

ROOKER REPORT

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GEORGE L. ROOKER: 1929-1993

George Lloyd Rooker began his county government career in 1954 at the age of 25 after getting his baptismal in government work as an employee of the state.

Never being one who was afraid of work, he had early in life adopted a personal ethic: do a good job and good things will happen. And so he did.

While with the state, Mr. Rooker applied himself and good things did happen. His efforts were recognized in the form of steadily improved job classification. At the end of eight years he had climbed to the position of supervisor of titles and was preparing himself for better things ahead by taking a correspondence course in accounting.

In 1962, Mr. Rooker was appointed chief clerk to the Metropolitan Nashville trustee, a position he held until 1968 when he was appointed to complete the unexpired term of Circuit Court Clerk Alf Rutherford, who had died suddenly. Since that time, his record of service was so impressive that voters returned him six times to the four-year position.

He was celebrating his 25th year in his first political office at the time of his death. He had privately announced to friends following recovery from his second heart bypass surgery in August that he would seek reelection in 1994.

As an elected official, his integrity was never challenged. He was beyond reproach in his dedication to serving the public welfare. Although he served at the whim of the voters, he never liked the label or considered himself a politician. He was an employee of the people and he earned his pay by extending his workaholic addiction beyond physical endurance.

Mr. Rooker not only endorsed workplace perfection; he insisted on it. He only knew one way to master an assignment--the correct way. To his many employees, it was the Rooker way. Nothing short of that would suffice. It would never get past his desk. (Please Turn Page)

Perhaps his one weakness was the inability to say "no." Repeatedly, he was asked to take on additional responsibilities. He never hesitated to accept the challenge. As a result, the citizens of Davidson County realized greater efficiency, but the increased pressures eventually took their toll on an already over-extended human being.

The strain first gained intensity in 1975 when the state Supreme Court ruled that traffic offenses could no longer be treated as criminal offenses in compliance with state statutes. The high court effectively removed the clerical responsibilities of those infractions from the Criminal Court clerk and placed them directly under the auspices of the Circuit Court clerk. Mr. Rooker, thusly, inherited the Metro Traffic Violations Bureau, thereby giving him supervisory control over a third major department. The General Sessions civil division already was under his jurisdiction, along with Circuit Court.

Four years later, following an intensive period of overhauling procedural operations in the bureau, Mr. Rooker was admitted to St. Thomas Hospital for what was to be the first of a series of major heart surgeries.

His resiliency toughened by other physical corrections, Mr. Rooker survived the scalpel assault on his heart's arteries and was back at his desk in record time. But he had gotten an admonition from his doctors that the patchwork might be limited to a five-year warranty on life. That satisfied him. It would be enough time for him to see his two sons through school and to accomplish some of the goals he had set for improving total efficiency of his office.

Fortunately, the warranty was an extended one. It wasn't until 13 years later--in August, 1992--that persistent, painful migraine headaches forced him back to the doctor's office where it was discovered that new bypass surgery would be required to correct five severely blocked arteries.

Again, he beat the odds. Again, he was back at his desk much sooner than the doctors had allowed. Again, his work days were penetrating into ripened darkness. Again, he demanded much too much of his patched-up body. And again it was his desire to complete improvement projects that propelled him.

Convinced he was invincible, Mr. Rooker didn't stop at his own personal goals. He relented to adding yet another department to his daily workload, that of the Probate Court, which had been under the County Court Clerk but lended itself more properly to litigation authority. When he assumed responsibility for that office last July 1, adaptation of his expertise further strained demands on his physical output. And he gave it all he had.

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His response to caring employees and friends who scolded him for over exerting himself was that he was only doing what the taxpayers were paying him to do. Indeed, he was grossly underpaid.

Mr. Rooker was the first office holder in Nashville to invest operating fees in interest-bearing accounts. As a result, he earned and turned over to the local government's general fund millions of dollars in excess fees. Other office holders followed his lead.

As circuit court clerk, Mr. Rooker was guardian of more than \$50 million each year, including an ever-increasing influx of child support payments that last year exceeded the \$11 million mark.

Of course, there is a plethora of other chores that attach themselves to the office, such as mailing out summonses to all prospective jurors for both civil and criminal courts and supervising all aspects of jury service for those courts. The circuit clerk even handles the budget for criminal court judges, not as a requirement, but because Mr. Rooker accepted the job at the request of his friend, the late Criminal Court Judge Raymond H. Leathers.

To make each department tick, Mr. Rooker managed to achieve maximum efficiency through innovative electronic systems designed under his personal supervision to correspond with each specific need. In 1989, as the child support caseload continued to steamroll, he converted an antiquated manual payment posting system to computer, providing immediate access to both payment and arrearage information. This led two years later to installation of an electronic telephone system that stores data on each child support case. Now, custodial parents with special code numbers can dial up the latest information available in their cases without assistance from clerks, who can devote more time to other duties. At last count, a total of 344 persons each day were taking advantage of this system.

Mr. Rooker also installed computer systems in both circuit and general sessions offices and had started computerization of operations in both probate and traffic violations departments.

Mr. Rooker shared credit for his office's advancements with his employees, whom he considered mere extensions of his "family." He treated every male employee as a son and each female as a daughter. He handpicked each one based on individual merit and seldom found need to disown a "child."

When a member of his staff encountered a problem--personal or otherwise--he provided a shoulder and helped each one find a way to overcome

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the dilemma. He stuck by them to the end, in the same manner he stood up for friends and total strangers when confronted with problematic situations.

On numerous occasions, Mr. Rooker reached in his pocket to help distraught mothers of children neglected by their divorced fathers. He often boasted of how the "loans" were always repaid when the mothers received their child support checks from his office. The beam in his eyes always confirmed a justification of his faith in people.

Throughout his public life, Mr. Rooker found time to be a devoted husband and father. He and wife Betty (his childhood sweetheart) reared two sons--George, Jr., and Richard--both of whom chose government work as their vocations.

Here is a chronology of Mr. Rooker's years in office:

1968--Appointed by judges to fill vacancy created by death of Circuit Court Clerk Alf Rutherford, an interim appointment effective only until the next general election that same year. Although a political novice, he defeated councilman Tom McGrath in perhaps the most publicized political campaign in Nashville history.

1970--Re-elected without opposition. Received endorsement of both Nashville newspapers, including the Tennessean, which had opposed him in his maiden campaign.

1974--Re-elected without opposition, again with endorsements of both daily papers and the Nashville Bar Association, which supported him in every election.

1978--Won landslide election over opponent, Nashville insurance executive George Kish.

1982--Re-elected without opposition.

1986--Re-elected without opposition.

1990--Overwhelmed Brentwood businesswoman Lisa K. Browning, a Young Republican leader.

On Monday, March 8, 1993--three days following Mr. Rooker's death--his youngest son Richard was unanimously appointed by the judicial branch to act as interim clerk, subject to approval of the Metro Council. If approved, Richard Rooker will serve out the remainder of his father's elected term, which expires next September.
