mitchellville, Md., retirement community just outside of Washington.

Bob literally spent his entire life battling for the government pension plan, which he called "the nation's most effective anti-poverty program."

He signed up as a staffer in 1939, just four years after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched Social Security in the midst of the Depression, and worked his way up through the ranks to serve as the commissioner for 20 years under three Presidents - John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. But make no mistake about it; Bob was not some bureaucratic drone. He was an innovative, creative man, yet hardly known outside of the nation's capital. American Scholar magazine called him Social Security's "biggest thinker and undisputed spiritual leader."

And you can see why. In 1983, when Social Security got into big fiscal trouble because people were living longer - much longer than the actuaries had anticipated a half-century earlier - Bob, by then a retiree himself, stepped in to help rescue the program.

Just a few months ago, when Social Security was floundering again, Bob wrote a piece in The Washington Post offering suggestions to keep the program solvent. He proposed raising the cap on those who paid Social Security taxes and taking a slightly more aggressive investment stance.

Before Social Security, millions had no pension at all. Bob knew what poverty could do. He had grown up in the Depression. When he finished graduate school at the height of the Depression, no one was knocking down the door for his services.

He talked about those dire years one day when I visited him at his modest brick rancher perched on a knoll in Alexandria, Va., where he lived for so many years. Bob, normally mild-mannered, could turn livid when he thought of those who wanted to privatize the government program. Bob figured that would wreck it. On the summer afternoon I spent chatting with Bob, he remembered the 1930s when the unemployment rate hit 25 percent. Bob said the main reason he went to graduate school was because "I figured I would be better off with a grant to attend college than being unemployed."

That decision to take economics courses at Wesleyan University was a lucky break, not only for Bob but the nation as well. A professor told him about a fledgling New Deal agency that had started just a few years before. So, one day, almost 70 years ago, Bob showed up for work in the Newark, N.J., office of Social Security.

Bob's early career was a bit different from what a college grad might expect today. His salary was \$1,620 a year and he made house calls, visiting beneficiaries who were too sick to come to the office.

Before long, Bob was running the Social Security office in a fancy New Jersey suburb, Montclair, later moving on to grimy Bayonne.

"My job was so important," he said, "that when I left, they closed that office."

That was the last time Bob closed an office. He arrived at Social Security headquarters in Baltimore in 1942 and by 1962, had become the commissioner.

In 1986, Bob formed the National Academy of Social Insurance to keep the education campaign going. Lawrence Thompson, the current chairman of the group says, "No individual has done more to advance American social insurance programs than Robert Ball."

E-mail Joe Volz at volzjoe2003@yahoo.com, or write to 2528 Five Shillings Road, Frederick, MD 21701.

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