

# Stanley H. Biber, 82, Surgeon Among First to Do Sex Changes

By MARGALIT FOX

Stanley H. Biber, a small-town Colorado doctor who for decades was internationally renowned as the dean of sex-change surgery, died on Monday at a hospital in Pueblo. He was 82 and lived in Hoehne, Colo.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, said his secretary, Marie Pacino.

A former Army surgeon, Dr. Biber (pronounced BYE-ber) was among the first doctors in the United States to perform sex changes and for years was one of only a handful to offer them. He became one of the country's most prolific providers of the operation, which, it was estimated, he performed more than 4,000 times beginning in 1969.

By now, about 30,000 Americans have undergone sex-change surgery, according to the International Foundation for Gender Education, an advocacy group in Waltham, Mass.

During the 1970's, 80's and early 90's, Trinidad, Colo., where Dr. Biber practiced, was an unlikely mecca for men and women who sought to change their sex. Featured frequently on television and in newspapers, the doctor's work earned the town (current population 9,078) a reputation as "the sex-change capital of the world."

If some local residents bristled at the title, many others embraced Dr. Biber and his work. Few disputed its quality. Some expressed pride in the service he performed. And no one doubted the economic benefit to Trinidad, which was a down-at-the-heels former coal-mining town when the doctor moved there in the mid-1950's.

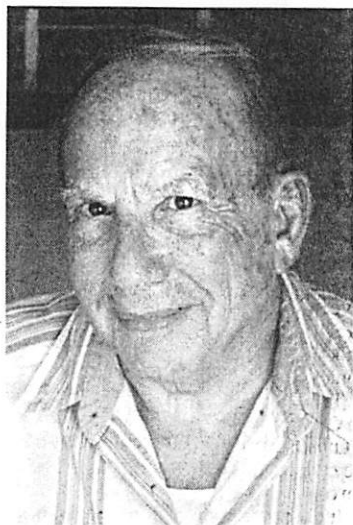
"It's a boon to business here," Dr. Biber told *The New York Times* in 1998. "They come with families, they stay in the hotels, they eat in the restaurants, they buy at the florists."

Once a rabbinical student, Dr. Biber took to the Old West ethic of Trinidad, near the New Mexico border in southern Colorado. He favored blue jeans, silver belt buckles and pickup trucks. He owned a ranch, was once a county commissioner and to the end of his life rode in cattle drives.

Throughout his career, he continued his work as a general practitioner, performing tonsillectomies, delivering babies and setting bones, sometimes reading X-rays at his kitchen table when patients called on him at night.

Stanley Harold Biber was born on May 4, 1923, in Des Moines. After graduating from high school at 16, he enrolled in a yeshiva in Chicago, intending to become a rabbi. He interrupted his studies to work for the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, during World War II. After the war, he enrolled at the University of Iowa, where he earned a medical degree in 1948.

After a residency in the Panama Canal Zone, Dr. Biber joined the Army, where he was the chief surgeon of a MASH unit in the Korean War. He finished his service at what is now Fort Carson, in Colorado, and in 1954 took a job at a United Mine Workers clinic in Trinidad. He planned to stay a year or two.



Steve Northup, 1998

Stanley H. Biber

For the next 15 years, Dr. Biber had a typical small-town practice, working at Trinidad's only hospital, Mount San Rafael. In 1969, a friend went to his office. She was a social worker who admired Dr. Biber's skill in repairing the harelips of children she had referred to him. She asked if he would perform an operation on her.

"Well, of course," Dr. Biber replied. "What do you want done?"

"I'm a transsexual," she said.

"What's that?" Dr. Biber asked her. He learned that his friend was a man living as a woman.

Not even two decades had passed since a G.I. from the Bronx named George Jorgensen became Christine Jorgensen in Denmark, in 1952. Few surgeons in the United States had

**A doctor who made a  
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ever seen a sex-change operation, much less performed one. But Dr. Biber was young and sure of his surgical prowess. In Korea, he had once performed 37 operations in a row before passing out from exhaustion.

Working from a set of hand-drawn diagrams he obtained from the Johns Hopkins University hospital, he performed the operation.

"It looked like hell," he told *The Rocky Mountain News* in 2004. "It was terrible. But it functioned, and she was very happy with it because it functioned."

Word got around, and soon other transsexuals went to Trinidad. Dr. Biber obliged, but quietly at first, unsure of the reaction by Mount San Rafael. He stored the charts of his sex-change patients in the hospital safe.

Eventually realizing that he needed the hospital's support, and the town's as well, Dr. Biber gave a series of lectures to local leaders on what is now called gender dysphoria, the feeling that one is trapped in a body of the wrong sex. Though he was sometimes a target of demonstrations by conservative groups over the years, he won over enough people in Trinidad that his work became an accepted part of life there.

Most of Dr. Biber's patients were men seeking to become women, though he also performed female-to-male sex changes. His patients came from all over the world and from all walks of life. There were three brothers who became three sisters. There were an 84-year-old train engineer, a 250-pound linebacker and an American Indian medicine man, all of whom emerged as women.

"Movie stars, judges, mayors — everything," Dr. Biber told *Denver Westword*, an alternative weekly newspaper, in 1998. "I had everything except a president of the United States."

By the mid-1990's, an increasing number of surgeons in the United States and abroad were providing sex-change operations. In 2003, after his age made malpractice insurance prohibitive, Dr. Biber stopped performing surgery altogether. He maintained a small general practice until his death, taking care, as he told an interviewer, of "friends who won't sue me."

Dr. Biber was divorced several times. He is survived by his wife, Mary Lee, whom he married in February; seven children, Prabhu Nam Kaur Khalsa of San Leandro, Calif.; Robert John, of Lee's Summit, Mo.; Patricia Philyaw, also of Lee's Summit; Debbie Ramsey of Denton, Tex.; David, of Colorado Springs; John, of Trinidad; and Terri Biber of Overland Park, Kan.; seven stepchildren; and 22 grandchildren.

In the years after his friend sat in his office, Dr. Biber refined sex-change surgery into something of which he was proud, training younger surgeons in the technique. His practice has been taken over by a protégée, Dr. Marci Bowers, who herself made the transition from male to female several years ago.

"We turn out a real good product," Dr. Biber told *The Rocky Mountain News* in 2004. "I have one former patient, a man who became a woman and is now married to a gynecologist. Her husband doesn't know."