

House faces future without legislative legend

by Grant Martin

The House lost its longest-serving member when Rep. Willard Munger — the legendary 22-term lawmaker known for his pioneering environmental legislation — died last summer.

Munger (DFL-Duluth) was first elected in 1954 from his west Duluth district and he held the seat from that time until his death, with the exception of the 1965-1966 session which he missed after losing in a 1964 state Senate campaign.

At 43 years of service, he holds the record for the longest time served in the House. Altogether his legislative career spanned nine governors, 12 House speakers, and five Senate majority leaders.

Munger died July 11 at St. Mary's Hospice in Duluth. He was 88.

Throughout his career, Munger focused on environmental issues and left a distinctive mark on the state's natural resources and conservation policy.

Appointed chair of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee in 1973, Munger served in that position for over 20 years, losing the chair only when Republicans won the majority in 1985-1986 and again in 1999.

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

Munger also secured millions of state and federal dollars to clean up the St. Louis River. And the 69-mile bicycle trail that currently runs from Hinckley to Duluth and will eventually run from St. Paul to Duluth bears his name. Munger was an early advocate for converting abandoned railroads into state trails.

Most recently, Munger sponsored the legislation calling for the constitutional amendment that extended the dedication of state lottery revenue into the environmental trust fund to the year 2025. Voters overwhelmingly approved the amendment in 1998.

Born in 1911, Munger was raised on a farm near Fergus Falls. He experienced politics at an early age, traveling with his father, Harry, to organize for the agrarian, populist Nonpartisan League.

In 1934, the year he met his first wife, Martha, Munger ran unsuccessfully for the House as a Farmer-Labor candidate. In the late 1930s, he was appointed as a state produce inspector and he moved to Duluth. During World War II, he worked in the Duluth shipyards as a builder and later owned a grocery store and a gas station in west Duluth.

In 1954, the year he was first elected to the House, Munger finished construction on the west Duluth motel and coffee shop that he owned and operated throughout his tenure at the Legislature.

Munger liked to tell interviewers that the motel would remain standing for a long time because he invested heavily in a solid foundation. He would then say that he applied the same principle to lawmaking and public policy.

In a 1998 interview, Munger said that his grandfather, Lyman Munger, a logger and naturalist, taught him that government must ensure that the environment is protected. It was his grandfather who coached him to run for office.

"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 till the cows come home, but you can't do a thing about it until you get in the Legislature,'" he said.

Munger initially told his constituents that

he would step down from the Legislature in 1998. But in November 1997, his second wife, Frances, died of a stroke, and he said that she wanted him 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."

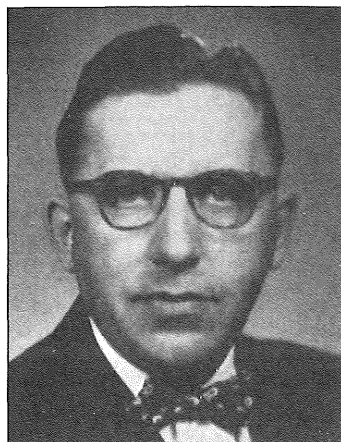
Munger won again in 1998. But early in the 1999 session, he was diagnosed with liver cancer. He attempted to attend daily legislative meetings while undergoing chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

After the session ended, Munger told several people that he wanted to return to work in the 2000 session, even if it meant continuing painful radiation treatments. But suffering from complications, he was admitted to the hospice July 8 and passed away at 3:40 a.m. on July 11.

In a 1998 pre-election interview with the *Duluth News-Tribune*, Munger promised his constituents that he felt ready to go back to the Capitol and continue his work. But he admitted that at his age, a higher force might change his career path.

"I'm almost 88. The good Lord is bound to say 'That's enough, Munger, you'd better turn it in,'" Munger said. "I'm in perfect health. I exercise and I watch the foods I eat. I've actually picked up speed the past few years instead of slowing down. But the good Lord might make me quit. You never know."

Munger's first wife, Martha, died in 1960. Munger is survived by two children, Willard Munger, Jr. of Duluth and Patricia Munger Lehr of Minnetonka, and several grandchildren. ❧



Munger was 43 when he won election to the House in 1954.



By the mid-1970s, Munger was a seasoned legislator and a leader on environmental issues.



Munger's last major legislative victory was a move to extend the dedication of lottery funds to an environmental trust fund.