Stovall recalled as pioneer

Associated Press

Thelma H. Stovall, former lieutenant governor, died Friday. Her funeral is Tuesday in Louisville.

1st woman elected lieutenant governor in state dies

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE — Her former comrades on Saturday praised Thelma H. Stovall as a pioneer for women in Kentucky's politics.

Stovall, the first woman elected lieutenant governor in Kentucky, died in her sleep Friday. She was 74.

"She came up, as we say, the hard way," said U.S. Sen. Wendell Ford of Owensboro. "She made an impact and was a leader for women in politics in Kentucky."

Stovall served in state government for more than two decades, serving three terms as secretary of state, two as treasurer and three terms in the House of Representatives.

She did not lose a race until she ran for governor in 1979 and finished last among five active candidates in the race won by John Y. Brown Jr.

Stovall's body will lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda on Monday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. CST. Funeral is scheduled for noon CST Tuesday in Louisville at Eastern Parkway Baptist Church, with burial in Resthaven Cemetery.

"There was never a question about her personal integrity, never a question about her dedication," Julian Carroll, who served as governor while Stovall was lieutenant governor, said Saturday.

"She was totally committed to serving the people ... honestly," Carroll said. "She dedicated her life to the public."

Late in her career, Stovall once said, "Well, I am not a big-shot person and never have been. I'm just Thelma Stovall and I'm not going to be any different kind of person in public office. I'm a lot like Harry Truman in this way. If I asked for the job, then, by golly, good or bad, I am going to do it."

Stovall was strongly dedicated to organized labor and the women's movement. After graduating from high school, she went to work at Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp. in Louisville.

She joined the tobacco workers union and served as secretary of her local. When the Jefferson County Democratic organization asked labor officials to suggest a candidate for the legislature in 1949, she got the nod.

Stovall never apologized for being

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Stovall: 'A leader for women in politics in Kentucky,' Ford says

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labor's candidate, and to repay her loyalty the Kentucky State AFL-CIO supported her for governor in her unsuccessful campaign.

Stovall's support of the Equal Rights Amendment for women led to the most controversial moment of her career — her veto, while acting governor in 1978, of a resolution to rescind Kentucky's ratification of the amendment. The veto came as the national drive to add the amendment to the U.S. Constitution faltered.

Lilialyce Akers, then the head of the Kentucky ERA Alliance, said at the time that the veto increased momentum for the ERA.

"All of a sudden, here comes a woman who takes on the whole, male-dominated General Assembly," Akers said. "Thelma has become a national heroine."

Stovall was born Thelma Loyace Hawkins in Munfordville on April 1, 1919. Her parents, Samuel Dewey Hawkins and Addie Mae Goodman Hawkins, divorced when she was 8. Her mother moved to Louisville with Thelma and a sister, Edith.

She graduated from Louisville Girls High School and took a job sweeping floors at Brown & Williamson. She also found her husband-to-be there — L. Raymond Stovall. He was 18, she was 17 when they married in September 1936.

Raymond Stovall avoided the spotlight but encouraged his wife to pursue a political career. He died in 1985. They had no children.

In 1955, A.B. "Happy" Chandler, running for a second term as governor and looking for someone with ties to labor, tapped her to run with him for secretary of state.

She said she never had a chance to make up her mind: Chandler simply announced her candidacy. Stovall narrowly survived the primary.

In 1975, she easily won the primary for lieutenant governor, getting 28 percent of the vote in a field of 11. The other 10 were men.

That set up the 1979 race for governor, but her term as lieutenant governor raised questions about her ability to fill the state's top office.

Stovall, who suffered a mild stroke in 1971, talked and moved with a slight tremor. Never a good speaker, her speeches were garbled at times.

Her age was also an issue. She turned 60 in 1979, the election year, which would have made her the oldest Kentucky governor in nearly 50 years.

She tried to take advantage of the anti-tax fever sweeping the country. California had just enacted Proposition 13 to lower taxes.

Stovall, as acting governor in then-Gov. Carroll's absence, called the legislature into special session to cut taxes.

Two bills were enacted that legislative budget experts say to this day undercut state and local tax structures. One repealed the 5 percent state sales tax on utility bills. The other capped property taxes.

However, the political impact of the session was lost in the heat of the primary. A little over a month after the legislature adjourned, Brown entered the race and won going away. Stovall got just 8 percent of the vote. She never sought elective office again, but took the job of labor commissioner during the last year of Brown's term.