

Ex-justice dead at 72

By RHONDA NOHAVA
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Former Justice Robert C. Underwood, hailed as "a leader and a champion" who restored integrity to the Illinois Supreme Court after it was rocked by scandal nearly two decades ago, died yesterday in his Normal home.

Underwood died about 7:30 a.m. of apparent natural causes

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after collapsing in his kitchen, said McLean County Deputy Coroner Dan Brady. Underwood, 72, of 11 Kent Drive had been under a doctor's care, Brady said.

Tributes to Underwood, a member of the high court for 23 years, poured in from across the state — from the governor and colleagues, as well as court clerks and longtime friends.

"He was the one person everybody could look up to. He was the epitome of what you'd want a Supreme Court justice to be. And on top of that, he was just the greatest guy," said Dave Anderson, spokesman for the Illinois State Bar Association.

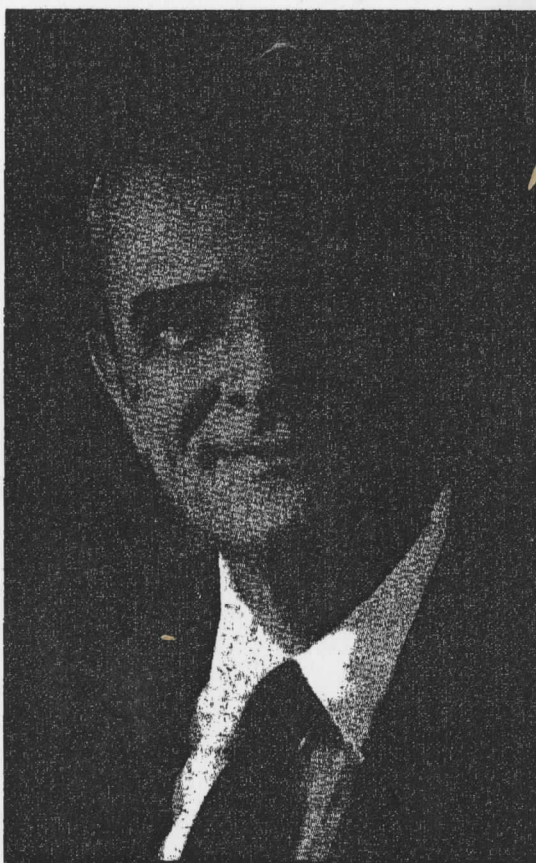
Donald Schiller, president of the bar association, said Underwood shepherded the high court through its most turbulent period of the century after taking over as chief justice in 1969.

"As an administrator, he was exactly the right person for the right job when the court was at a low ebb," Schiller said.

Underwood, a Gardner native, took over in the wake of a scandal that had led to the resignations of two justices — then-Chief Justice Roy Solisburg and Justice Ray Klingbiel, who were both accused of stock manipulation.

While neither admitted any wrongdoing, they resigned from the bench, and Underwood was chosen chief justice to restore confidence in the integrity of the court.

"I did become chief justice at a very difficult period in the court's history," Underwood said in a Pantagraph interview just before retiring in 1984. "Our primary objective in the short run



University of Illinois photo

Former Justice Robert C. Underwood, a member of the Illinois Supreme Court for 23 years, died yesterday in his Normal home.

was to try and restore confidence in our court, particularly, and in the judicial system as a whole."

To that end, Underwood helped establish a strict judicial code of conduct, which he viewed as his most significant contribution to the state's court system.

Underwood's leadership restored "the integrity and dignity of the court. He was a leader and a champion," Anderson said.

"The Illinois legal profession mourns his death and reiterates the extremely high esteem in which he was held," he added.

Gov. James R. Thompson said Underwood "epitomized the best of the judicial system" as an attorney, prosecutor and judge.

"He combined scholarship with integrity, strengthened by a devotion to justice. All of us ben-

efited from his contributions to society during his years as a judge," the governor said.

Underwood was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1962 after 16 years as a McLean County judge. He served two terms as chief justice.

Those who followed him to the high court also greatly admired him.

"I was really shocked and saddened to learn of his death. He had my personal affection," said Supreme Court Justice Ben Miller, who replaced Underwood.

Another former colleague, U.S. District Judge Richard Mills, said Underwood's "stately and judicial bearing was never bent by adversity, his quiet humor was ever constant and his warmth as a friend was never cooled by circumstance."