

"A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
THE MINNESOTA HOUSE CHAMBER"  
Remarks by Ed Burdick  
November 5, 1983

Welcome to the most beautiful and the most colorful legislative chamber in the entire nation!

Perhaps people from Florida and North Carolina might challenge me on that statement, but remember that the capitol building in Tallahassee, Florida, is only 10 years old and the Legislative Building in Raleigh, North Carolina, is also new.

I did not say that this is the most functional legislative chamber in the nation --- I said it was the most beautiful. If Cass Gilbert were to design this room today I'm sure it would be different. He'd probably design a larger desk for the Speaker and the Chief Clerk's staff. He'd have larger desks for the members with more filing space. The room would probably be full of computer terminals and we'd have more office space adjoining this room. Now we've converted hallways on both sides of the chamber into offices.

You asked me to visit with you this afternoon about the history of this room, not the architecture or the art work.

You also advised me not to talk about "How a bill becomes a law". That's a little restrictive because,

frankly, that's the theme of most of my talks to groups like this.

So I'll attempt to relate to you some of the history of this room and the human story that has unfolded here.

No doubt you know that this building is Minnesota's third state capitol building. It was constructed at the turn of the century at a cost of around 4½ million dollars.

The Governor moved into his new offices in 1903 along with the other constitutional officers. Samuel R. Van Sant, a Republican from Winona, was the first Governor to serve in this building. It was his second term. Ray W. Jones of Minneapolis was the first Lieutenant Governor to hold office here.

The Legislative Branch moved into the new capitol two years later with the first session convening on January 3rd, 1905. This room, therefore, is nearly 80 years old, and if Abe Lincoln in the portrait behind me could talk he would tell a story of drama, politics, suspense, intense debate, dedication, parliamentary law, and interesting personalities.

He would emphasize the major role that the legislative branch has played in setting policy in nearly 80 years of our state government. He would tell of the personal sacrifices that members have made to serve here. And

he would probably remind us that many people who held office in this House of Representatives went on to hold higher office in the state and in our federal government.

Minnesota has elected 47 different people to serve as Speaker of the House. 23 of them served in this chamber. Frank R. Clague, a Republican from Lamberton, was the first Speaker to preside in this room. He later was elected to Congress where he served 6 terms from the 2nd district. Minnesota's constitution requires that the presiding officer must be a member of the body. Currently, Harry A. Sieben, Jr., an attorney from Hastings, is the Speaker. He is a member of the DFL party. This is his second two year term as Speaker.

It is often said that the Speaker of the House is the second most powerful office in Minnesota government. I agree with that. We've certainly had some able and dedicated Speakers over the years. Lawrence M. Hall, a conservative from St. Cloud, holds the record for years of service. He held the office of Speaker for five consecutive terms from 1939 to 1949. 34 of our 47 Speakers held office for only one term.

I like the story that is told about accommodations for the press in the legislative halls in this building way back in 1905. It seems that the reporters in the old capitol had access to the floor in both the House and Senate chambers, walked around during the debate, and perhaps were disruptive during some of the deliberations. Legislative

members were reluctant to call them on it (you know the power of the press) so they directed the Board of State Capitol Commissioners to instruct the architect, Cass Gilbert, to provide no space on the second floor of this building for the press. They were assigned limited space in the balcony on the third floor. I'm told that those arrangements lasted only a few days. The reporters raised so much hell that legislators completely reversed their thinking and blamed the architect. The press was immediately moved to the visitors alcove back in the corner on this floor and members desks were rearranged to provide adequate accommodations for reporters.

Newspaper people are still using that back alcove and radio and TV crews have been assigned two additional sections in the balcony. Reporters, however, do not have access to the rest of the chamber and no longer move out onto the floor during the actual session.

One of the traditions in Minnesota government is that the governor takes the oath of office and delivers his inaugural address at a Joint Convention of the House and Senate on the second day of each biennial session. All Joint Conventions are held in this room because this chamber is larger than the Senate chamber. Now that the Governor's term of office has been lengthened from two years to four years the actual inauguration ceremony does not occur at

the beginning of the second biennial session during his term. At that time he gives a "State of the State" address patterned after the President's "State of the Union" address. The point I want to make is that 21 Governors have stood at this very podium and have taken the oath of office since 1905. And some of those Governors moved up to higher office, serving in Congress and the United States Senate, serving in the President's Cabinet and receiving appointments as Federal Judges. Some even aspired to become President of the United States.

The first public address system was installed in this room in 1937. Prior to that, members came forward and addressed the body from a small table at the front of the room. Cass Gilbert designed this room like an opera house and the acoustics are excellent unless, of course, there is a lot of noise in the room --- and frequently that's the case.

It is reported that prior to installation of the PA system some candidates listed their voice as a qualification for legislative service. One candidate, an auctioneer, printed on his campaign literature that he could talk louder than his opponent and that he could be heard in St. Paul. Yes, he was elected. Some Speakers, I am told, campaigned and were elected on the same issue. The installation of individual microphones on members' desks and on the Speaker's desk took away that advantage. I'm also told that the Reading Clerk 60 years ago was a hog-caller with a loud, deep voice.

A resolution was introduced in 1923 to provide \$32,000 for installation of a voting machine in this chamber. It failed to pass. The same resolution was again offered in 1925. It also failed to pass. Finally, in 1937, it did pass and the first voting machine in this chamber was operating during the 1939 session. Two years later the Senate installed similar equipment. Minnesota became the first state in the union to have voting machines in both bodies. We're told that it used to consume 15 or 20 minutes to call the roll orally and additional time to produce accurate totals. Now with modern equipment we do it in 7 seconds.

Considerable time must have been wasted years ago calling the roll. The House Journal for 1905 reveals that over 700 roll calls were taken that year. Multiple that times 20 minutes and you have 233 hours - just for voting. Imagine the problem we would have today if we did not have a voting machine. Over 2,000 roll calls were taken during the 1981-82 biennial session.

You've all heard this story but I love to tell it because I was here to witness it. There used to be a large clock on the wall in back of the room just over those doors. There was a curtain built into the clock. They'd pull this curtain over the clock at the end of the regular session and borrow or steal the three extra days allotted to the governor for signing bills after adjournment. All our records including the journal did not reveal that we stole those three days and crowded four days into one calendar day. We were told that it was necessary to cover the clock in order to finish our work in the 90 days every other year permitted by the constitution. It's interesting to note that the courts never objected to our

covering of the clock.

Finally, in 1961 Governor Elmer L. Andersen announced well in advance that he would sign no bills passed while the clock was covered. Joseph L. Donovan, Secretary of State, announced that he would refuse to accept enrollments enacted when the clock was covered. It stopped that practice. Now, because of another amendment to the constitution, we can meet 120 days rather than 90, we count only the days we are actually in session on the floor, and we are permitted to meet each year of the biennium rather than every other year. And the clock hasn't been covered for 25 years!

This might be a good time to mention Special Sessions. Our constitution says that we must adjourn by a certain date. Now that date is the first Monday after the third Saturday in May. If we meet after that it is called a Special Session. Minnesota unlike some states is not famous for holding Special Sessions. We've only had 27 in the history of the state with only 3 of them called in the first 55 years of Minnesota history. 24 of them were called after we moved into this building. We set a record when we held six special sessions in the 1981-82 biennium. The longest Special Session in the history of the state was in 1971 and lasted for 159 calendar days. Only the Governor can call us into Special Session - and they're called for "extraordinary occasions" pursuant to the constitution --- meaning a major problem had developed. They can be difficult and they can be political. Most members are unhappy to be called back to St. Paul for a

Special Session.

Members did not have private offices of any kind until late in the '60's. Office facilities and public hearing rooms were greatly improved again in 1974 when more space was made available in the old State Office Building located a block away and connected by underground tunnel. Prior to that time the desks where you are seated served as the only private offices available to members other than a few leaders and a few Committee chairpersons.

There used to be a spittoon, an old fashioned brass spittoon, on the floor by each member's desk. One of the first things I did when I was elected Chief Clerk in 1967 was remove the spittoons from the chamber. Some people claim that was the major accomplishment during my first term of office but I like to think otherwise! Smoking was permitted in the chamber until 1975. The room at the end of the day would be filled with smoke and there was a blue-gray haze near the ceiling accentuated by the lights.

History --- yes, there is an abundance of history connected with this room. Think of the debates that have taken place here and the parliamentary strategy that has been planned here. Think of the issues that have been discussed - many times resulting in new state law or changes in existing state law. There have been fights on taxes, appropriations, education, welfare, labor, agriculture,



business, housing, energy, transportation - every major governmental problem effecting every citizen of this state.

Keep in mind, too, that until 1913 the state legislatures and not the voters elected the United States Senators. Can you imagine the drama in this room when United States Senators were elected from Minnesota?

You might know that members of the Board of Regents of the University of Minnesota are still elected by the legislature meeting in Joint Convention in this room. There have been numerous close votes and tough fights over election of the Regents every two years.

You're familiar with the legislative process and you know, of course, that we can attempt to override a Governor's veto of a bill. That can be dramatic because it creates a conflict between the chief executive officer of the state and the legislative branch. Our rules provide that in overriding a veto we must call the roll orally and we can not use the voting machine. The constitution requires a 2/3rds vote to override a veto. That means it takes 90 aye votes in the House to override. In 1967 Governor Harold LeVander vetoed the first sales tax bill passed by the Legislature. We voted to override the vote. I called the roll orally from this podium. We knew the vote would be close. One member who was seriously ill was brought

by ambulance from the hospital to cast his vote. He was accompanied by a doctor and a nurse. And there were exactly 90 aye votes! Without his presence the sales tax would not have been enacted.

In 1954 both political caucuses in the House claimed victory after the November general election. We didn't know until the first day of session in January, 1955, which political group would control. Two sick members left their hospital rooms to be present. When the vote was called for election of the Speaker eight non committed members passed (or postponed) their vote until later. One by one seven of the eight members voted. And it was tied. Then the last member finally voted and the DFL group (then known as the Liberal Caucus) was victorious by a one vote majority. They took control away from the Republicans (then known as the Conservative Caucus) who had organized the House for 16 years. That was a tense moment --- and because of the close vote the 1955 session was rather hectic. Members rarely asked or got permission to be excused. A. I. Johnson of Benson, a Liberal, was elected Speaker. He defeated the incumbent, John A. Hartle of Owatonna, a Conservative.

Another tense moment took place in the 1979 session when the caucuses were evenly divided 67 to 67. A tie vote was possible because reapportionment had changed the size of the House to an even number. A negotiating committee met

for two months after the November election trying to develop a plan for organization of the House but they were unable to resolve their differences when we convened the following January. The Secretary of State, Joan Anderson Growe, presided for over a week until a Speaker was finally chosen. Negotiations permitted Rod Searle, an Independent-Republican from Waseca, to become Speaker. Irvin N. Anderson, a Democrat-Farmer-Laborite from International Falls, retained chairmanship of the powerful committee on Rules and Legislative Administration. The negotiated agreement also divided chairmanships of standing committees and membership of the committees between the two caucuses. That, too, was a tough year because of the close vote and members were rarely absent.

In order to amend the Constitution of the State of Minnesota, the legislative branch first must adopt the proposal that is submitted to the voters of the state at the next general election. Some of the best debates that ever took place in this very room related to proposed amendments to the state constitution. Here are a few:

In 1913, the legislature passed the bill providing for initiative and referendum. It was rejected by the voters in the general election and the constitution, therefore, was not amended.

The very same fight took place in the legislative

session of 1979. The proposal for initiative and referendum was again passed by the legislature but was again defeated by the voters of Minnesota in the 1980 general election.

Do you remember the fight over the taconite amendment to the Minnesota Constitution? That proposal was passed by the legislature in 1963 after several attempts and was ratified by the voters in 1964. The debates that took place in this very room over the taconite amendment were bitter and tense.

And remember pari-mutuel betting in 1982?

Another legislative responsibility is that of ratifying proposed amendments to the United States Constitution. Can you imagine the oratory that took place in this room in 1917 when the 18th amendment establishing prohibition was ratified? Or in 1933 when that amendment was repealed? Or in 1919 when the 19th amendment authorizing women to vote was ratified? Or in 1971 when the 26th amendment lowered the voting age to 18?

In 1972 the DFL party gained control of both bodies of the legislature for the first time in the history of the state. One of the first bills enacted into law in the 1973 session was repeal of the 60 year old law providing for the nonpartisan election of legislators. Nebraska with its Unicameral Legislature was the only other state in the union with nonpartisan members. Oh yes, there was some partisan politics in this room during the 60 years when we

were nonpartisan!

Occasionally the House will take a short recess or the House and Senate will meet in Joint Convention to hear an address by a VIP, a famous person. President Teddy Roosevelt addressed a Joint Convention in this room in 1909, the occasion being the establishment of Superior National Forest. U. S. Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg, a Minnesotan, spoke from this rostrum in 1931. He had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Other celebrities who have talked from this podium include:

Will Rogers

Sister Kenney

Sinclair Lewis, another Nobel Peace Prize  
winner from Minnesota

John McCormack, famous opera tenor

James J. Hill

Marion Anderson, famous opera star

Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey

Harmon Killebrew and Bob Allison of the  
Minnesota Twins

Dr. Will Menninger, world famous psychiatrist

Lowell Thomas

Otto Preminger, Hollywood producer of "Exodus"  
and many other movies

Vice President Walter F. Mondale

Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, Nobel Peace Prize winner  
Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme  
Court, Warren Burger  
Eugene McCarthy, Presidential candidate  
Dr. Jeannette Piccard, world famous ballonist  
Joe Louis, world champion boxer

And there have been many others including ambassadors  
and members of parliament from foreign countries.

Yes, this room is full of history. It's a story  
of honest people differing, it's a story of compromise,  
it's a story of majority rule. It's democratic government  
in action --- operating openly and soliciting citizen  
participation. Minnesota has a national reputation for having  
good, clean government. We have a national reputation for  
having a modern, responsive legislative branch. I'm glad for  
the opportunity I have had to be a part of it for over 40 years.

In behalf of Speaker Sieben, Majority Leader Eken,  
Minority Leader Jennings, and all the members of the House  
I invite you to come back next year when we will again be  
in session and observe more history being made.

Thank you!

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