

# Civic leader George Pillsbury dies

● For decades, he was a giant in Minnesota business, politics and philanthropy.

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George Sturgis Pillsbury, a leader in Minnesota commerce, politics, civic and philanthropic life for more than a half-century, has died at the age of 91.

Pillsbury, who suffered a debilitating stroke several days ago, died early Saturday at his Wayzata home, surrounded by family members.

He bore one of Minnesota's most storied names. He was the great-grandson of 1880s Minneapolis Mayor George A. Pillsbury; the grandson of "Big Miller" Charles A. Pillsbury, the builder of the flour-milling Pillsbury Co.; and the great-nephew of Gov. John S. Pillsbury. His maternal great-grandfather was Civil War-era Gen. Samuel Sturgis, for whom Sturgis, S.D., is named.

Pillsbury lived the values and philosophy those forbears brought to Minnesota in the 1850s. They held to the New England ideal that every citizen



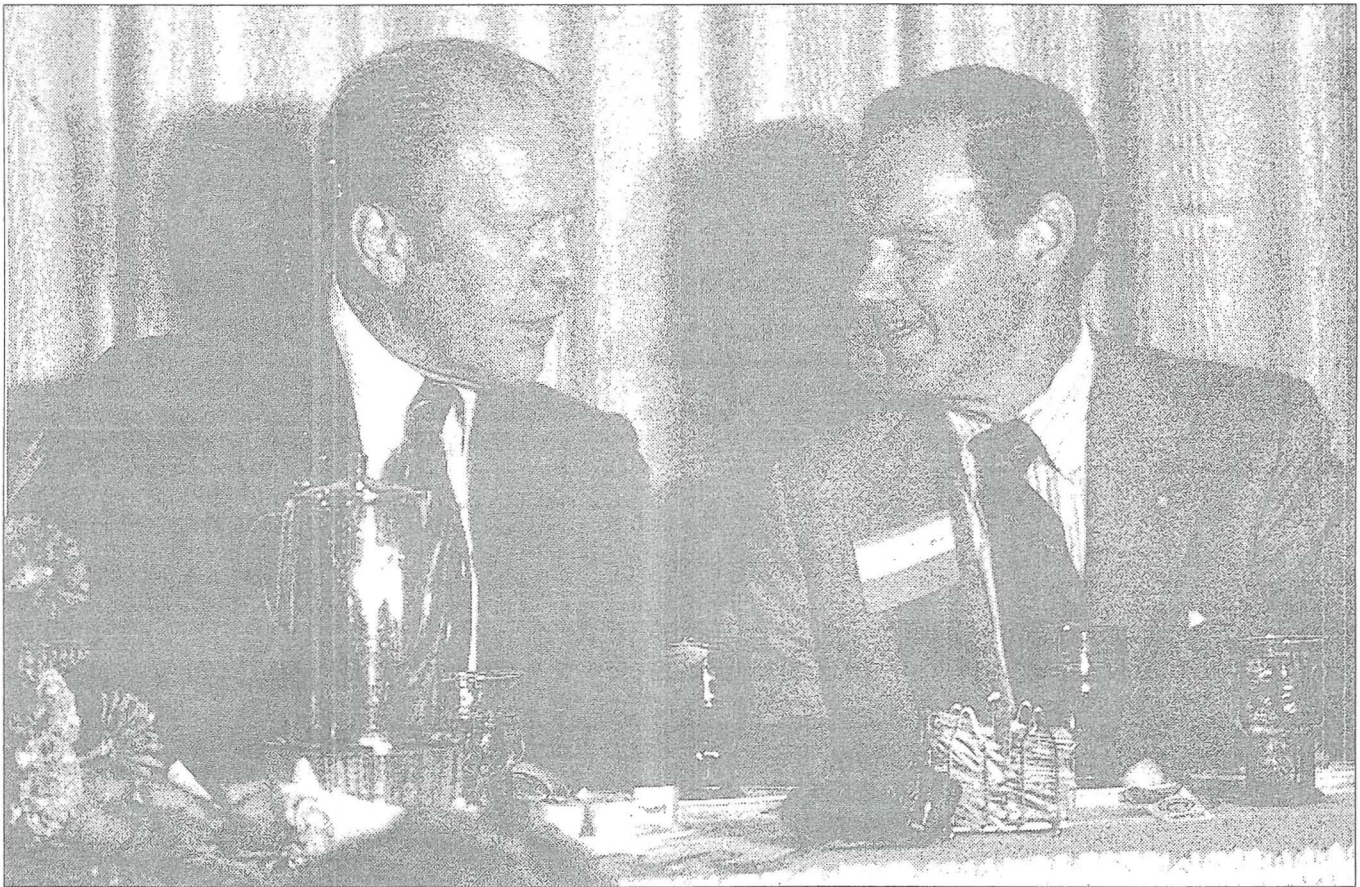
**Pillsbury**

has a duty to work not only for personal gain, but for the common good.

Pillsbury, a Republican who served in the Minnesota Senate from 1970 to 1982, was an independent thinker with a bipartisan streak.

"As a person and as a politician, he never met anybody he didn't like," said his son Charles of New Haven, Conn. "Democrat, Republican, Socialist — he was always open to discussion. And that's why people liked him. He also had a lot of integrity. He stood for something. And he

**Pillsbury continues on B6 ►**



Star Tribune file photo by JACK GILLIS

Then-state Sen. George Pillsbury and President Gerald Ford hobnobbed at the Registry Hotel in Bloomington when Ford visited Minnesota in August 1975.



# George Pillsbury 'was always the gentleman'

## ◀ PILLSBURY FROM B1

was the last member of the Pillsbury family to work for the company."

After graduating early from Yale University in December 1942, Pillsbury enlisted in the Marines, serving as an officer in the Pacific during World War II. After the war, he returned to Minnesota and worked at the Pillsbury Co., rising to group vice president over a period of 24 years.

Charlie and another son, George Pillsbury of Cambridge, Mass., said their father always said his best move was marrying Sally Whitney Pillsbury more than 65 years ago. She became his partner not just in marriage, but in business and philanthropy.

He spent eight years on the

Orono school board, succeeding his older brother, the late John Pillsbury Jr.

In 1970, he was elected to the state Senate. He represented the Wayzata area for 12 years, focusing on government operations, tax policy, education and reproductive rights for women.

His interest in government reform included a long effort to create a unicameral legislature and, in recent years, ranked-choice balloting in state elections.

### **GOP finance chairman**

Politically, Pillsbury followed his family into the Republican ranks. As state GOP finance chairman, he was an instigator of the 1976 party name change to Independent-Republican after the Watergate scandal.

"We never once missed payroll, and he got the Minnesota party back into the black," recalled Chuck Slocum, the party chairman who worked with Pillsbury in the 1970s and on a number of civic issues after that. "He was the most unpretentious man. His leadership was unique, his passion deep, and he was always the gentleman."

George Pillsbury also was active in the gubernatorial campaigns of his older brother, John Jr., and his brother-in-law, Wheelock Whitney, a generation ago. Much more recently, in 2008, he broke with the GOP to publicly support Barack Obama for president.

He backed Independence Party candidate Tom Horner for governor in 2010. And just this month, he held a fundraiser for DFLer Jim Graves, a moderate businessman running against U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann for the Sixth District congressional seat.

Roger Moe, the longtime Minnesota Senate Democratic majority leader, recalled Pillsbury as bipartisan, "unpretentious, outgoing, warm and inclusive."

"He was straightforward," Moe recalled. "He was an old-fashioned fiscal conservative. If you could prove the investment in a road or an educational initiative made sense and had a payback, George was for it. He loved new ideas, like employee stock ownership programs back in the 1970s. He loved to explore things."

"He was always civil, never partisan in the political arena, a bad habit into which some of us would lapse — never George Pillsbury."

### **Ever a Minnesotan**

Lori Sturdevant, a Star Tribune editorial columnist who met Pillsbury in the 1970s while covering the Legislature as a reporter, wrote "The Pillsburys of Minnesota" with him in 2011. It was a 2012 Minnesota Book Award finalist.

"Affable and outgoing, George made and kept friends, from presidents and European royalty to winners of the Pillsbury Bake-Off, which he and Sally attended faithfully

for more than 50 years," Sturdevant recalled. "He was devoted to Minnesota. He lived and died at Bracketts Point on Lake Minnetonka, in a house that once belonged to his late brother Eddy and next door to his parents' home, in which he was born. He loved Minnesota sports, particularly hockey. And he was the youth hockey coach for the Woodhill Wolves team on which future Gov. Mark Dayton learned to play goalie."

He and Sally have been significant patrons of numerous causes and organizations, including the Guthrie Theater, Planned Parenthood and Pillsbury United Communities, the nonprofit human service and arts organization that evolved from a settlement house established by his father and uncle. He was an active alumnus of St. Paul's School in Concord, N.H., where his grandfather was mayor before emigrating to Minnesota.

His sons said he cared deeply about quality education for Minnesota children, world population control through family planning and women's rights, and producing sufficient food to feed the world.

In addition to his wife, Sally, and sons Charles and George, he is survived by two daughters, Sarah of Los Angeles and Katharine of Newton, Mass., and 10 grandchildren.

Staff writer Lori Sturdevant contributed to this report.

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