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Former Rep. John Blatnik dies

By Cliff Haas
Washington Bureau Correspondent

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John A. Blatnik, who for nearly three decades represented the sprawling, hardscrabble DFL stronghold of northeastern Minnesota in Congress, died Tuesday. He was 80.

Public service was his career, from teaching in a one-room school in the

early 1930s until he retired from the House of Representatives in 1974 as chairman of the Public Works Committee.

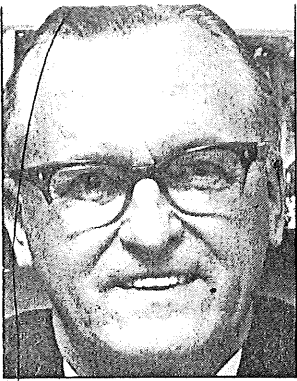
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He championed liberal politics and massive public-works projects with an equal fervor that made him unbeatable at the polls, but sometimes disappointed environmentalists.

Blatnik died at his home in the

Washington suburb of Forest Heights, Md., after apparently suffering a heart attack. His death was announced by Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minn., who had been Blatnik's top aide and then succeeded him.

"His passing marks the end of an era," Oberstar said.

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John Blatnik, in 1972. He was unbeatable at the polls.

Blatnik

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Indeed, Blatnik's retirement came as the strict seniority system in the House and notions about the limitless bounds of federal largess also began to crack.

Blatnik was born in Chisholm, near the Mesabi Iron Range, on Aug. 17, 1911. He grew up with the trauma of the Depression, and throughout his life carried his generation's attitude born during those hard times that building roads, bridges, canals and the like meant jobs, not harm to the environment.

He was the top honor student when he graduated from Winona State Teachers College in 1935. He taught high school chemistry and was the administrative assistant to the St. Louis County superintendent of schools.

Blatnik became interested in politics and became the youngest member of the Minnesota Senate with his election in 1940.

In 1946, Republicans had spectacular success around the nation, but the long Democratic tradition of the Iron Range, established by immigrants from Sweden, Finland and Eastern Europe who came to work in the mines, helped Blatnik win his first term in the House. He never had to worry about reelection.

The rich natural resources of his congressional district sparked Blatnik's interest in conservation issues, but he likewise was sensitive to the economic importance of mining and logging to his constituents.

That tension often led to sticky political problems as he drew fire from both anxious conservationists and angry local residents. Although many conservationists finally expressed disappointment, he was a major player in persuading Congress to pass bills that protected and enhanced the environment.

Blatnik was the chief House sponsor of a 1948 bill that led to the federal acquisition and razing of several hundred private cabins in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA). This helped restore the original character of the area, which covered a million acres of his district.

Conservationists also were delighted in 1969 when Blatnik helped establish the 220,000-acre Voyageurs National Park in his district.

But Blatnik was criticized by the same groups in the mid 1970s when he refused to support a ban on logging, motorboats and snowmobiles in

state and federal environmental agencies to end the waste discharge.

It was a strange situation for a man who carefully cultivated a reputation as "Mr. Pollution Control." He had authored every piece of water-pollution legislation enacted between 1956 and 1972, including the bill that now is the Clean Water Act, the chief federal remedy for polluted waters.

He played roles in establishing the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Act, the Interstate Highway Program and the Highway Trust Fund.

which Walter Mondale was appointed in 1964. In 1971, he became chairman of the House Public Works Committee. He retired from Congress in 1974. After leaving Congress, he was a part-time consultant for shippers and an environmental and economic-development consultant.

He is survived by his wife, Evelyn, and three children, Thomas, Stephanie and Valerie, from a previous marriage that ended in divorce. He will be buried Friday in Chisholm.

Staff Writer Dean Rebuffoni contributed to this report.