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Robert W. Johnson FORMER ST. PAUL LEGISLATOR

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He had a laugh, handshake for everyone

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As a "tin can sailor" on the USS Walker during World War II, Robert W. "Bob" Johnson of St. Paul looked up from the ship's bridge one day to see a Japanese war plane swooping by. The way he told the story for decades to come, he was eye to eye with a kamikaze pilot and suddenly barking orders for the ship to change course to avoid the coming raid.

"He was the most practical, common-sense guy you'd ever want to meet," said Jack Lee, a family friend from St. Paul who worked on Johnson's unsuccessful campaign for governor in 1978. "He was one of a kind."

Johnson, a tax accountant and lawyer who represented St. Paul's Highland neighborhood in the Minnesota House from 1963 to 1975, died March 20 at his winter home in Fountain Hills, Ariz. He was 88.

Friends said Johnson made friends everywhere and welcomed many of them into his family — for life. One of his sayings was: "Never trade an old friend for a new friend."

He married Betty Bremer, the only child of St. Paul millionaires Edward and Emily Bremer. Johnson had grown up poor in Swede Hollow on St. Paul's East Side; his Swedish immigrant parents sent



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him away during the Great Depression to work on a Wisconsin farm when he was 6 or 7. He told his children he later had a pivotal moment as a student at Johnson High School in St. Paul when one of his teachers asked him if he planned on being a "dumb Swede" for the rest of his life.

"That really stuck with him," said his son, Dr. Ed Johnson, a Twin Cities cardiothoracic surgeon and one of six children.

Johnson used the G.I. Bill to put himself through the

University of Minnesota, where he earned a law degree. He also became a certified public accountant and spent most of his professional life in business for himself at an office on Grand Avenue near a flower shop. His clients included a janitor who worked at the State Capitol — Johnson befriended him and thereafter did his tax return for free. Johnson also was a board member at Minnesota Mutual and at one point served as commissioner of the St. Paul Port Authority.

"He epitomized the Great-est Generation," Ed Johnson said. "He was one of those guys — always happy with what they have."

In the 1978 gubernatorial campaign, Johnson lost to Al Quie for the Independent-Republican Party endorsement. Johnson had been assistant minority leader in the House, where his accomplishments included getting funding for Moos Tower at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

Maureen Gruntner, general manager at the St. Paul Pool and Yacht Club, said Johnson and his wife would eat dinner at the restaurant as many as four times a week, sometimes joining as many as 10 other people or more.

"He was happy every single time I saw him," Gruntner said. "He was a force. He held

court and everyone knew him."

Johnson also was a regular at the Lexington Restaurant in St. Paul and a decades-long member of St. Paul's Town & Country Club. Tom Healy was a young bartender there when he first met Johnson, who immediately befriended him and eventually became godparent for one of his children. "He treated everyone as an equal," Healy said. "He was a friend in good times and in bad times."

Johnson loved golf and hosted an annual fly-in Canadian fishing trip with family and friends. He also cultivated many friends near Pelican Rapids, Minn., where he turned a hunting and fishing shack on Lake Lizzie into "The Farm," a 300-acre spread where he kept prized Herefords.

His civic involvement included volunteer roles at the U of M International Center, Lutheran Social Service, Everybody Wins!, the Festival of Nations and the American Cancer Society. But the best job that he ever had, he used to say, was as a caddie at St. Paul's Keller Golf Course.

Bob Johnson is survived by his six children, their spouses and 13 grandchildren.

Funeral services are set for Tuesday at Arlington Hills Lutheran Church in St. Paul.

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