

In remembrance

Peter Popovich, former House member and chief judge of the Minnesota Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, was an Iron Range success story.

He died March 29 at Midway Hospital in St. Paul as a result of multiple-organ failure. He was 75.

Popovich often credited his Yugoslavian roots and Iron Range upbringing for giving him the strong work ethic and independence apparent throughout his public life.

He was born in Crosby, Minn., and also lived in Aurora and Chisholm while growing up.

"In the Iron Range, the emphasis was on education," Popovich said in a 1988 interview. "Education was the key to getting ahead. More than once I heard my father say, 'Get an education. They can't take that away from you.'"

His father, who came to this country from Yugoslavia at age 15, worked in the iron mines before going on to serve as a Chisholm city official. His mother, a teacher, died when Popovich was 13.

Popovich's path to the Legislature and later to the bench was not an easy one. Aside from the death of his mother, he was afflicted with vision problems serious enough to disqualify him from military

service during World War II. And, he had to overcome a bout with polio in his 20s.

He worked odd jobs including a stint as a dance instructor to put himself through college. He eventually earned a degree from St. Paul College of Law (now William Mitchell College of Law).

Popovich lost his first run for the Legis-



Former Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court Peter Popovich

lature in 1950, but rebounded to win in 1952. He represented his St. Paul district with characteristic tenacity for 10 years.

"I just loved the legislative process — negotiating and drafting bills, negotiating compromises," he said.

His House colleagues named him outstanding freshman legislator in 1953 and most effective legislator in 1959. Among the many bills he sponsored was the state's first open meeting law.

Throughout his career, Popovich was known as a strong advocate for government openness and for First Amendment freedoms.

In 1983, former Gov. Rudy Perpich, a friend and fellow Iron Ranger, picked Popovich to be the first chief judge of the newly created Minnesota Court of Appeals.

Popovich was known as an active administrator who shaped the court into the only intermediate court in the nation with no backlog.

Perpich appointed Popovich to the state Supreme Court in 1987, and Popovich became chief justice in early 1989. He retired from the court in 1990 at age 70.

As the first person from the Iron Range to serve on the Supreme Court, Popovich was

considered a moderate and free thinker on the bench.

Popovich acknowledged that he could be stubborn and demanding, but he considered his determined approach to his work only one part of his character.

"I know the pangs and trauma other people feel. I'm warm. I've got a sense of humor," Popovich said in a 1983 interview. "... You live but once. You've got to do what you think."