
State legislator Willard Munger, environmental activist, dies

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State Rep. Willard Munger, who had a hand in creating everything from the lottery-financed Environmental Trust Fund to the state's bicycle-trail system, died Sunday at Duluth's St. Mary's Hospital, leaving a 43-year public record of extraordinary environmental activism. The Duluth DFLer was 88.

"He was an ardent environmentalist before there was Earth Day," said former state Sen. Gene Merriam. "He was quite courageous and visionary." The DFLer was Munger's counterpart for six years as chairman of



Willard Munger, the oldest lawmaker in Minnesota history, died at 88.

the Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

"If you're going to pick the most influential person in terms of environmental protection in Minnesota over the past 50 years, his name would certainly come to mind," said Minneapolis lawyer Charles Dayton.

MUNGER continues on A6:
— Funeral Wednesday in Duluth.

MUNGER from A1

Dayton is a prominent representative of environmental groups.

Munger, nicknamed "Mr. Environment," served his west Duluth district in the Minnesota Legislature for 43 years, starting in 1954, with only one two-year interruption, which occurred when he ran unsuccessfully for the state Senate in 1964.

Upon turning 87, he became the oldest legislator in state history; he also was the longest-serving House member. Three former senators — Carl M. Iverson, Anton J. Rockne and Donald O. Wright — share the legislative service record of 44 years.

After his liver cancer was diagnosed in February, Munger kept up his work at the Capitol, sometimes using a motorized cart to help him make his rounds. Up until his death, he planned to seek another term in 2000.

Munger sponsored or advocated nearly every piece of legislation related to the environment in Minnesota during the last half of the century.

His causes included the restrictions on the pesticide DDT in 1969 — Minnesota was the first state to legislate it — and establishing the Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund in 1990, in which about 7 cents of every dollar spent on lottery tickets is set aside to protect and restore natural resources. He was the longtime chairman of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee, who presided over what Dayton called "a flood of legislation," in the early '70s.

"Minnesota's very different today as a result of those years," said Jackie Rosholt, who worked as Munger's committee administrator from 1973 to 1985.

She added that the Environmental Trust Fund was Munger's proudest achievement and that there's some talk among environmental groups that the fund should be named in his honor.

Munger already has his name on the 69-mile bicycle trail from Duluth to Hinckley, Minn. He advocated converting abandoned railroad ways to state trails, a stance Merriam recalls as being nearly as unpopular as Munger's efforts to put more northern Minnesota land into the public hands.

"He didn't care how popular things were if he thought he was right," Merriam said.

Munger could see some of his handiwork from his house on the St. Louis River. The river underwent a \$115 million cleanup.

"He loved to get people there because he wanted them to see how the river had come back," Merriam said. "When he came to the Legislature in 1954, it was basically an industrial sewer."

Gov. Jesse Ventura's office said in a statement: "The governor and First Lady are saddened by the passing of Rep. Willard Munger and offer their sympathy and condolences to the Munger family and recognize Rep. Munger's many years of dedicated service to the people of Minnesota."

Munger planned to retire in 1998 but reconsidered when his wife of 33 years, Frances, died in 1997 at age 81. "I might as well be in the Legislature, making some accomplishments, rather than sit around and be sad," he told the Duluth News-Tribune at the time. The couple were married in 1964 after their first spouses died.

"People come and go from the Legislature and burn out, but Willard never does," Mike Jaros, a fellow DFL legislator from Duluth, said earlier this year. "He keeps going because he believes in what he's doing. He's a true statesman who has always worried more about others than himself."

Deep political roots

Munger's life in public service intersected many of the major political movements, events and people in 20th-century Minnesota.

He grew up on a farm in Otter Tail County. He went with his father, Harry, on organizing trips for the Nonpartisan League, a populist, agrarian movement headed by A.C. Townley.

"He went through that whole Depression, Nonpartisan League, farmer unrest stuff," said Craig Grau, a political science professor at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. "Someone said they used to call Willard 'Little A.C.'"

His love of nature was nurtured on hikes with his grandfather, Lyman Munger, a socialist and naturalist who compared logging companies to locusts and told his grandson that only strict laws could preserve the land and water.

In the pre-DFL days of 1934, he ran unsuccessfully for the Legislature as a Farmer-Labor candidate, then held patronage jobs in

the late 1930s as state grain, fruit and vegetable inspector under Farmer-Labor governors Floyd B. Olson and Elmer Benson.

Those jobs required him to move to Duluth, a port for ships carrying the commodities he inspected. He helped build ships in the Duluth-Superior shipyards during World War II, and he owned and operated a grocery and gas station, and later a motel and coffee shop, all in the western Duluth neighborhood that became part of his legislative district.

At the urging of his first wife, Martha, he ran again for a seat in the Legislature in 1952, but lost.

Built a legacy

Though jobs nearly always topped the environment on the scale of issues in Munger's blue-collar industrial district, his constituents allowed him his activism, though he occasionally paid a price for it.

In the 1970s he sided with those who wanted Reserve Mining Co. to stop dumping taconite tailings in Lake Superior, at the possible cost of hundreds of jobs.

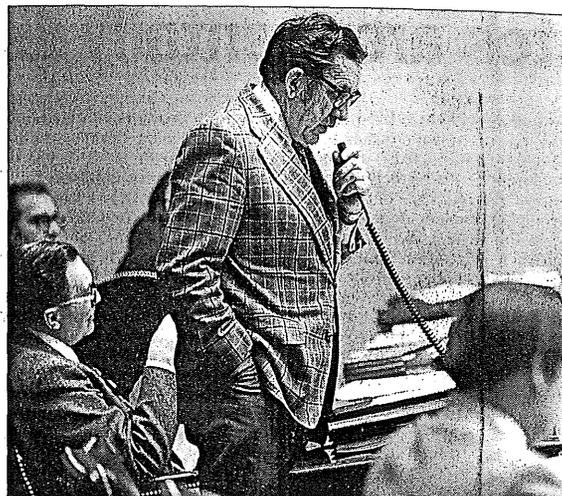
During that battle, two men with ballpeen hammers visited the Willard Motel and went to work on the windows in the motel's coffee shop.

Stories abound of legislators crossing party lines to join ranks, trade favors or maintain friendships with Munger. His friends say the allure wasn't his charisma, of which he had little, but rather from his hard work, good heart and often-endearing quirks.

His personal traits — mumbling, frequently garbled syntax, homespun sense of humor and outspoken feistiness — became legislative legend.

An example was Munger's 1994 floor debate with Sen. Steve Novak, a New Brighton DFLer, over whether radioactive waste should be stored at the Prairie Island plant in Red Wing. Novak, then 44, suggested that Munger's stance must mean he wanted to close the plant and idle 500 employees.

"You quit saying that!" Munger said. "I may be 83, but I can still



Star Tribune file photo by John Croft

Willard Munger in 1981. Rep. Mike Jaros, DFL-Duluth, said Munger was "a true statesman who has always worried more about others than himself."

kick your ass!" Colleagues gave him boxing gloves to hang in his office and started calling him "Kid Munger."

Munger always had preached that in the long run environmental protection created jobs, not destroyed them. Some would say he'd been around long enough to know.

"I was sent to the Capitol as a green activist thinking I knew something about the environment, and when I got there I found out Willard had invented it," said Diane Jensen, who worked around Munger for 13 years as a lobbyist for Cleanwater Action.

"My gosh," Jensen said earlier this year. "Willard went from an era when we thought groundwater was impervious to an era when we understand how vulnerable it is. From an era of open burning and no emissions standards to an era of reduction strategies."

"I used to be a kook environmentalist," Munger said in 1989. "Now, suddenly, I'm a respectable kook."

Saturday brain trust

When he wasn't debating is-

suces at the Capitol, Munger exchanged ideas with friends who gathered Saturday mornings at the Willard Motel coffee shop.

"The guy's got a mind that never stops," Alden Lind, a well-known conservationist who was a regular, said this year.

"He liked an audience to bounce ideas off of. He would cook breakfast for us and never take any money for it. Often, it was educational. [Prof. George] Rip Rapp from UMD would come out and talk about chemistry or his archaeological digs."

Those who knew him best said that love for learning and doing was Munger's fountain of youth, a well of strength that enabled him to play a major role in shaping and redefining Minnesota's values for almost 50 years.

"Willard has left a mark," Prof. Grau said. "He's left the place much better than how he found it."

Munger is survived by a son, Willard Jr., a daughter Patricia Lehr, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Visitation will be held from 5 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Duluth. Services will be held at 11 a.m. Wednesday at the church.

— *The Associated Press contributed to this report.*