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Remembering Gene

By Mark Hengel

As Jay Koontz tells it, former U.S. Fourth District Congressman Gene Snyder had no problem mixing with the common man.

Koontz was Snyder's field representative from 1976 until Snyder's final term ended in 1989. He said Snyder was as comfortable in blue jeans as he was in a suit. Snyder loved interacting with his constituents and discussing topics of the day with those who disagreed with his conservative philosophy as much as talking with his fellow conservatives.

"But by the time Gene [Snyder] left, the other man always agreed with him," Koontz said.

Marion Gene Snyder, 79, died Friday, Feb. 16, 2007, in Naples, Fla.

Koontz said the ability to blend came naturally to Snyder. A favorite memory Koontz shared was when Snyder almost forgot to attend a parade in Fairdale. Koontz remembers sitting in his black 1928 Ford waiting for Snyder to appear. Koontz stood with then-Jefferson County Judge-Executive Mitch McConnell and both men were afraid they would have to begin before Snyder arrived.

But soon, Snyder would arrive in his Ford F-100 pick-up truck wearing blue jeans with a red handkerchief hanging out of the back pocket and a denim shirt.

"Mitch [McConnell] looked at him like, 'huh?!'" Koontz said.

Snyder had been clearing rocks from his Trimble County farm and had forgotten about the engagement until he had no choice but to appear in his work clothes, Koontz said.

"But the people in Fairdale loved it," he said. "[Snyder] just had the appearance of an everyday, blue-collar man. He was never one to put on airs."

Anne Gernstein, who chairs the Oldham County Republican Party, began working for Snyder in 1980 as a staff assistant and became Snyder's Louisville district office chief.

Gernstein remembers the former representative as her most demanding boss but also her most fair.

She said Snyder's attention to detail garnered respect from members of both parties. As his tenure came to a close in 1987, staffers began cleaning out his offices in Louisville and Washington D.C. Gernstein said she called David York, Snyder's legislative director in Washington D.C., to ask what to do with stacks of Snyder's leftover stationary.

"[York] said to me, 'Don't send them up here [to Washington D.C.], because Snyder will make us cut them up and use them for notepads,'" she said.

Snyder hated to waste government resources, she said, calling her former boss "frugal." But she said his employees could deal with his demanding presence, because they saw him show up to work early and leave late. Snyder became known for arriving at the office at 7 a.m. or earlier and working many Saturdays, she said.

Snyder's desire not to waste government resources also earned him the ire of the Louisville Courier-Journal, she said. Snyder was the ranking minority member of the public works committee and secured many "pork-barrel projects" for his district and his state, including the Gene Snyder Freeway.

Snyder always got the last laugh, though, Gernstein said. He secured funding to help the General Services Administration renovate the courthouse and custom house that is on 600 block of West Broadway in downtown Louisville. And to show appreciation, the GSA's employees decided to name it the Gene Snyder U.S. Courthouse and Custom House.

When Snyder attended the renaming, he stood on the podium before the building and pointed to the Courier-Journal's office building that is on the 500 block of West Broadway, Gernstein said.

"[Snyder] said, 'One of the things that makes me happiest is that every day those folks are up there [at the Courier-Journal] will have to look at my name,'" Gernstein said.

Born in Louisville, Snyder studied at the University of Louisville and graduated from the University of Louisville School of Law, attaining his bachelor of laws and juris doctor in 1950. He was admitted to the bar and commenced practicing law in Louisville in 1950. Snyder served as the city attorney for Jeffersontown from 1954 to 1958, and was elected District 1 Magistrate in Jefferson County for two terms, from 1958 to 1962.

Snyder was engaged in farming, real estate, insurance, and also in the residential construction business. He was elected the state's District 3 representative in 1963 and District 4 representative in 1967. He served in District 4 until 1987. He was a resident of Pewee Valley.

Survivors include his wife, Pat Snyder; a son, Mark Snyder; two stepchildren, Ginger

Robertson and Chris Robertson; a brother, Ronald Snyder; and many friends.

Visitation will be 3 to 7 p.m. Friday and 10 to 11 a.m. Saturday at Pearson-Ratterman Brothers Funeral Home in Middletown.

Services will be at 11 a.m. Saturday at the funeral home.

Burial will take place at Floydensburg Cemetery in Crestwood.

Memorial contributions may go to the American Cancer Society.

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