

I was asked to present a brief biography today of former representative and senator Jim Keller. It will be difficult, however, to be brief in reference to a man who has served the state so long and so well.

Anyone who followed legislative activities in the 1950's and early 60's is sure to recognize the name of Jim Keller. After serving one House term in 1949, he went on to become part of the "inner club" which led the Minnesota Senate throughout the 50's. While in the Senate, he served on the powerful Committee on Committees as well as the Rules Committee.

One can read of the "gruff-voiced, cigar chomping, hard-bargaining Senate veteran" in numerous accounts of legislative business. Besides chairing the Senate General Legislation Committee for several sessions, he was a leader in forming tax policy for the state of Minnesota.

In 1955, when a tax controversy raged between the Senate and the House, he played an important role in reaching a compromise. Because of his reputation of being a tough bargainer, he was often appointed to important conference committees.

One of his major interests was highway safety. In 1961, he was the chief author of at least 18 bills calling for new and tougher traffic safety laws. In 1959, he introduced a bill which would have required seat belts and padded dashboards in all cars made after 1961.

Jim Keller received widespread respect because of the work he did as chairman of a legislative interim study commission formed to study the Highway Department. It was the first thorough probe of highway department affairs in state history, and the commission recommended tighter legislative control of the state highway department budget.

Before he came to the legislature, Senator Keller was a farmer from Rollingstone. In 1955, he moved to Winona and became a contractor. He found time to participate in many community organizations such as the Travelers Club, the Winona Athletic Club, the Elks, United Commercial Club, the Knights of Columbus and Winona Association of Commerce. He was an executive board member of the boy scouts for 10 years.

After looking at the tremendous contributions of time and talent that Jim Keller made to the Legislature and the state of Minnesota, I think it truly can be said that with his death Minnesota lost one of its first citizens.