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Former state power dies in a flophouse

By Tom Davies
Staff Writer

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Ralph L. Mayhood once wielded enough power to manipulate the Minnesota Legislature. He died Wednesday night in a flophouse.

The former state representative and senator was bludgeoned to death with an iron pipe and a half-gallon wine bottle in the basement of a rooming house he owned. He once owned two nursing homes and a hotel, but he was slain in a patched shirt and worn-out shoes.

Two men and a woman were arrested in the case Thursday. They are being held in the Hennepin County Jail and are expected to be charged today.

Mayhood, 68, apparently died while trying to protect a crippled man the three were alleged to have been trying to rob. When he intervened, one witness said, the three turned on Mayhood.

They struggled briefly, police said, before Mayhood was knocked unconscious. The two men continued to beat his head, the witness said, long after Mayhood had fallen, face down, in front of Room 117.

Mayhood's most noted legislative achievement bore his name. The "Mayhood law" exempted nursing homes in Minneapolis from city control, and stirred considerable criticism of Mayhood, since he owned two nursing homes.

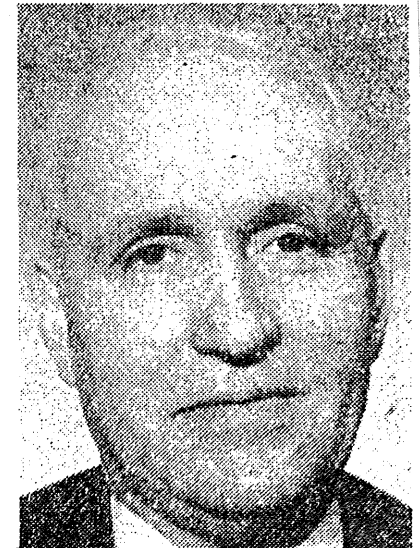
The nursing homes, called the Sa-

maritan and the Monterey Manor, were considered among the worst in Minneapolis at the time, with deficiencies in fire safety, space, sanitation and nursing care. In 1957 the Minneapolis Tribune called the conditions in the nursing homes "shocking."

Mayhood was able to get the Legislature to pass the Mayhood law in 1953, thus exempting those homes from city inspections, which were considered more rigorous than state inspections.

Despite repeated attempts to repeal the law, Mayhood was able to keep it on the books throughout his legislative career. He was able to control enough of the Hennepin

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Ralph Mayhood in the 1960s

Mayhood

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County legislators to resist the efforts of reform elements. That also brought him criticism.

"I'm a little tired of nursing-home bills being twisted out of shape," then state Sen. Donald Fraser said in 1957, "because of one of the senators from Hennepin County."

Mayhood was first elected a state representative in 1942 while he was working his way through law school as a bell boy at the Curtis Hotel. During his 16-year legislative career he belonged to the Conservative caucus; that was before legislators were listed by political parties.

Mayhood was defeated when he sought reelection in 1958. In a 1962 rematch with Sen. Jack Davies, who beat him in 1958, Mayhood lost again. He tried to win a state representative seat from Minneapolis in 1964, but came in fourth in a four-way race. In 1965 he considered running for Minneapolis alderman, but his candidacy got nowhere.

After he was out of office, the state health department forced him to close the Samaritan nursing home in 1960. The year before he had sold his interest in the Monterey Manor nursing home.

A family spokesman said yesterday that the rooming house apparently was the last thing Mayhood owned. He and his wife had been divorced for years, the spokesman said, and no one in the family had had any contact with Mayhood for some time.

The spokesman couldn't say if Mayhood was broke at the time of his death. But witnesses said that his clothes were old and the bottoms of his shoes had worn through.

They also said Mayhood was wearing a white shirt when he died. The shirt, they said, had been split up the back and a panel — made of old T-shirt material —

had been sewn in to make the shirt larger.

There are only seven men living in the rooming house now, some of them winos and some, as a police detective said, "just men who are down." All have voices that are more air than sound, and all have coughs. There are small pools of blood throughout the house — not blood from Mayhood's murder, but blood from tuberculosis coughs.

The smell in the basement is as thick as that in a chicken house. In this case, though, the smell is that of sweat, urine, smoke and wine.

Mayhood apparently came downstairs about 10 p.m. Wednesday night. He may have been down there earlier, according to witnesses, to demand rent from one of the men arrested for killing him.

But he came downstairs the last time because of Leon Siss. Siss is 53 years old and crippled. He doesn't know why, police said, he just knows his legs don't work and he can't walk without help.

Siss was being robbed by the two men and woman, police reports said, and Mayhood intervened. Siss was cut on the mouth and forehead in the incident, police said, though he was not injured seriously.

When police arrived, Siss was still lying in his bed. Mayhood, however, was lying about 20 feet away, already dead, with his shattered false teeth on the carpet next to him. He had been beaten, police said.

The family spokesman said Mayhood had lived in the rooming house for more than 10 years.

He was eccentric, the spokesman said, but he doubted that that had anything to do with his death.

"It was just his personality," the spokesman said, "to get involved in other people's problems."