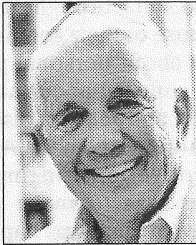


**Earl B. Gustafson** Legislator, judge, author

# Proud liberal earned respect in law practice, public service

By MAURA LERNER • maura.lerner@startribune.com



As the family story goes, Earl B. Gustafson wanted to become a professor at a small college someday. But when he started graduate school, his dean suggested that maybe he was heading in the wrong direction.

How about politics? The dean said: "I feel that you would excel in that arena, and probably more so than academia."

Gustafson took his advice and started a new family tradition when he was elected to the Minnesota Legislature in 1962, representing his hometown of Duluth.

Gustafson, who later became chief judge of the Minnesota Tax Court, died April 16 at age 90. He served three terms in the Minnesota House of Representatives and one in the state Senate before retiring in 1972.

His brother James and son Ben later followed in his footsteps as state legislators.

"He was an unusual public person," Ben Gustafson said of his father. He was a "very unassuming" man and legal scholar who worked quietly behind the scenes to get things done, he said.

"It was an era when both parties worked much better together," his son recalled. Gustafson, who was once named the most liberal member of the Senate, was in the minority party "the whole time," his son said. "But he was still able to work across the aisle very effectively."

Gustafson was born in 1927 in Duluth and joined the Navy in June 1945 near the end of World War II. "He was only 17 years old," said his son, but he was tapped to lead a "platoon of recruits through boot camp."

By that time, his leadership skills already were apparent — he had been elected captain of both his football and basketball teams in high school. "He was very proud of

that," his son recalled. After the war, he graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College and earned a law degree from the University of Minnesota.

When Gustafson began his political career in the early 1960s, races for the Legislature were nonpartisan, his son said, but Gustafson wore his liberal credentials proudly. Still, that didn't stop him from winning friends among political rivals.

"The reason he was so well regarded is that he discussed ideas rather than simply made his opinion known," said James Ulland, a Duluth Republican who served with Gustafson in the Legislature in the late 1960s and early '70s. "If somebody didn't agree, he didn't just up the volume as one would see today. He surrounded his ideas with his very good-natured personality, listening to other views and responding without being offended or using this degraded political language that we have today."

In 1972, Gustafson announced he would not seek reelection, saying the demands of the Legislature and his private law practice "had become irreconcilable."

He unsuccessfully sought the DFL endorsement for Congress in 1974 and never ran for office again. In 1977, Gustafson was appointed to the Minnesota Tax Court, which rules on tax-related disputes, and retired as chief judge in 1995.

A decade later, he published a book, "The Swedish Secret: What the United States Can Learn from Sweden's Story." Gustafson, a descendant of Swedish immigrants, had spent years researching and writing the book, his son said, as a tribute to a political culture he admired.

Gustafson died in Minneapolis after a long struggle with dementia.

In addition to his son Ben, he is survived by his wife of 66 years, Donna Gustafson; daughters Kim, Mary, Sarah and Katie; sons Joseph, Brad and Peter; 13 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Services have been held.

"The reason he was so well regarded is that he discussed ideas rather than simply made his opinion known." — James Ulland, former state legislator