



Tony Perpich State senator, public servant

A quiet leader and craftsman from famed Iron Range family

By JENNIFER BJORHUS • jennifer.bjorhus@startribune.com

Of the Perpich brothers, Tony was the quiet one — a dentist with a passion for carpentry and public service.

The former state senator formed one-third of a storied trio of siblings in Minnesota politics, the DFL clan from the Iron Range that included George Perpich and the late Rudy Perpich, Minnesota's longest-serving governor. Tall and dark-haired, the brothers even looked alike and were frequently mistaken for one another, family said.

"The Perpich brothers were trailblazers in a great working-class push for political and economic power on the Range and beyond," author Betty Wilson wrote in her book "Rudy! The People's Governor."

Tony Perpich succumbed to heart disease and died Saturday surrounded by family in his Shoreview home. He was 84.

It's "a sad day for the Range," said former state Sen. Doug Johnson from his home on Lake Vermilion.

Tony Perpich was born in 1932 in a hardscrabble mining community called Carson Lake that once existed near Hibbing, the second oldest of four boys born to Anton and Mary Perpich. A Croatian immigrant, Anton worked in the ore mines and met Mary when he lodged at the boardinghouse Mary's mother ran in Carson Lake.

Their mother was determined to be a teacher, said Joe Perpich, the youngest of the four brothers and the only one who did not pursue dentistry or politics. Joe said she had to quit school in the eighth grade after her father died.

"That was a defining event in my mother's life," said Joe, a psychiatrist and lawyer in Chevy Chase, Md. "There was no question that her children were going to be educated."

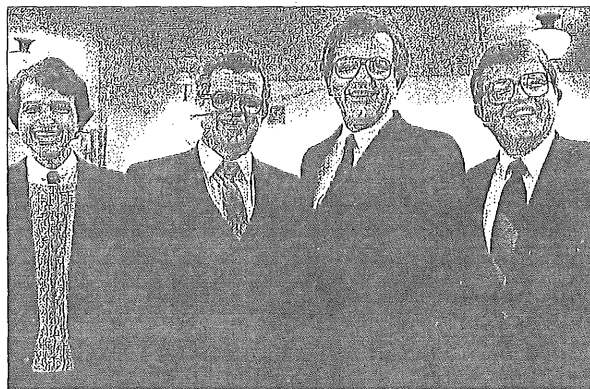
The boys grew up speaking Croatian at home. Joe recalled how his older brother Tony cared for their grandmother and delighted him with gifts. Knowing how badly he wanted a camera, Tony once sent him a German camera in a leather case nestled inside a blue velour box.

"I just can't tell you how magical that camera was to me. We were very poor and that was just simply out of the question," Joe said. "I just loved that camera."

The treasure is still displayed on his bookshelf.

Tony Perpich built his dental practice in Virginia, but politics called. From 1967 to 1976 he served as a state senator and worked his way up to chairman of the powerful Senate Tax Committee. In contrast to the blood-sport style of Iron Range politics, Perpich was known as a calm and soft-spoken leader.

Among his best-known accomplishments was an increase in the production tax paid by mining companies in lieu of property taxes, which helped relieve Iron Range



DARLENE PFISTER • Star Tribune file

The Perpich brothers — Joe, Tony, Rudy and George — in 1983. "It's a sad day for the Range," said a former senator.

homeowners of heavy property taxes.

After U.S. Rep. John Blatnik, D-Minn., retired from Congress in 1974, Perpich ran to replace him, vying with Jim Oberstar for the Eighth District seat. Perpich won the DFL endorsement, but the powerhouse Blatnik campaigned for Oberstar, and Perpich lost.

In 1976, after Perpich stepped down from the Legislature, Minneapolis Star columnist Jim Klobuchar praised him as such an authentic independent that lobbyists didn't even try to woo him: "He offered that most novel of all spectacles — a politician free of the standard requirement to genuflect in the direction of his campaign patrons."

Perpich was later appointed a deputy commissioner at the Department of Energy and Economic Development, where he worked for Mark Dayton. Then brother Rudy appointed him head of the Department of Public Service.

"He was a dedicated public servant and a wonderful human," Dayton said via e-mail.

Tony Perpich and his wife, Irene Kosiak, a physician, raised their daughter Julia in Fayal Township and he continued a lifelong passion for carpentry. He always had a project underway, family members recalled.

In addition to building a home for his family in the woods outside Eveleth, Perpich slowly constructed a grand cabin on a lake in southwest Ontario with vaulted ceilings and tremendous views of the water. Shangri-La, Joe called it. "It was his cathedral in the pines."

Following Perpich's wishes, the family will not hold a service but is scattering his ashes Up North. He is survived by his brother George of Shoreview; brother Joe in Maryland; wife Irene Kosiak; daughter Julia Perpich of Shoreview, and three grandchildren.