

THOSE WE'VE LOST

Robbie Waters, an Old-School Cop and Legislator, Dies at 84

A Sacramento fixture, Mr. Waters drove a 1932 Ford and crossed paths with Patty Hearst and Squeaky Fromme. He died of the coronavirus.



By John Leland

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This obituary is part of a series about people who have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Read about others here.

Robbie Waters won four terms as the only Republican on the Sacramento City Council. He once won 98 percent of the vote.

But that's not all: He was a former police lieutenant and sheriff who, in 44 years of public service, crossed paths with both the newspaper heiress Patty Hearst and Lynette Fromme, the Charles Manson follower known as Squeaky; marched in President Ronald Reagan's inaugural parade; and was hanged in effigy by his own deputies. He also created the sheriff department's domestic violence unit, coached Little League, ran a hardware store and published an autobiography.

And a public library was named after him.

About that hardware store: "It wasn't a good idea to try to shoplift at a store owned by Robbie Waters," said his daughter, Deanna Earl. "You'd get cuffed to the palm tree outside. I saw that happen a couple times."

Mr. Waters broke his hip in his Sacramento home on June 30. While he was recovering in a nursing home, a test revealed that he had the novel coronavirus.

He died on July 27 at Sutter General Hospital, his daughter said. He was 84.

Mr. Waters was a fixture of California's capital city, which had nearly quadrupled in population since his days on the football team at Sacramento High. At various times he smoked Salems, wore turtlenecks and cruised the neighborhood in a 1932 Ford, his friend Sam Jackson, a former city attorney, said.

"He could tell you who worked what shift at Gunther's Ice Cream," Mr. Jackson said. "That hometown, old-school thinking was a part of who he was. But he was willing to change with the times."

James Robert Waters was born on Jan. 16, 1936, the oldest of four children of James and Joyce Waters. His father was a printer, and his mother stayed home with the children.

He survived polio in junior high school. That was the first of several health challenges, including prostate cancer and melanoma, which required regular operations. “He joked that he got a face lift an inch at a time,” his daughter said.

After high school he enlisted in the Air Force, and after four years he joined the Police Department, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant. He had a knack for getting involved in big cases that attracted news cameras, Mr. Jackson said.

In the mid-1970s, when a radical group that called itself the Symbionese Liberation Army was hiding in Sacramento, Mr. Waters knocked unknowingly on their door to ask about a crime nearby; only later did he realize the woman who answered was Ms. Hearst, who had been kidnapped by the group. In 1975, when Ms. Fromme was apprehended for pointing a gun at President Gerald R. Ford, Mr. Waters transported her to jail and joined in her interrogation.

His marriage to Judie Kent in 1960 produced three children, Darren, Daniel and Ms. Earl. His wife and children survive him, as do his brother Dick; his sister, Margaret Anne Blaney; and two grandchildren. His brother Donald died in 2016.

He was elected sheriff in 1982, but some deputies resented his tough ways and hanged him in effigy, Mr. Jackson said. After he was arrested and charged with driving under the influence, he lost his bid for re-election.

But he maintained enough support to win four terms in the City Council by working with Democrats, his wife said.

His last weeks still vex his family. Before starting rehab for his hip at the nursing home, he was tested for the coronavirus. Negative. Two weeks later, he returned to the hospital with hematoma, or bleeding under the skin, and he was tested again. This time he tested positive.

“We’ll never know how he got it,” Ms. Earl said.

He never saw any family members after his fall on June 30. They might have soothed him with stories of old Sacramento or by playing his favorite song.

It was “My Way,” sung by Frank Sinatra.

Those We’ve Lost

The coronavirus pandemic has taken an incalculable death toll. This series is designed to put names and faces to the numbers.

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