Review: 'Citizen Swain,' by Tom H. Swain, with Lori Sturdevant; a life of public service

NONFICTION: Tom Swain reflects with thoughtfulness and modesty on his long life of civic engagement.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER () Special to the Star Tribune  |  JULY 8, 2015 — 9:57AM

In 1996 University of Minnesota President Nils Hasselmo asked Tom Swain to become interim vice president for institutional relations, working with Gov. Arne Carlson and disaffected members of the business community. Although he was 75 years old and retired, Swain felt he couldn’t say no.

Swain’s decision was emblematic of his long and distinguished life of civic public service.

In “Citizen Swain,” he looks back on a career that has included (in addition to his day jobs as ticket manager of the University of Minnesota athletic department, chairman of the Convention and Visitors Bureau of the St. Paul Association of Commerce, executive director of the Minnesota Insurance Information Center and public relations director of the St. Paul Fire and Marin Insurance Co.) chief of staff to Gov. Elmer Andersen; co-chairman of a campaign to convert St. Paul into an independent school district; president of the Elder Learning Institute; leader of the National League of Families of American Prisoners; chairman of the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce Committee on Public Conduct and Concern; chairman of the Minnesota Health Care Commission, and mayor of Lilydale.

Unfailingly modest, Swain rarely blows his own horn. He likes “politics on the fringes,” he confesses, but never had “much taste for it on the inside.” Swain makes clear, however, where he stands on important issues. A steadfast Republican, he reminds his readers that taxes “have not been this state’s undoing. Rather, they’ve paid for the education, infrastructure, law enforcement and social services that undergird a high quality of life.”

Swain strongly supports universal health care coverage through a mandate that all adults buy insurance and government subsidies for the poor. He wasn’t ready to push for a single-payer system in 1994, but if Obamacare fails and he’s “still around,” he indicates that he just might endorse it.

And in 2006, Swain (who did not learn that his brother, Jerry, was gay until he killed himself in 1979) appeared at a rally on the Capitol steps to oppose then-Rep. Michele Bachmann’s efforts to ban same-sex marriage.

In 2008, Swain was re-elected mayor of Lilydale, with more than 60 percent of the vote. During the contested election, he began to understand how vulnerable candidates are to ill-informed — and personal — attacks. He came away “keenly aware that democracy asks a lot of those willing to serve” — and with a conviction that “we ought to appreciate them more.”

At a time in which civic engagement has atrophied and Americans are less connected to social structures, ranging from churches to clubs, political parties and bowling leagues, Swain’s observations and, more important, the example of his exemplary life should command our attention.

Glenn C. Altshuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University.