

Thursday, September 17, 1997

Sumter County Times

E.C. Rowell, former House speaker, dies

E.C. Rowell, former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, died of a heart attack in his Wildwood home early Monday evening. He was 77.

Rowell will be remembered in the political world because, as one of his closest friends Willard Peebles suggests, the list of his accomplishments and achievements is far too long and successful to ignore or forget.

That list would have to be printed like a catalogue, said Peebles, who owns the Wildwood Shopping Center.

But the truth of his absence, will also be a truth that the public and the press and the politicians will never know, according to Peebles who worked in an office next to Rowell for years.

It will be in the silence behind the front door of a family home or the pause in the stride of a local resident, as they take the time to remember E.C. Rowell.

And when those that grow silent behind the door and stop along the street remember E.C. Rowell it will a memory of how he took the time to help them get a job or their retirement or maybe workout a family problem.

It's those achievements that Peebles believes Rowell will be best remembered for and those achievements that the public will never know, he said.

Peebles said he remembers being amazed one day as he looked around his office and realized that out of the five people standing there, himself included, there wasn't one that Rowell hadn't helped at one time or another.

He said he wouldn't even try to put a number on all the people Rowell had helped on a personal level.

Rowell's political career included being a member of the House of Representative from 1956 to 1970 and Speaker of The House from 1965-66. Beginning in 1967 he spent three years as Chairman of the Rules Committee and from 1971 into the early 1980's he served as a lobbyist for the Florida Trucking Association.

According to former House Clerk Allen Morris, Rowell's credits include attaining reapportionment in the House, as well as being responsible for the installation of the computer system into the House.

"People nowadays don't realize who did it. He did it," Morris said.

Even Morris didn't remain untouched by Rowell's influence in his personal life.

According to Morris his wife was ill with cancer when Rowell encouraged him to become Clerk of the House. Rowell went so far as to visit Mrs. Morris and persuade her to encourage Morris that the

position would be good for him, helping to put his mind on new things.

Rowell could even lay claim to influencing royalty, because during World War II, he persuaded Britain's then princess and now queen to recognize his military comrades, Morris said.

Morris used the adjectives *gruff* and *shrewd*, noting that Rowell maintained a discipline in the House, that no one else did.

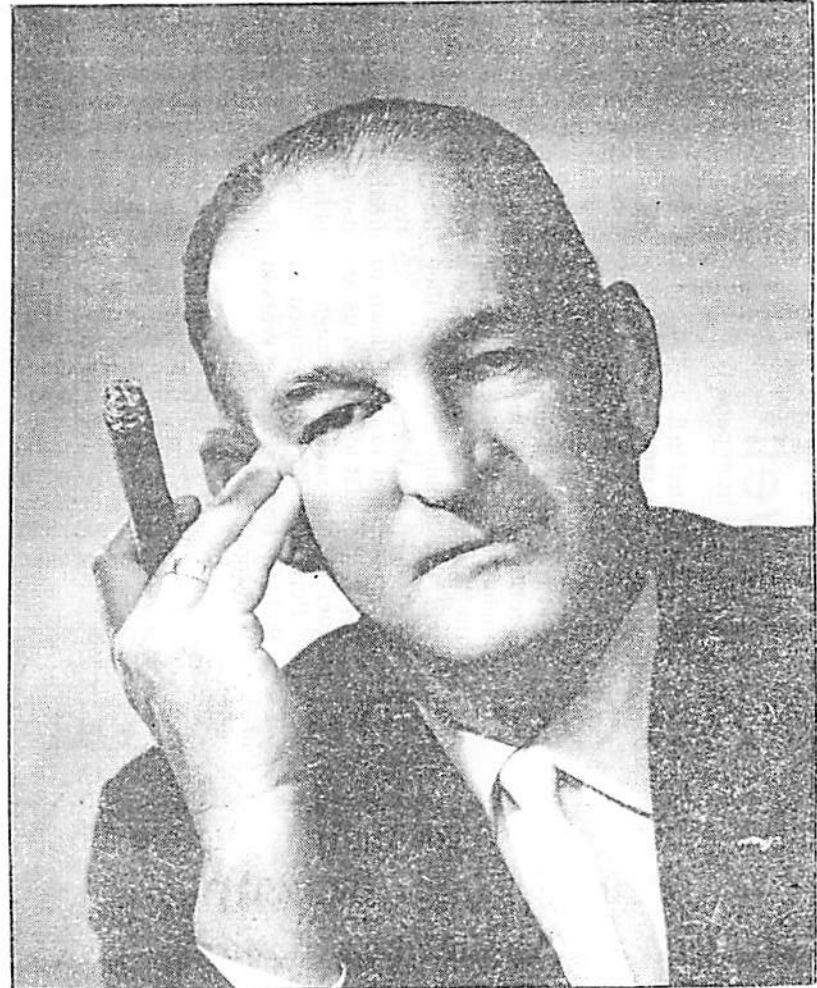
County Administrator Bernard Dew said it wasn't possible to have anything less than respect and admiration for Rowell's tenacity in pursuing goals, something he did relentlessly.

Dew said Rowell secured Sumter Correctional Institution and jobs for the county, as well as helping with road systems, including the Florida Turnpike.

Peebles said strong, persistent and a tremendous judge of people best described Rowell.

Peebles said he himself had a secret ambition that he had never shared with anyone. An ambition that he had never even mentioned to his family or friends, including Rowell.

He said he wanted to be appointed to the state road board and one day Rowell just came in the door and told him he had



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E.C. Rowell, former speaker of the state House of Representatives

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been appointed to it.

Listing his credits, Peebles noted the E.C. Rowell Highway (C.R. 471, south of Tarrytown), and his contributions to junior colleges and vocational education, but for Peebles himself, his cherished memories of Rowell will include the laughter, the practical jokes and the fishing trips that they shared.

"People used to come down to the banks, just to listen to us argue," Peebles said with a laugh.

Born in Oxford and raised in Webster, he spent his last years in Wildwood.

In addition to his previously listed credits, Rowell was Past Master of Bushnell Masonic Lodge #30, Shriner and World War II Veteran.

Rowell is survived by his wife Marjorie of Wildwood, two daughters Barbara Besrock and Diane Chappell of Wildwood, one son Justin of Lake City and four grandchildren.

Graveside services will be held at 11 a.m. on Friday, Sept. 18, at the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Webster, with the family receiving friends during visitation from 5 p.m. until 8 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 18 at the Purcell Funeral Home Chapel.

They ask that in lieu of flowers donations be made to the E.C. Rowell Public Library in Webster.

E.C. Rowell, cigar-smoking former House speaker, dies

By STEVE ORLANDO
Tribune Staff Writer

WILDWOOD — E.C. Rowell, former Florida House speaker and a cigar-smoking embodiment of powerful old-time Florida politics, died Monday. He was 77.

Rowell was instrumental in creating the state's modern road system and in bringing Walt Disney World to Florida.

He suffered a heart attack at his Wildwood home about 6 p.m. while his family was shopping, said Marjorie Rowell, his wife of 48 years.

"He was one of my great friends and a great friend of Florida," said Claude Kirk, Republican governor from 1967 to 1971.

Rowell was elected a Democratic state representative in 1956, overcoming a lengthy bout with alcoholism. He served until 1970, including terms as speaker in 1965-66 and chairman of the Rules Committee from 1967 until 1970.

Born in the tiny community of Oxford, Rowell never forgot his Sumter County roots. His time in the Legislature included major reforms in state government, although Rowell's critics regarded him as a pork-barrel politician.

"He did so much for so many people, and he was able in return to get their attention," said Willard Peebles of Wildwood, Rowell's longtime friend and a member of the state road board, a position Rowell helped him get.

Rowell unabashedly looked out for his home district. One of his major projects ensured Wildwood's

place on the map.

Florida's Turnpike, built in the 1950s, originally was to run from Miami to Orlando. With Rowell's help, the route was extended to run through Sumter County, where it now intersects Interstate 75.

Rowell also helped smooth the way in the mid-1960s for the later construction of Walt Disney World, now a leading international tourist destination.

On a local level, Rowell saw to the construction of State Road 471 in Sumter and Polk counties in the early 1960s.

Aware of Rowell's political clout, Kirk sought and received his support when he ran for governor in 1966, despite their party differences.

"In those days, it was political death and derring-do to be a Republican or [for a Democrat] to back a Republican," Kirk said. "Some men believe in principles. He was one of those men."

After leaving the Legislature, Rowell became a lobbyist for the Florida Trucking Association. He left that job in the early 1980s to tend to his Wildwood home and his Webster ranch.

The public library in Webster, which on Tuesday had a black ribbon on its front door, contains a large collection of Civil War memorabilia and books donated by Rowell. He also donated money toward its construction.

A funeral service for Rowell is scheduled for 11 a.m. Friday at the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Webster.



Rowell in 1965.