

Herb Wilson, local ambulance company owner

Valley Press

Longtime Palmdale resident Herb Wilson, who with his wife Dorothy owned Wilson Ambulance Services for nearly 40 years, died Tuesday in Lancaster. He was 84.

Wilson was born June 6, 1925, in Pasadena, and he and his wife Dorothy moved their family to the Antelope Valley in 1954. A little more than five years later, they purchased Desert Ambulance and reopened it as Wilson Ambulance Services on Halloween 1959.

In an August 1996 interview with freelance journalist Frankie Richards, Wilson remembered how different things were in 1959, when the Valley had one hospital (Antelope Valley) and there were no paramedics, no doctors based in the Antelope Valley Hospital emergency room, no local neurosurgeon to treat head injuries, and no freeway to Los Angeles:

“Sierra Highway was a two-lane road. That 10 miles between Palmdale and Lancaster seemed like 100 miles sometimes,” Wilson said. “We didn’t have paramedics. We were it. Yet, I can’t remember losing a single patient on the way to the hospital.

“It used to be a six hour trip to the county hospital. Now it’s about an hour. Avenue S was a dirt road. There was mud and a dirt lake like being in Alaska.

“We didn’t have response from the paramedic squads like we do today,” Wilson said. “The only time we called the fire department was when we needed assistance for something like getting somebody out of a vehicle.”

“Wilson Ambulance was a ‘mom-and-pop’ operation from the start.

“They had three ambulances, 1955 and 1958 Cadillacs and a 1958 International van. ‘That was a clunker,’ said Wilson, who was the first ambulance driver. ‘I did the maintenance on the ambulances myself.’

“Herb Wilson’s wife, Dorothy, did the bookkeeping, answered the phones, and dispatched ambulances. She even washed the ambulance laundry in their home’s washing machine and ironed it with a mangle (a pressing apparatus like the wringer on an old fashioned washing machine).

“The couple had two Palmdale locations, including a one-bedroom house at 10th Street West and Palmdale Boulevard.

“We had a phone (at) both places,” Wilson said. “We used to have phones on the kitchen counter. The kitchen looked like a bookie joint.

“At night and weekends we would take an ambulance home.’ A neighbor took calls with Wilson at night, and Herb Wilson handled the day shift with a day man.

“He once took patients to Dr. Senseman’s Clinic on Lancaster Boulevard, later known as Lancaster Community Hospital.

“They didn’t have an ambulance entrance,’ he said. ‘It was like delivering groceries.’

“Wilson also took patients to AV Hospital, which opened in 1955. In the beginning years, there were no physicians based in the emergency room, only doctors on call. The emergency room was ‘one room with one gurney,’ Wilson said.

“All head injuries went to AV Hospital. There was no neurosurgeon up here to care for them. There was no such thing as a trauma center in those days.’

“Patients with severe head injuries were sent to AV Hospital, then transferred to Los Angeles County Hospital or ‘to a hospital over the hill’ such as Burbank Community Hospital. As a result, time was lost during the golden hour, that first hour after injury.

“To help solve this problem, a neurosurgical department was added to AV Hospital in late 1971. On August 1, 1972, a 31-year-old neurosurgeon named Dr. Harvey A. Birsner opened a full-time practice in the Valley. At last, patients with severe head injuries could be treated locally, helping win their race against time.

“Los Angeles paramedic service also came in 1972, for the first time providing medical treatment at the scene of accidents. It was directed by the base station emergency room.”

The Wilsons sold the ambulance service to American Medical Response in 1996. Their younger son, Andy, later opened Antelope Ambulance with a partner.

Wilson is survived by his wife; daughter, Sandy Macy and husband Len of La Pine, Ore; son Randy Wilson of Palmdale; daughter Candy Wilson of Palmdale; son Andy Wilson and wife Beverly of Palmdale; six grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

Visitation will be from 9 to 10 a.m. Friday, with funeral services at 10, at Chapel of the Valley Mortuary, 1755 East Ave. R, Palmdale.

Burial with full military honors for the former World War II Navy ships cook will follow at Eternal Valley Memorial Park in Newhall.