

Party Pooper

GOP stalwart Paul Hassett breaks ranks on intervenor's office.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Paul Hassett would fit right in with the good old boys at the American Legion bar in Three Lakes for three very good reasons. Number three: He's been a fisherman all his life. Number two: He was an Air Force navigator in both World War II and Korea. And reason number one: Paul Hassett has been a card-carrying Republican all his life.

"At Legion Post 431," Steady Eddy says, "those credentials will keep you in Beer Nuts the rest of your days."

Paul Hassett was born in Worcester, Mass., in 1917, but grew up in Milwaukee, where he attended St. Galls grade school and West Division high school. There, he won 10 letters in basketball, track and cross-country and was the state high school cross-country champion in 1937 and 1938.

At 78, he's still running like a fine-tuned engine. We delayed our luncheon the other day so he could squeeze in a swim.

A graduate of the old La Crosse State, he majored in English and history, was editor of the *Dunn County News* (and chaired the Dunn County Republican Party at the same time), president of the Wisconsin Association of Manufacturers and Commerce, a member of the UW Board of Regents, and executive secretary to the late Gov. Warren P. Knowles for his entire administration—from 1964 to 1970.

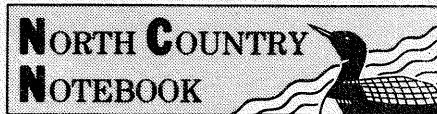
Hassett thinks Warren Knowles would disagree with some of Tommy Thompson's recent decisions, particularly the one to eliminate the office of public intervenor and its two and a half positions. After all, it was the Knowles administration that created the office of public intervenor in the first place. That happened after the 1967 merger of the old Conservation

Department and the Department of Resource Development.

A lot of the old-timers then, many of them hunters and fisherfolk, feared their interests would get lost in the new bureaucratic shuffle. "They felt they'd be up the creek without a paddle," Steady Eddy says, "or a canoe." The Wisconsin public wanted someone whose *only* job would be to watch out for the state's resources. They got that advocate in the public intervenor. Hassett feels the office is one of Warren Knowles' great legacies.

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only state agency that can function over other state agencies. It's a watchdog over the Department of Natural Resources, and it keeps the DNR on their toes. Well, you remove the watchdog and you force people into court; that costs money, and the cases stretch into big, long cases that can go for two, three, four, five years."

Hassett is certain that there is no pressure coming from the DNR to abolish the public intervenor. And he thinks he knows where the pressure might be coming from.

"My guess," he says, "is that the present mining rules and regulations in Wisconsin may have prompted this move by the governor to eliminate the public intervenor's office. The governor has been close to the mining group. James Klauser used to rep-

resent the mining group.

"Klauser worked for me for about three years when I represented the Wisconsin Manufacturers, and Exxon was one of his clients. He handled them."

Hassett insists he is "not particularly opposed" to mining, but it has to be done under state rules and regulations. Then, the state has to make sure that the mining companies abide by those rules.

"The public intervenor's office," Hassett says, "now has its half-time attorney assigned to watchdog Exxon and the Crandon mining operation. And that's the way it should be. But if the public intervenor's office is terminated, then the people's watchdog is also terminated.

"Exxon should be watched. I think all mining in the state should be watched."

Hassett went back to his soup before it cooled, and I told him I had heard the attorney general, James Doyle, say that while the attorneys in the public intervenor's worked for the Department of Justice, they did things their own way.

"I don't always agree with the public intervenor's office," the attorney general had confessed, "but even though I appoint them, it's an independent office in the Justice Department—and that's the way it should be."

"I agree," Hassett concurs. "That's the way it should be. Tommy's done a great job in some areas—being a spokesman for the state. Being a spokesman for business. I applaud his work in that.

"But he wants to control everything. He wants to run the Department of Education. He wants to run the DNR. He appointed the whole Board of Regents and he tells them you can't do it your way, you do it my way. I don't understand that. It's contrary to my belief in the democratic process—that's with a small 'd'—as Wisconsin has known it.

"In my wildest dreams, I could not envision Warren Knowles making a power play like this." ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).