

Gene Chappie, 1920 - 1992



Gene Chappie was a former congressman, state assemblyman and county supervisor. He was also one of the state's more colorful politicians, known for his hard work, a folksy, straightforward manner, his practical jokes, and a disdain for bureaucrats

Chappie was born in Sacramento, joined the

Army Air Corp in 1941 and served in both World War II and the Korean War, then returned to the family farm in Cool.

His political career began and ended with governor appointments to the county board of supervisors.

In 1950 Gov. Earl Warren appointed him to a vacant seat. Chappie moved to the California Assembly in 1964 and immediately became a champion for off-road recreation at a time when many in the legislature were seeking ways to ban “Jeepers” from public lands.

Chappie proposed the landmark legislation Off Highway Vehicle Act of 1971, designed to identify and set aside areas specifically for the use of off-road vehicles.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of miles of roads and trails were set aside for off-road recreation. The legislation also made state and local ORV parks possible.

Chappie would continue his advocacy of off-road recreation throughout his career in state and federal politics.

Early in his state legislative career, he proposed legislation which prohibited local coroners from being funeral directors. The legislation took direct aim at the owner of Placerville's Memory Chapel, who was also the county coroner, and directed business away from the upstart Chapel of the Pines.



Chappie was elected to Congress in 1980. After three terms in Washington, the Republican rancher and winemaker announced his retirement in 1986.

“Hell, some of my colleagues make George Burns look like a kid,” he said at the time. “They don’t have the good sense to quit.”



Chappie and his wife, Nancy, retired to the El Dorado County community of Cool, where he had been raised on his family's 640-acre plot of pastures and orchards.

In 1989 he returned to county politics briefly when he was again appointed to an empty supervisor seat, this time by Governor George Deukmejian.

“He was the kind of guy who could tell you off and you still liked him,” said El Dorado County Supervisor Jack Sweeney.

“He was very flamboyant, and of great humor. But he had a great record of being able to accomplish things,” former Assembly Speaker Robert Monagan said.

Chappie was one of the organizers of the annual Jeeps Jamboree, a July trek across the Sierra Nevada by 1,200 people in 400 vehicles.

Chappie reportedly mortgaged his ranch to build Stumpy Meadows reservoir, preserving water rights for Divide residents and making GDPUD a reality. He was also a founder of the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association.

Didn't that hurt the Bacchi family, who had staged cattle in Stumpy meadows for a century or so? “Yes it did,” said Cheri Little recently, “but we forgave him because he got Highway 49 realigned away from our front door.”

Chappie also championed Golden Sierra High School and Black Oak Mine Unified School District. Prior to their formation, high



school students on the divide took buses to Placerville to attend El Dorado High School.

Chappie was a member of the Pilot Hill Grange, Rotary Club, Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, Native Sons of the Golden West, El Dorado County Farm Bureau, The Elks and The Holy Name Society, whatever that is.

In 1987 he was named Divide Rotary's Person of the Year.

In 1990 the state of California recognized Chappie's efforts with the dedication of approximately 50,000 acres west of Shasta Dam as the Gene Chappie/Shasta Off-Highway Vehicle Management Area".

Gene Chappie died of cancer in 1992 at the age of 72.

A decade after his death, community members sponsored a highway memorial sign on a portion of Highway 193 as the Eugene "Gene" Chappie Memorial Highway.