

The 14th District Conservation Caucus, 1978

For me, the weirdest adventure of the Stanislaus Campaign was the 14th District Conservation Caucus of 1978, which helped kick John McFall out of Congress

By Melinda Wright

You would think the two main characters of this story would be John McFall and Norm Shumway, the Republican who defeated McFall. But in my mind the main characters are John McFall and Norma Lowrey.

McFall had been in Congress for 22 years, and the Stanislaus River was in his district. Democrats were in the majority, McFall had followed in Tip O'Neil's steps to become House majority whip, and McFall, with Biz Johnson and Bernie Sisk, formed a killer trio whose purpose seemed to be to rubber stamp federal projects, especially in California. New Melones Dam was John McFall's baby. If an act of Congress was going to be necessary to save the Stan, we were not going to get it as long as McFall was the Congressman from our district.

Norma Lowrey was a Sierra Clubber who lived in Riverbank. The year I was born, Norma was taking part in activism to protect Tuolumne Meadows. In the early '70s she came home from a Sierra Club meeting where people had been railing and lamenting about McFall, and, as she told us later, "I was standing in my kitchen and I just had this vision. I knew I needed to run against McFall."

She took out papers, got signatures, and got her name on the primary ballot. She didn't collect campaign contributions or run an official campaign, and she got only a small percentage of the vote that year. She continued to put her name on the primary ballot against McFall in every election. Then in 1978 McFall was involved in "Koreagate," a scandal involving rice selling and Tong Sun Park. Other Congressmen involved were re-elected without too much trouble, but in the 14th district primary, Norma got about 33 % of the Democratic vote without campaigning or spending money.

When the Republicans saw that, they started giving money and support to Norman Shumway, a lawyer from Stockton who thus far had been McFall's unnoticed GOP opponent. Environmentalists took a good look at Shumway, also, and found that he was moderate in both politics and style, even if he was a Mormon with conservative social views.

I remember going to Stockton to meet Shumway and his wife at their house, and carpooling to other meetings in Stockton, and the people I remember travelling with include Bob Hackamack, Mark Dubois, Carl Pope (Calif. League of Conservation Voters), Don Moyer, possibly some reps from Cal Trout or Trout Unlimited, and a woman named Julie who had a powerful amount of energy. Some time in there the group "14th District Conservation Caucus" was formed, and in the end, the California League of Conservation Voters, Sierra Club, and Friends of the River not only endorsed Shumway but worked to elect him.

Thank goodness Charlene Schutz was living in Stockton. For many of us from the Mother Lode, Charlene's house was our home away from home as we volunteered at Shumway's headquarters, walked precincts, and leafleted. Charlene made Stockton accessible for us, and was a main reason that river people made up about half of Shumway's Stockton campaign volunteers.

Charlene herself worked many hours in Shumway's downtown Stockton office, and I think she also was in close contact with the League of Women Voters. She had unflagging energy and optimism and wonderful connections. (The last news I have of her was that she took the oars for part of a Grand Canyon trip.)

We passed out "environmentalists support Shumway" flyers at University of the Pacific. People took the flyers saying "right, like that's real." Then they read the flyers and said "Sierra Club? You mean this is real?" At a UOP debate put on by the League of Women voters, Shumway got the question "If New Melones was up for authorization today, would you vote for it?" Shumway explained that as a true conservative he would not, given the big government subsidies involved, and the next day that was the headline in the newspaper.

We had enough volunteers to call everybody in Tuolumne County. Hardly anybody we called wanted to re-elect McFall. I went to the Republican meeting (mostly well-dressed women) in downtown Sonora accompanied by local potter Nathan Davidson, with his clay spattered clothes and long hair (parts of the Shumway campaign were really fun!). When the November election results came in, the foothills went so strongly for Shumway and the valley went so weakly for McFall that Norm Shumway went to Congress.

That was step one of this weird adventure. The second step was the redistricting prior to the 1982 election. The story I heard was that Phil Burton, the power-wielding pro-environmentalist of the House, asked Shumway for a map of the 14th district, drew a line around Norm's house, and gerrymandered Norm and the 14th District into what had been Eugene Chappie's district. We became the 18th district, and in 1982 Rick Lehman became our Congressman for the next ten years, representing Yosemite, Sequoia, the Tuolumne, the Kings, Mono Lake, and the Merced, all of which Rick Lehman got protection for as the years went by, as well as passing the Desert Protection Act.

There are pro-choice people in Stockton who have never forgiven environmentalists for endorsing Shumway and energizing his campaign to put it over the top. I don't ever regret getting McFall out, because it meant getting Lehman in. Also, with Burton - not McFall - influencing the 1981 redistricting, Biz Johnson and Don Clausen were defeated in 1982.

To my mind the main thing about supporting Shumway was meeting him and taking his measure and knowing that he was an honest person who meant what he said. Over and over in the 1978 campaign, Shumway said "Six terms in Congress is enough for anybody." Shumway served six terms and stepped down at the end of 1990.

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