

Star Tribune

O. J. Heinitz was first speaker pro tem of Minnesota House

By: Ben Cohen, October 14, 2007

A real estate agent and businessman, the Republican state representative from Plymouth served for 16 years.

Orlando Jacob Heinitz, who represented Plymouth in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 1968 to 1984, died on Oct. 10 at his home in Green Valley, Ariz.

He was 86.

Heinitz, who was widely known as O.J. or Lon, was a Republican who embraced the party when Minnesota legislators were not designated by political parties. Nor did he hide his loyalty during the Watergate scandal.

But he was also a Republican who supported causes across the political spectrum, said Chuck Slocum, former state GOP chairman.

"Although conservative in party circles, he broke the mold on certain things," said Slocum. "He believed being pro-choice was the ultimate in individual rights, which is a tenet of Republicanism."

In 1979, Heinitz was the first to serve as speaker pro tem of the House. The position was created in case the House speaker became incapacitated. Around 1980, he was a candidate to become House speaker, but was not elected.

"He was valued by all sides, because he was so respectful of the role of the House," said Slocum. "I think the House would have been better for it, had he been given that opportunity."

In 1981, Heinitz broke with Republican Gov. Al Quie and his move to scrap Minnesota's catastrophic health insurance program.

"He sort of defied labeling in the House," said Slocum.

Patricia Neils, who once served as his campaign manager, recalled that Heinitz walked every block of his district, to learn about all of its problems.

"He had great, great integrity," said Neils.

Heinitz, who grew up in Mountain Lake, Minn., served as an Army infantry officer, fighting in the Battle of the Bulge during World War II. He served 22 years with Army Reserves and National Guard, retiring as a major.

In the late 1940s, he received his bachelor's degree in economics and psychology from the University of Minnesota.

He owned five Snelling and Snelling employment agencies in Minnesota, selling them in 1970. During his years in the Legislature, he worked in real estate.

He moved to Green Valley in the mid-1980s, but worked for several years as a lobbyist for small bankers and a hospital association at the Minnesota Legislature.

In a March 16, 1986, Star Tribune article about the growth of lobbying at the Legislature, Heinitz gave his insights about lobbyists' increasing pressure on legislators, and the giving of more and more valuable gifts to them.

"Legislators think nothing of coming up to you and saying, 'I need four hockey tournament tickets,'" he told the Star Tribune. "I was taken aback. It never used to be like that."

He is survived by his wife of 59 years, Donna of Green Valley; daughters Nancy and Barbara, both of Sierra Vista, Ariz.; son Thomas of Bloomington, brother Stanley of Mankato, six grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Services will be held at noon Friday at the Desert Hills Lutheran Church in Green Valley.

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