

Like father, like son/daughter

Legislative service is family affair for six members

By RUTH DUNN

Six current representatives followed in their fathers' footsteps right up the steps of the State Capitol and into the House chamber.

These sons and daughters of former House members come from families where current events were a main course of dinner table conversation and public service was a priority.

"All children are affected by what their parents do," said Rep. Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley), whose father, Willis, served in the House from the time his son was six until he was out of high school. His father's service sparked an interest in the Legislature in young Eken who knew early on that he wanted to do what his dad was doing. "I looked up to him. I saw he made a difference and made the state a better place to raise a family," he said.

Not only did Rep. Peter Nelson (R-Lindstrom) follow his dad, Howard, into the House, but he also joined him in the family business, a meat processing shop. Nelson said it was natural for him to become involved in his community because his parents had been involved in everything from the Masonic Lodge and the PTA to their church. Nelson's community service then led him to the House just as it had for his father.

"I grew up with a positive image of public service and a ringside view of what good can be done," says Rep. Ron Latz (DFL-St. Louis Park). He was involved in campaigning since he could walk and has vivid memories of riding in a converted milk truck that his father, Robert, used on the campaign trail. Besides a love of the Legislature, Latz and his father are

In a 1976 family campaign photo, Rep. Kent Eken, right, who is currently serving in the House, was 12 years old with brother, Lee, left; father, then-Rep. Willis Eken; mother, Betty Eken, and brother Loren. Twenty-six years later, the youngest Eken was elected to the House.

Submitted photo



attorneys who share a law practice. "Public service was held up as an admirable profession in my family," said Rep. Katie Sieben (DFL-Newport), who remembers campaigning door-to-door in a stroller. She was born while her father, Mike, was serving in the House. Her uncle, Harry, was also in the House, including a stint as speaker from 1981-84. Of her father's three children, she was always the most interested

in helping him campaign for himself or for others. No one was surprised when she first decided to run for the House at age 24 since her father had been elected when he was 25. "My father and uncle warned me that serving in the Legislature is a lot of work. They said it would have to be something I really wanted to do," she said.

The Peterson family may be setting a House record. The third generation of the family Rep. Aaron Peterson (DFL-Madison), remembers running around the Capitol when he was a child and sitting on the House floor with

his father, Doug. His grandfather, Harry, also served. All three are "prairie populists, cut out of the same cloth," says Peterson. Half of the voters in his district are over age 55 so a good percentage of them had a chance to vote for each Peterson, who all represented Madison, including the farm that has been in the family since the 1930s.

Nelson said his dad's campaigns were different from his. "There was not as much door-to-door and not as many yard signs," he said. His dad campaigned at auctions and church functions and hung posters in businesses. His father, now age 92, still has a strong interest in the Legislature. He avidly watches House Television and breaks only for walks. Nelson and his father share their interest in politics with discussions every Sunday after church.

Eken and his father share a top priority: education.

the family tradition and run for the House? "That's totally up to them. It has rewards, but also frustrations," he said. Campaigns have become more brutal and also more expensive, he adds.

Peterson's father also takes an interest in his son's political life. "He gives good advice but sometimes I have to

each other at the Capitol because the elder Peterson is president of the Minnesota Farmers Union and is here to lobby for bills.

Latz's father pounded lawn signs for him and came up with ideas for campaign literature. "He taught me that credibility is the most important currency here," said Latz.

The elder Latz is a good strategist, says his son. "He's been through it, he understands how the process works. He has lots of ideas for legislation and is a good reference point."

Will there be a third generation of the Latz family in the Legislature? The answer is yes based on a photo of Latz and his 6-year-old son, who he refers to as his chief political advisor, which was recently published in *Session Weekly*.

Nelson's two grown sons — one a mortgage banker and the other an attorney — have never said they want to run. "But like me, they love engaging in a discussion of current events," said Nelson, who adds he wouldn't be surprised if one or both decides to run for office sometime.

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A House full

Current members and their fathers who have served

Rep. Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley) and his father, Willis

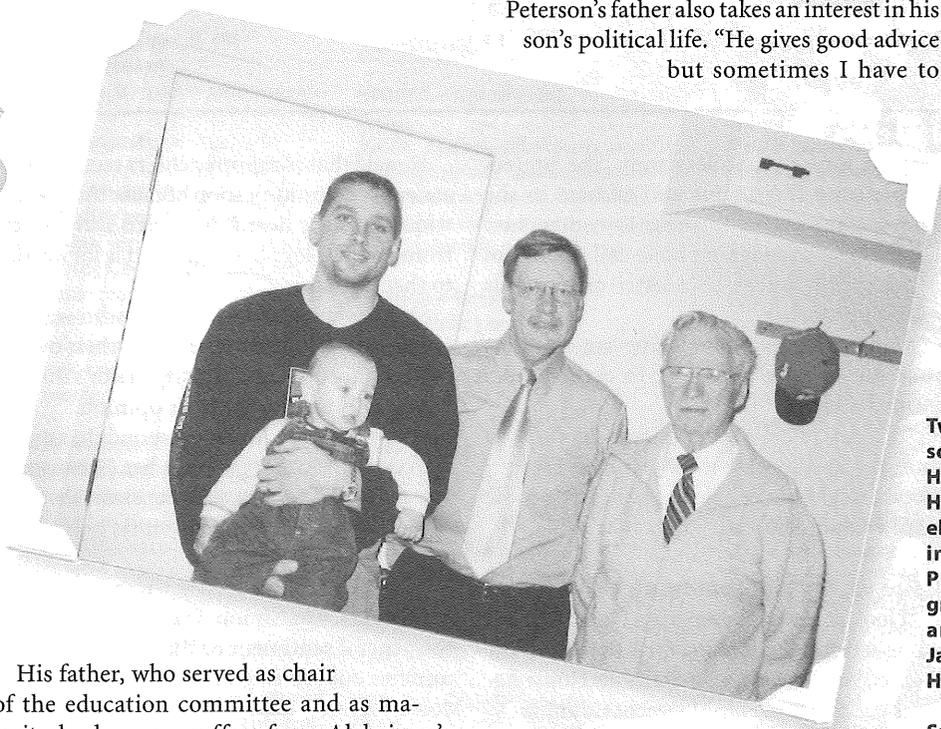
Rep. Peter Nelson (R-Lindstrom) and his dad, Howard

Rep. Ron Latz (DFL-St. Louis Park) and his father, Robert

Rep. Katie Sieben (DFL-Newport), her father, Mike

Rep. Aaron Peterson (DFL-Madison), his father, Doug

Rep. Barb Sykora (R-Excelsior), her father, John Zwach



His father, who served as chair of the education committee and as majority leader, now suffers from Alzheimer's disease. His father's illness was a motivating factor in Eken's decision to return to the family farm and run for office. During Eken's first term, his father came to visit the House and received a warm greeting during a House session. Will any of Eken's four children follow

remind him, "That's my name on the signs," said Peterson. His father's advice was "Knock on doors until you can't stand it" and "Work harder than the other guy." They even shared a campaign manager. These days, father and son often see