

# In their blood

## 16 legislators have a family connection to previous members of the House and Senate

By TOM LONERGAN

Following their parent's path wasn't exactly on the future agenda for a couple of first-year House members when as children, they watched their legislator fathers head for St. Paul.

Rep. Katie Sieben (DFL-Newport) was 5 years old when her father, Michael Sieben, finished five terms in the House in 1982. Rep. Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley) remembered when he was 6, "running around the Capitol tunnels," while his dad, Willis Eken, a House member from 1971-84, tended to business.

Family connections in the Minnesota Legislature are not unusual. Considering generation-to-generation, siblings, spouses, and extended families – even a first cousin once removed – there are 11 current members of the House and five in the Senate with family legislative ties, according to the Legislative Reference Library.

Rep. Howard Swenson (R-Nicollet) and Rep. Barb Sykora (R-Excelsior) are two veteran House members who also grew up with political issues flavoring family discussions.

Swenson, serving his fifth term, traces his legislative lineage back to his great-grandfather, Swen Swenson (House 1887), who emigrated to the U.S. from Norway in 1857. The farm his great-grandfather established in Nicollet is run today by Howard Swenson's son.

"I guess I had an early interest and knowledge of the state," Swenson said. "My grandfather was in the Senate during the years I was growing up." Oscar A. Swenson served in the

Senate from 1937-49 and in the House in 1913, from 1915-29, and in 1931.

Sykora's father, John Zwach, served in the Legislature for 30 years (House, 1935-46 and Senate, 1946-66) and was a Congressman from Minnesota for three terms (1966-72).

"You could say I was born into it," said Sykora, serving her fifth term. "I developed an interest in issues and politics at the dinner table."

Generational lines of state legislators trace back to the 19th century. Yet, it apparently took until the third year of the 21st century for one family to have three consecutive generations serve in the House.

Rep. Aaron Peterson (DFL-Madison) sits in the same House seat his father, Doug Peterson (House 1991-2002), and late grandfather, Harry Peterson (House 1965-73), did.

"The carryover of being around people in politics is pretty impressive," said Doug Peterson, who recalled sitting on Hubert H. Humphrey's lap when he was 5. "I didn't campaign for my son," Peterson said. "That's something he had to do on his own. The voters have to know who you are as an individual."

Proud of their roots, the legislators with family ties say they don't believe it gives them an edge over their colleagues, other than perhaps some inside knowledge of the legislative process.

"I came in with some idea about how things worked," said Eken, who teaches, government, economics, and history. "It's helpful, but things have changed since my father served."

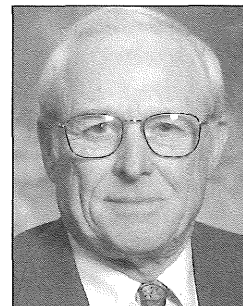
"It's nice to have a father that people remember," said Sieben, 25, the youngest current member of the House. "The main result of my dad's



Rep. Oscar A. Swenson



Rep. Doug Swenson

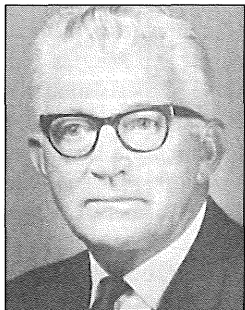


Rep. Howard Swenson

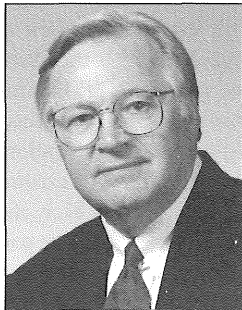
influence is it instilled in me the belief that public service is an honorable profession to be in."

Swenson said he ran for state office after many years of being active in his community, serving on school boards and agriculture-related committees. Asked if he's continuing a family legacy that also included great-uncle Lars Swenson (Senate 1887-89), an uncle, Carl L. Swenson (Senate 1915-17), and a brother, Doug Swenson (1987-97), Swenson said, "I suppose some people would think so."

Sykora, first elected in 1994, four years after her father died, said his influence helped her decide to run for the House. "He always encouraged me to be involved," she said. "I have often thought how nice it would be to have him around to get his advice, but I waited too long."



Rep. Harry Peterson



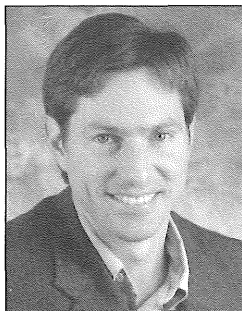
Rep. Doug Peterson



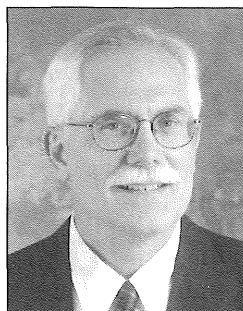
Rep. Aaron Peterson



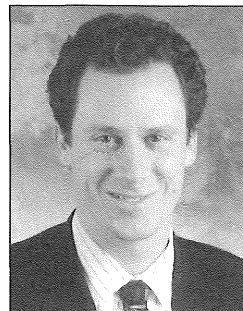
Rep. Willis Eken



Rep. Kent Eken



Rep. Ray Cox



Rep. Ron Latz

Among current legislators, the Swensons don't hold the longest family line back in legislative history. That milestone belongs to Sen. Steve Dille (R-Dassel), a former House member from 1987-92. Dille's great-great grandfather, Edward Harrison Hutchins was a state Senator from 1872-75.

The great-grandfather of Rep. Ray Cox (R-Northfield), Edwin Cox, was in the House in 1889.

There's no indication of a current descendant from a legislator that served during the state's first decade in the 1860s or prior years as a territory.



Rep. John Zwach



Rep. Barb Sykora

### Legislative family connections

Sen. Ellen Anderson is the wife of Andy Dawkins (House 1987-2002)

Rep. Len Biernat is the son of Ted Biernat (House 1949-57)

Rep. Ray Cox is the great-grandson of Edwin Cox (House 1887)

Rep. Jerry Dempsey is the brother of Terry Dempsey (House 1979-93)

Sen. Steve Dille is the great-great grandson of Edwin Harrison Hutchins (Senate 1872-75), great-nephew of Peter E. Hanson (Senate 1895-99, Secretary of State 1901-07), and great-son-in-law of John R. Bloomquist (House 1947-55)

Rep. Kent Eken is the son of Willis Eken (House 1971-84)

Sen. David Knutson is the son of Howard Knutson (House 1967-73; Senate 1973-90)

Rep. Ron Latz is the son of Robert Latz (House 1959-67)

Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba is the widow of Ken Otremba (House 1995-97)

Rep. Aaron Peterson is the son of Doug Peterson (House 1991-2002) and the grandson of Harry Peterson (House 1965-73)

Rep. Katie Sieben is the daughter of Mike Sieben (House 1973-82) and the niece of Harry Sieben (House 1971-84)

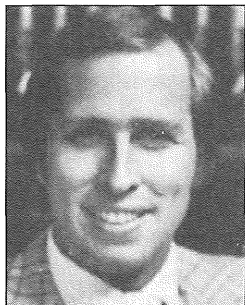
Rep. Nora Slawik is the first cousin once removed of Martin McGowan, Jr. (House 1959-67)

Sen. Yvonne Prettner Solon is the widow of Sam Solon (House 1971-73; Senate 1973-2001)

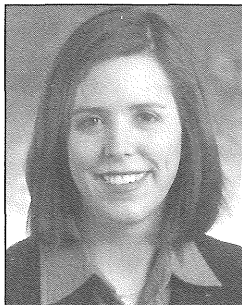
Rep. Howard Swenson is the brother of Doug Swenson (House 1987-97), nephew of Carl L. Swenson (Senate 1915-17), and grandson of Oscar Swenson (House 1913, 1915-29, and 1931; Senate 1937-49)

Rep. Barb Sykora is the daughter of John Zwach (House 1935-46; Senate 1946-66)

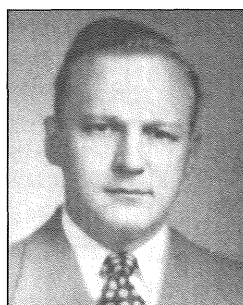
Sen. Jim Vickerman is the first cousin to the husband of Barb Vickerman (House 1993-97)



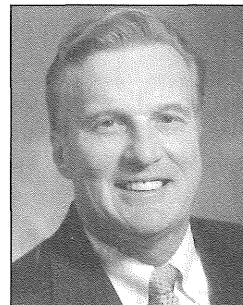
Rep. Mike Sieben



Rep. Katie Sieben



Rep. Ted Biernat



Rep. Len Biernat

Some photos courtesy of the Secretary of State's Legislative Manual