

S.D. Loses McGovern, Other Leaders In 2012

BY AMBER HUNT
Associated Press

SIoux FALLS — In South Dakota, 2012 may be remembered for lives lost — some of the state's greatest politicians passed, along with one of the nation's most famous American Indian activists.

The state also saw two executions, tripling the number since the federal government lifted its ban on executions in 1976. With one execution in 2007, the total now stands at 18 in the state or Dakota Territory since 1877.

Here's a look at the state's biggest stories of the year, as chosen by the newspaper and broadcast members of The Associated Press:

1. THE EXECUTION OF DONALD MOELLER

Becky O'Connell was just 9 years old when she left her Sioux Falls home to go to the corner store on an errand. She never returned.

The discovery of her body the next morning in a secluded area near the Big Sioux River forever altered the small-town feel of South Dakota's largest city. Convicted at two trials in 1992 and 1997, Moeller maintained his innocence for more than 20 years. Then this year, he told a judge that he indeed kidnapped, raped and stabbed the girl to death. "I killed. I deserve to be killed," Moeller told a judge in July. Four months later, he was put to death by lethal injection in the South Dakota Correctional Facility.



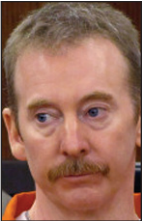
Moeller

2. SOUTH DAKOTA DEALS WITH DROUGHT.

After record-setting flooding in 2011, South Dakota found itself struggling this year with drought. An unusually mild winter and dry spring and summer led to a severe drought that eventually spread over two-thirds of the nation. Crops wilted, and farmers scrambled to find feed for their livestock as rangelands and pastures dried up. Despite recent storms, the state remains in a drought that experts say is likely to linger at least until next spring.

3. THE EXECUTION OF ERIC ROBERT.

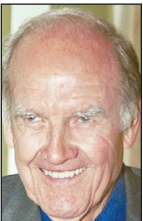
Two weeks before Moeller died, Eric Robert was executed for the death of prison guard Ronald "R.J." Johnson during a failed escape in April 2011. Robert and another inmate, Rodney Berget, attacked Johnson and beat him to death. Then Robert donned Jackson's uniform and attempted to push Berget, hidden inside a box, outside a prison gate. The plan failed, and Robert expedited his own death by attempting to waive the state's usually mandatory review of death penalty cases. He sealed his fate by assuring a judge that if allowed to live, he would kill again. He received a lethal injection on Oct. 15.



Robert

4. FORMER SEN. GEORGE MCGOVERN DIES.

George McGovern made history in 1972 when he won the Democratic nomination for the nation's highest office but suffered a landslide defeat against incumbent President Richard Nixon. His October death at age 90, just weeks before the general election, briefly united Democratic President Barack Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney, who both praised him as a statesman. Vice President Joe Biden delivered a stirring tribute during the first of two Sioux Falls services, calling McGovern the "father of the modern Democratic Party" and positing that the nation would have been better off if he'd been elected.



McGovern

5. FORMER GOV. BILL JANKLOW DIES.

A colorful figure who dominated South Dakota politics for more than a quarter century, Bill Janklow announced in late 2011 that he was suffering from inoperable brain cancer. He died in January at age 72, and hundreds gathered to mourn the man who served at various points as state attorney general, governor and congressman. Though Janklow was accused of running roughshod over his opponents, even his enemies acknowledged the Republican had a talent for getting things done.



Janklow

6. FORMER U.S. SEN. JIM ABDNOR DIES.

Jim Abdnor, who gained national fame as the Republican who ousted George McGovern from the U.S. Senate, died in May, just months before his one-time adversary. Abdnor, 89, was best known in his home state as a farmer-turned-politician who loved talking with people. A World War II veteran, he spent 30 years in public service after working as a teacher and coach.



Abdnor

7. DARK MATTER LAB OPENS IN LEAD.

The world's most sensitive dark matter detector opened in May in a former gold mine nestled in the South Dakota's Black Hills. Scientists working there hope to soon detect dark matter — an elusive substance that scientists believe makes up about 25 percent of the universe. They know it's there by its gravitational pull, but unlike regular matter and antimatter, it's so far undetectable. Why search in South Dakota? Rick Gaitskell, a Brown University scientist working on the Large Underground Xenon experiment in Lead, said being nearly a mile underground in the shuttered Homestake Gold Mine will help shield the detector from pesky cosmic radiation that makes it impossible to detect above ground.

8. NATIVE AMERICAN ACTOR AND ACTIVIST RUSSELL MEANS DIES.

Russell Means, who once belonged to the American Indian Movement and continued working as one of the most visible Native

American activists, died from throat cancer in October at age 72. Means had helped lead the 1973 uprising at Wounded Knee in South Dakota — a bloody confrontation that raised America's awareness about the struggles of American Indians and gave rise to a wider protest movement that lasted the rest of the decade. Means also was an actor, appearing in such films as "The Last of the Mohicans."



Means

9. SIOUX TRIBES BUY BLACK HILLS LAND.

Several Sioux tribes worked together to buy land in the Black Hills that many members consider sacred. With the help of celebrities including P. Diddy, Ezra Miller and Bette Midler, the tribes raised \$9 million to buy the land known as Pe' Sla. The fundraising effort was controversial because some Sioux

tribes felt the land was rightfully theirs and they shouldn't have to buy it. An 1868 treaty set aside the Black Hills and other land for the Sioux, but Congress passed a law nine years later seizing the land after the discovery of gold in western South Dakota.

10. "PINK SLIME" LABEL PROMPTS LAWSUIT.

Sales dropped at Beef Products Inc. of Dakota Dunes after an ABC News report popularized the term "pink slime" for what the beef industry said was better described as lean, finely textured beef. Beef Products laid off about 750 workers nationally and then sued ABC for \$1.2 billion for alleged defamation. Beef Products attorney Dan Webb said the ABC story led viewers to "believe that our lean beef is not beef at all — that it's an unhealthy pink slime, unsafe for public consumption, and that somehow it got hidden in the meat." ABC stood by its report and said the lawsuit was without merit.

Dr. David V. Wagner

Matt Rumsey

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