

Former governor wore various hats

By Susan Steinmueller
staff writer

Former Michigan governor Murray Van Wagoner — who died Thursday at Botsford General Hospital, Farmington Hills, at 83 — was a long-time Birmingham-Bloomfield resident and an engineer by profession.

He served a two-year term as governor, from 1941-42, after a successful political career in county and state positions, including that of

state highway commissioner. He remained active in civic organizations and was a member of the board of directors of Botsford General Hospital, of which he was a former chairman.

Van Wagoner, a Democrat, was the first official for statewide office to receive over one-million votes in Michigan when he was elected governor. Many Republicans crossed party lines to elect him over Lt. Gov. Luren Dickinson. He lost a re-election bid in 1942.

He once said that while serving as governor his most important task was keeping the peace between labor and management and avoiding massive worker strikes, such as had occurred at Consumers' Power and Ford Motor and which might have hindered the war effort.



Former governor Murray Van Wagoner and his wife, Helen, in a 1984 photo.

tion at the time of his election was transformed into a \$27 million surplus by the end of his two-year term.

But Van Wagoner had said that the position he most enjoyed was that of state highway commissioner. He was elected to that post in 1933 and served until 1940, when he resigned to run for governor.

"I felt I really accomplished something in the highway department," he

said. "We didn't have much money, but we stretched it a long way."

Michigan history will agree with that assessment. In the book, "Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State," author Willis Dunbar wrote, "The only truly effective Democratic party organization built up in these Depression years was that of Murray D. Van Wagoner who had been elected state highway commissioner in 1933."

UNDER HIS administration, Michigan conducted one of the nation's first state highway needs studies, laying groundwork for Detroit's freeway system and improved highway financing.

He established the first roadside park on the state's highway system and the nation's first permanent state highway travel information center.

The causeway built into the Straits of Mackinac during his administration was the first concrete step in the famed Mackinac Bridge.

Van Wagoner worked his way through school, earning an engineering degree at the University of Michigan in 1921. He held civil and private engineering jobs and was a Pontiac engineer when first elected to public office in 1930.

He said his first elected position as Oakland County drain commissioner was somewhat of a surprise, and the result of a Pontiac newspaper article which mentioned him in connection with his activities with a local organization.

"Before I knew it, the local Democratic party had nominated me for drain commissioner," he said.

He became one of the few Democrats to have won office in Oakland County, where he was twice elected drain commissioner.

AFTER SERVING as governor, he moved to Birmingham where he and his family maintained a house for 14 years, keeping it while they moved to Germany for two years, 1948-49, when he was appointed by President Harry Truman as director of the U.S. military government for the German state of Bavaria.

He later moved to Bloomfield Township, and was self-employed as an engineering consultant.

He was born on a Tuscola County farm near Kingston in Michigan's "Thumb" area, on March 18, 1898, to James and Florence Van Wagoner.

His wife of 62 years, the former Helen Jossman, died in April. Survivors include two daughters, Ellen Wikol and Jo Ann Karhos, six grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Van Wagoner was a member of American Road Builders Association, American Society of Civil Engineers, and Michigan Engineering Society. He was also a member of the Mason, Elks, Moose, Oddfellows, and American Legion 40 & 8 organizations. He attended St. James Episcopal Church in Birmingham.

Huntton Funeral Home in Pontiac is handling arrangements. A funeral will be held 1:30 p.m. today in St. James Episcopal Church, Birmingham. Burial will be in White Chapel Memorial Cemetery in Troy.

Van Wagoner — in memory

Continued from Page 1

"The agenda we mail out generally contains 150-200 pages of information," Cooper said. "We don't really expect anyone to read it all. It's furnished for background. But Pat invariably read every single word. He held a very strong commitment and he was very knowledgeable."

RUSS TUTTLE, Botsford's community relations director, said Van Wagoner not only was a citizen activist, but also a good storyteller. "I enjoyed listening to him," Tuttle said. "He'd put you at ease very, very quickly."

Tuttle remembers Van Wagoner recalling his days as governor in 1941-42 — a governorship Van Wagoner won even though President Franklin Roosevelt, a fellow Democrat, failed to carry Michigan.

"I remember the governor telling me that when he was elected, the state had a deficit of several million dollars. But when he left the governorship, the state had built a surplus. He was very proud of that," Tuttle said.

Van Wagoner was trained as a civil engineer. He was a state highway department bridge engineer from 1921-24, owner of a Pontiac civil engineering company from 1924 to 1930, Oakland County drain commissioner from 1930-33 and state highway commissioner from 1933 to 1940.

AS STATE highway commissioner, Van Wagoner was responsible for opening the nation's first permanent state highway travel information center near New Buffalo and first roadside park near East Lansing.

He served on the Mackinac Bridge Authority since 1947, and was vice chairman at the time of his death. He also was a highway consultant.

Jaycees choose 1st woman president

Continued from Page 1

ceded planning that has already been done to celebrate Farmington Area Jaycees 40th year of service to the community and the work delegated to its 80 members.

"I'm very proud of being the (Farmington) Jaycees first woman president and particularly on an anniversary year," she said. "Enthusiasm is running very high and I am determined this year will be the best of the 40."

COLEMAN's determination runs hand-in-hand with the commitment she has made for the year.

The Jaycees' projects of fund raising and services, with money coming and in going out continuously, runs year-round with no summer break. This year's agenda

lists 60 projects, and though the president does not participate in any committee, is expected to oversee and attend all of them.

Membership meetings, board meetings, state conferences and a constant-ringing telephone leaves little time for much else. In her words, "no other clubs, no hobbies, no night school, no leisure classes, just commitment to the Jaycees for a year."

One of those commitments has been to get in touch with as many of the Farmington Area Jaycees' 40 past presidents as Coleman can reach and involve in the 40th year anniversary projects.

The grand opening of the 40th year will be a float for the Founders Festival Parade. The float was a longtime tradition that fell off for a time and Coleman will

reactivate. The Jaycees will continue their tradition of providing food under a tent for festival-goers.

A BLACK-TIE dinner to benefit the Center for Burn Medicine is something new on the year's agenda. And so is "Meet and Treat," an addition to the Haunted House the Jaycees prepare every fall, which will be an alternative for trick and treats.

The most ambitious of the new projects that will go into effect this year is called "Elderly Assistance," a multi-service to the community's seniors that will encompass everything from security to house maintenance.

Coleman is a native of South Bend, Ind., whose family moved to Michigan in 1963. When she graduated from Livonia Stevenson High

School, she had already worked for Winkelman's for three years.

"Winkelman's offered to train me as a store manager. I was always interested in fashion, sewing, design. Instead of going to college, I thought I would try the training, just for a year."

By the time she was 19 years old, she was managing her first store. Her job as a manager at Winkelman's — in Tok's Mall in Southfield and then in Briarwood Mall in Ann Arbor — lasted 10 years. She quit that job when Kimberly Rae, now 2 years old, was born.

IN THE interim, she said she "dabbled in college, took a few courses here and there but didn't work too hard at anything specific."

When her year as president of

Farmington Area Jaycees closes, she says she'll get around to seriously thinking about going back to school and pursuing a law degree — "something that's been in the back of my mind for a long while."

In August, Coleman will attend the Jaycee Michigan convention on Mackinac Island, with "one of the largest delegations we've ever had from the Farmington-Farmington Hills club," she said.

"That's a good example of the kind of enthusiasm we've got going for us this year," she said. "Our membership now is about 80 percent men and 20 percent women. That gives us a lot of both day and evening people power, with everybody willing to take a lot of responsibility for whatever the job at hand."

Budget detail is presented

Of the \$56.3 million dollar 1986-87 budget for Farmington Public Schools, \$17.8 million is budgeted for basic instruction, according to the resolution passed in early June.

Next highest on the list of expenditures

is \$10.6 million under the business account in support services.

The budget is broken down into four categories of expenditures with sub-accounts listed in more detail. Total budgeted amounts include

\$29.6 million for instruction, \$24 million for support services, \$100,000 for community services, and \$2.5 million for capital outlay.

About 85 percent of the out-of-

state district's revenue, or \$47.6 million, comes from local property taxes. Another \$5.8 million is received from the intermediate school district, \$1.9 million from the state and \$886,000 is federally funded.

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