

Joseph E. Tinney -- politician held in high regard

Wednesday, May 17, 2006

Republican **Joseph E. Tinney**, that rare San Francisco politician who was viewed by rival party members and the press as an honest man, died Saturday from complications from lymphoma. He was 96 and lived in Petaluma, in a home for patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease.



Mr. **Tinney**, an attorney by training, was the San Francisco assessor from 1966 until his retirement in 1979. Before that he served on the Board of Supervisors, including a stint as board president.

Mr. **Tinney's** integrity was so unquestioned that two Democratic mayors -- George Christopher and John Shelley -- appointed him to the city posts, and Democratic political leaders played key roles in his re-election campaigns.

Christopher, who was Mr. **Tinney's** neighbor in Merced Manor, appointed him to the Board of Supervisors in March 1961 to fill a vacancy created by the death of another supervisor. In making the appointment, Christopher described Mr. **Tinney** as "a high grade gentleman in every respect."

Five years later, Shelley asked Mr. **Tinney** to replace Russ Wolden, the longtime assessor who was convicted of eight counts of bribery and one count of conspiracy.

Wolden had been in the office for 28 years, since 1938, and the department was a mess when Mr. **Tinney** took over. Within a year, Mr. **Tinney** had overhauled the department, called for reform of property tax assessments, and had every residence and business property reassessed with a flat rate across-the-board. Special audits uncovered nearly \$9 million in back taxes owed.

Although many homeowners and business saw their taxes go up, Mr. **Tinney** handily won re-election, time and time again, and was one of the biggest vote-getters in the city. He was so popular that he even considered running for state Senate and for mayor, said his son, **Joseph Tinney** of Petaluma.

Though he was a Republican by party, he was a working man at heart, said his son.

He was born **Joseph Emmanuel Tinney**, the youngest of seven children born to Irish immigrants. His father was an early teamster, in that he had a team of horses for delivering and hauling. In later years, his dad was a cable car gripman. He worked the Owl Line, meaning he worked midnight duty.

Like many immigrant children, young Edward was expected to go to school and get excellent grades. He was valedictorian of St. Ignatius High School, class of 1927, and managed to get through college and law school within six years at the University of San Francisco, where again he had the top grades in his class.

He grew up on Bernal Heights and in the Outer Mission, and although he moved to Merced Manor after marrying in 1940, he kept roots in the Mission District, maintaining several law practices there over the years, both before and after his government service.

The Mission at the time didn't have its own dedicated supervisor, said his son, but residents considered Mr. **Tinney** one of their own. When Latinos wanted to have Mission Street closed off for Cinco de Mayo celebrations, Mr. **Tinney** took on the task, arguing to fellow board members that it was only fair, given that Market Street was closed to celebrate St. Patrick's Day and Columbus Day parades. And though a fiscal conservative, he argued in favor of giving raises to Municipal Railway bus drivers, whom he considered to be underpaid in the 1960s.

Mr. **Tinney's** foray into politics began in the early 1940s, when he was a member of the Republican County Central Committee and the Republican State Central Committee. A decade later he was on the San Francisco Planning Commission, where he served a stint as its chairman. The supervisor's and assessor's posts followed.

Upon retirement from public service, Mr. **Tinney** returned to the Mission District and to private practice as a civil litigator. He worked as an attorney until 2000, said his son. He also enjoyed travel, the theater and concerts with his wife, the former Helen Elizabeth Frahm. When she died in 1999, a lot of his zest faded and he retired soon after.

In addition to his son, he is survived by a daughter, Marcella **Tinney** Frank of Windsor in Sonoma County, seven grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

A vigil will be at 7 p.m. Thursday night at Parent-Sorensen Mortuary and Crematory, 850 Keokuk St., in Petaluma. A funeral Mass will be celebrated at 10 a.m. Friday at St. Stephen's Church, 601 Eucalyptus Dr. in San Francisco. Interment will follow at Holy Cross Cemetery in Colma.