

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Burdette Stegall: one of a kind

Burdette Stegall, who died last week at age 83 and served on governmental boards most of his life, was a professional grump. A member of the Knox County board for over a decade, he prided himself in questioning anything and everything, often the only member to bellow "No!" at the end of a role call vote. He usually voted against the entire county budget for one reason or another.

I was on his "calling list," those whom he called regularly to find out what he could, exchange the latest gossip, and to argue. I spoke with him about two weeks before he died, as it turned out. He was sharp as a tack to the very end, his last call to me being about the land purchases made by GREDA (economic development group). I was supposed to know all the ins and outs of that activity, which I didn't. I often didn't know what he thought I should, and in that case, he would fill me in. Sometimes he would make me so angry and frustrated he would just say "Let me talk to Dale!" would be thrilled to hand the phone to Dale.

My husband never met Burdette, but they were an even match on the phone. Burdette would bait Dale about partisan issues and Dale would never fail to dish it back. They had some humdingers of conversations.

Before elections, Burdette would love to call me and ask innocently, "What's going on?" at which point I was supposed to fill him in on all the Democratic party plans and activities. I learned early in the game that I didn't tell Burdette anything I didn't want his next phone contact to know.

Burdette was also a good man. I wasn't living in this area when his wife died and he was ill and had to have his leg amputated. But for years, he lived in their farm home alone and made the best of things. Because

of his size and partial disability, the county actually provided big, sturdy armchairs for him in the county board room and at the highway department.

I remember when Burdette was a Democrat. I met him in the 1970s at political party functions. Something happened in the 1980s and he changed parties. The day after he died I heard WGIL Radio announce his death and report he had served on the Knox County Board as a Democrat. Knowing how Burdette would have hated that, I called the station and corrected their record. Burdette would have objected, but I had to chuckle.

Burdette and I crossed paths again when I got on the county board in 1992. He was always verbally jabbing at me and I answered him quickly and firmly. I think he liked that. As the first woman on the Highway Committee of the board, I sat right next to Burdette, who was immediately rude and unpleasant to me. We often laughed about my turning around to face him, looming over me because of his size and his big chair, and snapped back at him so fast he blushed. From then on, we respected and understood each other.

Actually, if Burdette were honest, he would tell you he didn't think women ought to be in public office. Someone brought to my attention several years ago that he would not pose in a photo of the county board because of the women on the board and our female county clerk and deputy. And sure enough, I cannot find a photo of him as a board member.

But he didn't put up any fuss when County Highway Superintendent Francis Griffin took a photo of the Highway Committee, including me, out on a field trip.

Burdette Stegall will be remembered as a sharp, independent, curious, cantankerous guy who had a heart of gold. And there's no doubt about it, he will be remembered.

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