

Mildred Schwab (1917-1999)

By Philip Cogswell

A Portland city commissioner for fourteen years, Mildred Schwab was known for her sharp tongue, colorful personality, and frugality regarding city funds. A lover of music and an accomplished pianist, she played an important role as the commissioner in charge of the development of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts.

Born in Portland on January 9, 1917, Schwab's parents were Jewish immigrants. She grew up in northeast Portland, attending Irvington Grade School, Grant High School, and the Northwestern School of Business. At a time when there were few women lawyers in the state, she attended Northwestern College of Law. She graduated in 1939 and became a member of the Oregon Bar. Her brother Herbert would become chief judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals.

Schwab practiced law in Portland until her appointment to the City Council in January 1973, filling the vacancy created when Commissioner Neil Goldschmidt became mayor. She easily won election three times until her retirement in December 1986.

As a city commissioner, including the time when she was in charge of the police and fire bureaus, Schwab enjoyed considerable public popularity for her informal, flamboyant manner and quick wit. But at City Hall she had a reputation for being temperamental, unpredictable, and disruptive and for not hesitating to publicly criticize fellow politicians and city staff members or to derail a colleague's proposal.

Regarded as highly intelligent, Schwab was attentive to detail, especially regarding city spending. Her goal was to read the text of every proposed initiative. She countered the charge of being a nitpicker by saying she once caught a \$10 million mistake.

After her retirement from the council, Schwab served on the Port of Portland Commission and worked on civic causes. She chaired a citizens' advisory committee for the state Youth Conservation Corps, a program aimed at helping troubled youngsters.

Schwab, who never married and lived alone, was found dead in her northwest Portland home on January 13, 1999, a few days after celebrating her eighty-second birthday.

Sources

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