

County's 'Sixth Supervisor,' Alice Earl Wilder, dies at 99

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

Alice Earl Wilder, the undaunted grand dame of local politics, died early Monday morning at her home in Ben Lomond after an extended illness. She was 99.

The list of her awards and accolades is almost unending. In 1979, the Los Angeles Times called her one of the most prestigious California women of the 20th century.

She is best known as the "Sixth Supervisor," an unofficial title bestowed upon her by political pundits for her uninterrupted attendance at Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors meetings.

For more than 50 years, Mrs. Wilder kept a keen eye

on the workings of the supervisors, attending virtually every board meeting. She never hesitated to criticize board members and to speak out for her beloved Ben Lomond, or for what she believed in.

"I have never been paid for what I do and I never intend to be," she was quoted as saying in a 1981 article in the UC-Berkeley alumni magazine. "You see, I don't have to run for election, don't have to worry about recall. I do anything I damn well please!"

She was known as the woman in the red hat, as she usually wore a wide-brimmed red hat and red clothing that set her apart from the audience.

Her presence was so strongly felt that in the late 1960s, the board installed a brass plaque in front of her customary front-row seat, reserving that chair for her alone.

As if her presence were not enough, artist Paul Lee painted her portrait in 1979. It still hangs in the board chambers, looking down on the supervisors.

On her 95th birthday in 1984, Supervisor Robley Levy proclaimed that Sept. 23 as "Alice Earl Wilder Day."

From a proclamation, Levy read, "Alice Earl Wilder's life has been blessed by an extraordinary commitment to her home town of Ben Lomond. ... Alice Earl Wilder has attended significantly more meetings of the board of supervisors than any other supervisors, clerk of the board or any other member of the community."

Wilder also received a similar proclamation from President Reagan, lauding her years of public service and her work for the Republican Party.

She had been a member of the county's Republican Central Committee for 46 years until she retired at age 95.

It was only her failing health which kept Wilder from attending board meetings over the past few years.

Mrs. Wilder first came to Santa Cruz County in the summer of 1896, when her family began spending summers in the San Lorenzo Valley. They bought a house in Ben Lomond in 1901.

In various interviews, she spoke fondly of her youthful days in the valley, recounting memories of fishing in Fall Creek and of admiring the beauty of the mountains.

She was born Alice Earl in Oakland, to Guy Chaffee Earl and Ella Jane (Ford) Earl, who were the children of California pioneers.

Her father was a prominent lawyer and political figure in Northern California. He was instrumental in the development of power facilities and Lake Almanor was named for Alice and her sisters, Martha and Elinor.

She graduated from UC-Berkeley in 1912 with a degree in social economics. She was a classmate of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, and of a young engineer, Beverly Burt Wilder, whom she married in 1913.

Her husband had also spent his childhood summers in Ben Lomond and together they had four children.

In 1934, both her husband and her father died and she moved to Ben Lomond permanently to raise her children, one of which was still an infant. She was sustained by income from a family estate, but following the earlier guidance of her father, who had always stressed public service, she soon became involved in local politics.

In 1935 she became a member of the Ben Lomond School Board and a representative to the Boulder Creek High School Board.

The service started a record unparalleled in Santa Cruz County.

She served terms on the Ben Lomond Recreation District, the county Office of Education Board, the City-County Library Board, the county Welfare Advisory Commission, the Republican Central Committee, the state Republican Central Committee, the United Way, and numerous other organizations.

She also was instrumental in the formation of the first county Health Department and in the creation of the county Planning Commission.

"She was an extraordinary woman," said Carl Conelly, who served with Wilder on many political committees.

"Thirty-five years ago, I was chairman of the Republican Central Committee and she was the secretary. We had an outstanding Republican legislature in those days. We worked diligently and went to Sacramento a lot. We became great chums in those days ...

"She had a great belief in integrity. She called a spade a spade and took issue with many leading politicians (over the years). She believed in what was right. Her passing is a sad occasion."

Wilder was recognized many times for her contributions to the community.

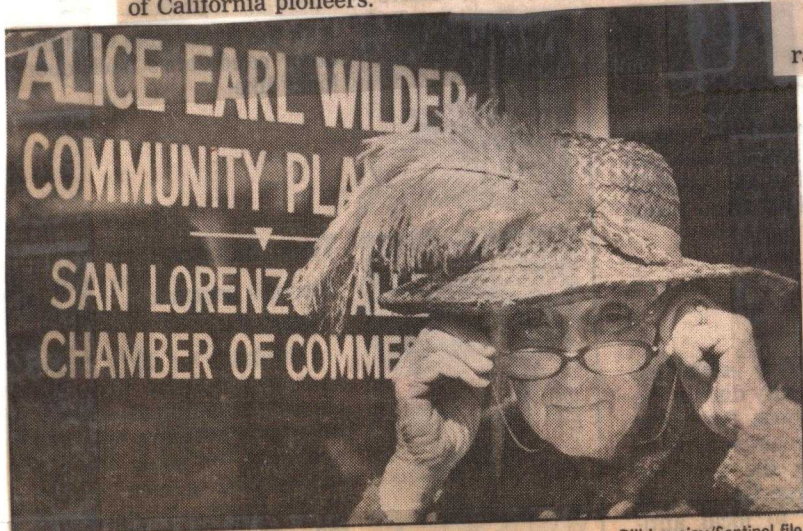
In 1981, she was named "Woman of the Year" by the San Lorenzo Valley Chamber of Commerce. The Santa Cruz Chamber named her "Woman of the Year" in 1966, as did the Business and Professional Club of Santa Cruz County in 1968.

In 1981, the county Historical Museum honored her with a retrospective exhibit of her life and times. The same year, she also served as grand marshal of the Miss California Pageant, riding atop a flower-bedecked convertible through town.

Services for Mrs. Wilder are pending.

She is survived by two sons, B.B. Wilder of Ben Lomond and Guy Earl Wilder of San Jose; two daughters, Eleanor Wilder Edmund of Berkeley and Marion Wilder Curtis of Happy Camp; 11 grandchildren; and 16 great-grandchildren.

Her daughter, Anne Skopecek died in 1985. Norman's Family Chapel is in charge of the arrangements.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Alice Earl Wilder, known as the woman in red hat, in 1979 photo.

REFERENCE

