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Building of filth; Building of death

OFFICIALS CONDEMN EX-SENATOR'S ROOMING HOUSE

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The door swings open and three faces blotched and creased with a thousand lines spread into wide, toothless smiles. The smell in the tiny room is overpowering.

Their withered hands grope in friendship toward the strangers who enter the room, and they whoop and, teetering, steady themselves on a filthy floor beside a half-empty bottle of wine and a blackened mattress.

For the outside observer, it was a brief glimpse of the world at 1810 Washington Av. S.—a world that police say was, in the past, often punctuated with booze, muggings and robberies.

LAST WEEK former state Sen. Ralph L. Mayhood, 68, who ran the deteriorating rooming house, was beaten to death there in a dank basement hallway.

Two tenants were charged Friday with second-degree murder. They were identified as Charles Desjarials, 30, and Wilmar Martin, 48.

After the killing, a number of city and county officials toured the building and were appalled at what they found. As a result, the place has been condemned and its seven residents have been told to find other accommodations or be relocated, according to Sol Jacobs, Minneapolis director of inspections.

Why the place had been allowed to stay open at all baffled several police officers investigating Mayhood's killing, and caused other officials to point accusing fingers at each other. Several other public officials said the conditions existed because no one had bothered to complain about them.



Star Photo by Jim McTaggart

Walter Johnson, left, and Leon Siss in \$120-a-month room in rooming house that Ralph Mayhood ran

THE BUILDING is listed with the city as owned by Mayhood and his brother, Jacobs said, but Jacobs said he didn't know the brother's name or address.

Police Lt. William Quinn, who investigated Mayhood's killing, called the rooming place "outright filth" and criticized the city and county for allowing it to exist. "That we have people who live like that is sick," he said. "People choose a lifestyle to some extent, but I don't think we ought to allow that."

Several tenants said Mayhood charged \$80 to \$120 a month for the cramped apartments, and would not give the tenants welfare or social security checks mailed to them if they were behind in rent payments.

The three men with the wine were entertaining themselves in a room about 8 feet by 10 feet, which one of them said cost him \$90 a month. Several persons in the building described Mayhood as nice, but opinionated and "tight" with his money.

Leon Siss, 58, lives in the basement of the rooming house in a cramped room that he said cost him \$120 a month. His room has a toilet at the foot of the bed that Siss said "sometimes works and sometimes doesn't." The walls, roof, ceiling and furniture were coated with dust.

Siss, who is crippled, was being attacked and robbed of \$5 in his room last Thursday when Mayhood intervened. The assailants, who had been evicted from the building earlier that day, turned on Mayhood and beat him to death with a pipe and a wine bottle, the complaint against the two men says.

ALTHOUGH SISS said he is sorry for Mayhood and was happy he helped Siss fight the attackers, he was upset at the rent he had to pay for his tiny, dirty room.

"It's no fun," he said, "but more or less I gave in (to Mayhood). There wasn't much I could do about it." He said he couldn't move to another apartment. Authorities took Siss and another tenant to Hennepin County Medical Center Monday for observation.

Walter Johnson, 66, another tenant in the building, called Mayhood "tight" and said "the senator," as Mayhood was called, hardly ever made repairs. "You know, the only thing that man put out was his breath and he took that right back."

The place frequently was miserably cold, Johnson and Siss said, and tenants often had to light the burners on a gas stove in the basement kitchen for heat. Siss said Mayhood gave him an electric heater for his room last year. "Mayhood finally gave it to me after I blew my cork," he said. "Everybody here complains about

the cold."

While a state senator, Mayhood was often criticized for owning two substandard nursing homes, which eventually were closed by the city.

CITY INSPECTORS last year had ordered Mayhood to put in new carpets and clean the yard and walls of the rooming house, and he had complied, Jacobs said. But Jacobs said the place was poorly maintained and deteriorated quickly.

After one of Jacob's inspectors visited the building Friday, Jacobs said, "It's just filthy. Food is all over—and urine. It just smells bad."

"The funny thing is nobody complains and apparently these (Hennepin County) social workers never go and see where these people live," he said. His department, he said, does not make periodic inspections of rooming houses unless there are complaints.

Minneapolis police Lt. Pat Hartigan, who knows many down-and-outers in the city, and visited Mayhood's place last week, called it one of the worst he's ever seen.

He said derelicts and other tenants who live in substandard conditions "don't know where to go to complain. How are you going to help them? You tell them to go to the city building inspectors—they just don't go." Also, he said, many winos don't seem to care about living amid garbage.

Rex Holzemer, a senior social worker for the Hennepin County Welfare Department's adult and child placement division, said he had referred the case to Richard Magnuson, an adult protection case worker, after Quinn called him about the building Thursday.

Although Magnuson could not be reached for comment, Holzemer said Magnuson told him he was shocked at the condition of the rooming house.

"The general impression was that it was probably one of the worst places they've seen and that the condition was probably as run-down, decrepit and filthy as you would expect anything to get," Holzemer said.

He added that Magnuson had said something to him to the effect, "Where in the hell was the housing inspections (department) on this place?"

"I know of the building, it's a terrible building," said Don MacIntosh, a supervisor of the welfare department's adult protection division.

HE SAID HE didn't know why it had been allowed to stay open. He and Jacobs said they wondered what actions, if any, the city department of public health had taken to protect the health of the building's tenants.

But James Brinda, the health department's director of environmental health, said his unit only gets involved with rooming house tenants if there are complaints about health problems—and there weren't any in this case until after Mayhood's death.

Brinda said he was upset at the health conditions in the building and said he suspects there are other rooming houses in the city with similar problems.

But he said that making routine checks of all city multiple dwellings is costly, adding, "How much are we willing to pay? There just isn't any money."