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BODY:

Jack K. Berman, former San Francisco judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, story-teller, civil rights advocate, gambler, boxing aficionado and former husband of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, died yesterday afternoon. He was 80.

Mr. Berman died at San Francisco General Hospital around 4 p.m. from complications of a head injury he received Saturday. His wife, Terry Berman, said he had suffered a heart arrhythmia while playing tennis at the San Francisco Tennis Club and fell to the ground, hitting his head.

He was taken to San Francisco General and regained consciousness, she said, but the injury proved to be too severe.

State Sen. John Burton, who knew Mr. Berman for 40 years, said the judge was a "hell of a guy, one of a kind."

"It was typical of him to fine a lawyer who showed up late to his courtroom and then make him write the check out to Delancey Street," Burton said.

When Burton returned to the city after serving in Congress, he moved into Mr. Berman's old law office after Mr. Berman was appointed to the Superior Court.

"He charged me way too much and he left me two of the ugliest lamps you've ever seen in your life," Burton said last night.

Mr. Berman was born in San Francisco in 1922. He graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, where he was Phi Beta Kappa and founder of the Labor Board, which related to working conditions for students. He completed his studies at the Cal School of Jurisprudence, which later became the Boalt Hall School of Law.

He served as an ensign in the Navy and was a defense counsel for the War Crimes Tribunal in Manila in 1946-47.

He married Dianne Goldman in 1956 and they divorced in 1960. She later

became Dianne Feinstein.

Mr. Berman had a private practice in San Francisco after the war and later served as deputy district attorney and assistant district attorney. He was appointed to the bench in 1982 by Gov. Jerry Brown.

"He was a very, very special San Francisco guy," said Mr. Berman's longtime friend, Phil Ryan. "And he was one of the most brilliant men who ever sat on a San Francisco bench."

Peter Keane, former chief deputy public defender in San Francisco, said Mr. Berman used to hang around with a group of San Francisco lawyers who are almost all gone now. They used to work in the old Hall of Justice in Chinatown and hang out at the corner bar, Cookie Piccetti's place.

"He used to say that everything changed when they moved the (current) Hall of Justice," Keane said.

Mr. Berman was politically connected throughout the city. He was a longtime friend of Mayor Willie Brown, whom he credited with helping him get appointed to the bench. Keane said Mr. Berman and Brown and their cronies would go to the Fillmore and hang out at jazz clubs all night.

Those connections proved controversial in 1985 when Mr. Berman was involved in a grand jury investigation of clothier Wilkes Bashford, who was accused of cheating the city out of rent for his business in the Sutter-Stockton Garage building. Mr. Berman removed the prosecutor on the case and effectively derailed the investigation, which was later moved to Marin County.

Keane said Mr. Berman was a funny, engaging man who often lost his temper with attorneys appearing before him. Most soon learned that it was just Mr. Berman's style, and if they waited five minutes he would forget whatever transgression had started it and be his old jovial self again.

Burton said Mr. Berman was an avid gambler and loved to go to Las Vegas.

He recalled a story in which Mr. Berman had won quite a bit of money one day and then proceeded to lose his winnings, plus the rest of the cash he brought with him. A younger, less-experienced friend was with him and was shocked at the loss, Burton said, adding: "Jack just said, 'Shoot, kid, it's only candy.' "

Keane said Mr. Berman used to say he liked to go to Las Vegas to visit his money.

"You could tell by the look on his face on a Monday morning how well he'd done in Vegas over the weekend," Keane said.

He said Mr. Berman often got ringside seats at heavyweight boxing title fights in Las Vegas. He rarely missed one, Keane said.

Terry Berman said her husband was a "total character." She said he was brilliant, principled, very liberal, loved people and was always gregarious.

Ryan said Mr. Berman went to the South in the '60s, along with lawyers from