

Retired legislator Aubrey Dirlam dies at 81

By David Chanen
Staff Writer

Aubrey Dirlam, 81, one of the leading conservative voices at the State Capitol during his 34 years as a Republican legislator, died of Alzheimer's disease Saturday at Wood Dale Nursing Home in Redwood Falls, Minn.

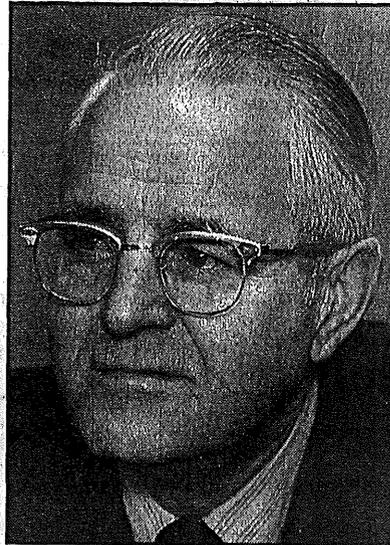
Former legislator Terry Dempsey, IR-New Ulm, said Dirlam was an evenhanded, fair and effective political leader.

"Aubrey was always referred to as kind of an icon," he said. "He was the kind of person that when you came into the Legislature, you were told to fashion yourself after him."

Dirlam was elected to the House in 1940 and served 17 consecutive terms as representative for Redwood Falls. Before he was elected he got a job as a janitor at the Capitol so he could watch how the Legislature operated.

He recalled in the early days of his legislative career that he would knock on a door to ask for a vote and "Someone would tell me I was too young to be running for office."

Dirlam was chosen speaker of the House in 1971. He openly fought with newly elected DFL Gov. Wendell Anderson, who he believed wanted more executive control over the Legislature and was not as fiscally



Aubrey Dirlam served 17 consecutive terms in the state Legislature.

conservative as Dirlam. He also refused to allow Anderson to speak to a joint session of the Legislature.

In 1972 Dirlam ousted Ernie Lindstrom as majority leader after intraparty struggles over campaign financing in the conservative House caucus. That same year the DFL Party gained control of the House, and Dirlam became minority leader.

As speaker, he was known to have a fast gavel to end meaningless debates. In a poll of legislators he was given an "excellent" job rating and

was rated as having leadership skills "depending on a pleasant personality and gentle persuasion than rousing floor speeches to get cooperation."

Dirlam wrote several transportation, highway and road improvement bills. He lobbied for improvements in rural education, health and employment opportunities and was instrumental in bringing Southwest State University to Marshall, Minn.

His most well-known piece of legislation was the "flexible session" concept, a constitutional amendment that made it possible for the Legislature to allocate its meeting days over both years of the biennium instead of meeting every other year. He headed several committees and was president of the National Conference of State Legislative Leaders.

When Dirlam retired in 1975 he said that the Legislature "was at a point where we should make a decision either to become practically a full-time Legislature or remain a so-called citizen part-time Legislature."

He was born in Panora, Iowa, and was a longtime farmer in Redwood Falls. He was a trustee of the First United Methodist Church in Redwood Falls, a member of the Redwood Falls school board and a board member of Redwood Falls Elevator and Minnesota Valley Bank, and a Paul Harris Fellow Rotarian. A trail is named in his honor at Ramsey Park in Redwood Falls.

Dirlam is survived by his wife, Hazelle; two sons, Gordon, of Bloomington, and Kenneth, of New Ulm, Minn.; a sister, Bertha Alexander, of Redwood Falls, and a brother, Charles, of Eugene, Ore.

Services will be held at 2 p.m. Tuesday at First United Methodist Church in Redwood Falls. Visitation will be held from 4 to 8 p.m. today and 8 a.m. to noon Tuesday at the Nelson Funeral Home, Redwood Falls, and one hour before the service.