

FORWARD

I first met Willard Munger during the 1948 Democratic Farmer-Labor (DFL) state convention. I was a young college student attending my first major political gathering and Willard was already a veteran of partisan politics, having run and lost his first race for the state legislature as a Farmer-Labor Party candidate back in 1934.

Over the years, Willard and I became personal friends, a friendship fueled, I think, in part because we shared a common background, coming as we did from rural Minnesota and from Minnesota's Progressive tradition. My own childhood, growing up in Ceylon, Heron Lake, and Elmore, Minnesota, all small farming communities located near the Minnesota-Iowa border, was spent surrounded by geography much different from where Willard hailed from. Elmore sits in platter-flat southern Minnesota, the best farm land anywhere, but where the only appreciable surface water is limited to slow, meandering streams and rivers, and where forest is only a rumor.

In contrast, Willard grew up surrounded by the hardwood forests and lakes and potholes of Otter Tail County in northwestern Minnesota, the rugged and somewhat inhospitable landscape described in Herbert Krause's "Pockerbrush" stories. It seems a certainty that the geography that nurtured Willard's childhood (along with the walks and lectures Willard endured from his paternal grandfather) prepared Willard Munger for his life as Minnesota's foremost conservation advocate.

What is most remarkable about Willard's journey as a legislator and environmentalist is that he accomplished what he did with a high school education, a limited mastery of public speaking, and a rumpled personal appearance. But behind this seemingly inept facade beat the heart of an astute politician, a true believer in government's ability to make life better for ordinary folks, and a man of high ideals and principles.

Regrettably, in this day and age when personal attack ads foretell the beginning of yet another campaign season, Willard Munger might seem to be an anachronism. But he isn't. His legacy, his most important gift to all of us in public service, from township supervisors to aspirants to the presidency, isn't the countless environmental laws he sponsored and helped enact, as important as they are, but his example of basic honesty and courage.

No greater praise can be given a man or woman in any occupation, and certainly no greater platitude can be used to describe an elected official, than this simple beatitude:

Willard Munger was a man of his word. What he said, he meant. You could bet your life, and the lives of your grandchildren on a promise made by Willard Munger.

Willard was my friend, my colleague and my political mentor. I will always cherish the time I spent with him at political conventions, in the coffee shop of the Willard Motel, and in his brother's Duluth home talking about issues of concern to Minnesotans.

Enjoy this in-depth look into the life of one of Minnesota's most underappreciated politicians, a man who was truly "Mr. Environment."

Walter Mondale
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