

Rep. Willard Munger . . .

Pioneer in environmental legislation turns 87 years old

By Grant Martin

When the Legislature adjourns this spring, Rep. Willard Munger (DFL-Duluth) will have 21 legislative sessions under his belt, surpassing Walter E. Day as the person serving the most sessions in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Munger was honored by his House peers Jan. 20, the first day of the legislative session and Munger's 87th birthday.

A student choir from Fridley Middle School, of which Munger's great-granddaughter Katie Morrissey is a member, led the House in singing "Happy Birthday." And a reception was held in his honor in the House retiring room.

Munger currently holds the record for the most years served in the House at 41 years. He was first elected in 1954 from his West Duluth district. He has served the district since then with the exception of the 1965-66 session, which he missed after losing in a 1964 state Senate campaign.

An activist and pioneer in environmental legislation, Munger has chaired the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee since 1973, except when Republicans briefly held a controlling majority in the House.

His most noted legislative accomplishments include passage of the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, the Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling Act of 1989, and the Wetlands Conservation Act of 1991.

"I've loved every bit of it," Munger said. "I am in a position to carry out the dreams I have had since I was a kid."

Munger said that he was inspired to get involved in politics by the economic problems caused by over-logging in northern Minnesota. He said that his grandfather, who was a



Rep. Willard Munger, *right*, the longest-serving member of the Minnesota House, enjoyed a piece of his 87th birthday cake Jan. 20, as his daughter, Pat Lahr, talks with House Majority Leader Ted Winter during a reception in the House retiring room.

logger and an environmentalist, encouraged him to pursue politics.

"My grandpa used to tell me, 'Willard, it's no use talkin' about it. You've got to get elected. You can talk about it 'til the cows come home, but you can't do a thing about it until you get in the Legislature,'" Munger said.

He said that he recently had a physical and with his clean bill of health he plans to officially announce that he will run for re-election again this fall. Munger suffered the loss of his wife, Frances, in November 1997, an event that he said factored into his decision to run again in 1998.

"If my wife had lived, I would have considered not running," he said, "but she always wanted me to run again. It was one of the last things she said to me."

Munger must remain in office through 2001 to break the record for most years served in the Minnesota Legislature, including service in both the House and the Senate. This record is currently shared by former legislators Carl M. Iverson, Anton J. Rockne, and Donald O. Wright, each with 44 years of combined service in both bodies.

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