

Charlie Berg STATE SENATOR, FARMER, RANCHER

He changed parties, not philosophies



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By PAUL WALSH
pwalsh@startribune.com

Charlie Berg was proud of his philosophically consistent voting record and his inconsistent party affiliation, having hopped from one to another during more than a quarter century in the state Senate.

Berg, a grain farmer and cattleman from the Chokio area whose roots from birth remained in west-central Minnesota, died Jan. 22 at a Minneapolis hospital following a heart attack and stroke. He was 86.

In a farewell ceremony for him and several other senators during the waning moments of the chamber's 2002 session, Berg said, "I never thought I'd be here this long. And sometimes I wondered if I should have stayed this long."

His closing line further validated his reputation for candor and a caustic wit: "I'm going to miss some of you."

While his political affiliations ran the gamut, he considered himself solidly conservative. He opposed abortion, spoke in defense of schoolchildren being required to say the Pledge of Allegiance and favored the death penalty. Berg said he felt most proud of his work shaping environmental and agricultural policy.

Just as Berg was leaving elective office, one of his sons, Colin, announced he was running for the state House from Olivia. Colin Berg assured voters that he too was "an independent thinker" but a little softer around the edges.

"As far as curmudgeon, no," said Colin Berg, who fell short in two races. "I'm a lot easier to get along with."

The elder Berg's sharp tongue at times got him in hot water, such as in 1993, when he contended that some of his fellow senators "were bought off" by special interests representing American Indians as they voted against a bill he co-sponsored that would have allowed video gambling machines in bars. Colleagues signed a short-lived ethics complaint against Berg.

"He was Jesse Ventura a long time before Jesse Ventura was Jesse Ventura," said Berg's oldest of seven children, Charles Jr., comparing their similar think-it, say-it approach. "They were of the same cloth. Whatever Dad felt like saying, he said."

Charlie Berg was first elected as an independent in 1972, then defeated in 1976. He was elected in 1980 as a Republican. He then ran as a DFLer in 1986 and then as an independent in 1996. In 2000, he ran as a Republican again.

In 2002, he decided not to challenge Sen. Dallas Sams, DFL-Staples, in a redrawn district, though adding that the realignment was not a factor in calling it a career.

"I was elected as an independent, a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, and a Republican again, in that order, and my voting record never changed," he said at the time.

Away from the Capitol, the longtime legislator's passions included hunting and fishing, with the latter testing his skills as a rationalizer.

Charles Jr. chuckled recalling his father's nimble explanation for why he had a plaque up in the basement with four big walleye on it, all of them pulled within hours from a western Minnesota

lake during a post-retirement fishing expedition. The daily limit for such sizable catches at the time was only one.

"I started at 10 at night and fished until 2 in the morning," the younger Berg recalled his father saying.

Pointing out that the explanation only accounted for two of the four walleye, Charles Sr. continued, "Your mother was sitting in the car."

The son added, "My mother had no recollection."

Born in Graceville, Minn., on Oct. 15, 1927, Charles A. Berg attended a country school in Traverse County and graduated from West Central School of Agriculture in Morris in 1945.

Following graduation, he farmed with his father and brother. Berg married Carol Lamb in 1948, and the two lived on a farm they bought from his grandfather.

Berg was active in the Minnesota Cattlemen's Association, serving as its president and on the national board of directors. He also served on his Church Council and as a Lutheran Sunday school teacher, on the Chokio Board of Education and on the West Central Educational Development Association in its early years.

Berg was preceded in death by brother Carl Jr.

Along with his wife and his sons Charles Jr. and Colin, Berg is survived by daughters Bonnie, Laurie, Dixie and Marla; son Adam; brothers Robert and Richard, and sisters Janice and Patricia.

Memorial services will be held March 22 at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Chokio. Visitation will be held on March 21 at Pedersen Funeral Home in Morris. Times have yet to be set.