

Dr. Dick Roger: A local legend in more ways than one

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The first time Dick Roger saw the Los Angeles County General Hospital was in August 1945. He was a small child stricken with polio and he was being admitted.

Polio, a virus causing paralysis, had been endemic for centuries, but in the United States it had become epidemic, peaking in the 1940s and '50s. Every summer since the first outbreak in Vermont in 1894, mothers were terrified because children were most frequently affected. The disease occurred primarily in July, August, and September and hit regardless of geographic region, economic status, or population density, creating intense dread. The fatality rate was frighteningly high. Franklin Delano Roosevelt suffered the disease and survived with his life, eventually becoming president of the United States, but was paralyzed from the waist down.

The Los Angeles County General Hospital, opened in 1933, was a Roosevelt WPA, Works Progress Administration, project and an imposing and gorgeous art deco building.

Little Dick Roger, just 7 years old in August 1945, was admitted and placed in an iron lung. (The machine was large, cumbersome and extremely expensive. In the 1930s, a single machine cost some \$1,500, about the same price as the average American home. Patients were encased in the metal chamber for months or even years, until the advent of positive pressure ventilators.)

Many of Dick's fellow patients, his "roommates," died. The tedium of endless hours lying in the iron lung was momentarily broken on Saturdays, when movies were shown on the ceiling of the ward. Dick survived new therapies developed by Sister Kenny, of scalding hot packs to ease the spasm of contracting muscles, spinal taps every other day and injections of gamma globulin likely made from horse serum. He also survived the illness and would go on to be-



Dick Roger was a physician, horseman, green beret, pilot, marathoner, mountain-climber, and all around good guy.

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come a physician himself.

Dick was back at LA County General Hospital in 1964, but this time as an intern, just out of medical school. Dick's attending physician and teacher for Otolaryngology was Dr. Clay Whitaker, someone familiar to him from his trips to Palm Springs. (Whitaker's daughter, Mary, would marry Sonny Bono and go on to be elected in her own right to Congress.) And in 1970s, the little boy who had survived polio became chief resident in medicine at the hospital where his life had been spared.

Dick headed back to the desert after completing his residency to practice medicine, becoming a prominent cardiologist. Dr. Dick Roger had a more interesting and varied life than most, in this most interesting and varied place.

His maternal grandfather, Jay Kasler, founder of City National Bank, purchased the exclusive B-Bar-H Ranch in 1940 for \$42,000, and soon after closed it to the general public. It was there that his grandson, Dick, would learn to ride and admire real roping cowboys, explor-

ing the wide-open desert expanse. (Around 1950 Dick discovered Cabot's Eagle Nest cabin secreted amongst the mountain crags. He kicked in the door and looked around at the spare appointments, absconding with a stack of old records.)

Returning constantly over the next two decades to Palm Springs, in 1971, Dr. Roger began working at Desert Hospital, and there in the front hall was a large bronze plaque listing the original founders and donors including his grandfather, Jay Kasler. His grandson, Dr. Dick Roger, would eventually attend at all the hospitals in the Coachella Valley: Desert, Indio/JFK and Eisenhower.

In 1973, the Springs Ambulance Company was prepared to begin paramedic service for the first time and cardiologist Dr. Dick Roger agreed to supervise their first run to critique and advise them. He got the call and the ambulance picked him up on their way to an emergency. The police had already arrived at a small house in the south of Palm Springs. At the time, no one was trained in CPR, car-

diopulmonary resuscitation. The patient was on the bedroom floor, his wife reported he had been unresponsive for more than 10 minutes. He was comatose, without pulse or blood pressure. His pupils were dilated. He was dead.

The freshly minted paramedics and numerous police officers stared at Dr. Roger, thinking it was time to call the coroner. Dick decided to take the opportunity to teach some CPR. Injecting epinephrine directly into the patient's heart and trying out the primitive and bulky defibrillator, he shocked the patient, reviving him. The whole crew of paramedics and the police were stunned, and Dr. Roger's heroics in resuscitating an obviously dead person became the stuff of local legend.

His illustrious 56-year career in the desert included caring for or cavorting with the most prominent of desert residents and lots of celebrities including Elvis, Walter Annenberg, Jennifer Jones, David Janssen, Red Skelton, Steve McQueen and Sophia Loren.

Along the way Dick served as a green beret paratrooper in Vietnam, was wounded earning a purple heart and a Silver Star. He describes those "bumps in the road" along with polio, his own battles with cancer, some 14 surgeries, motorcycle crashes, and car crashes in his reminiscences of life on the desert. After some 600 hours of flight, he crashed a plane he was piloting in 1978 after striking the prop on landing. He climbed Mt. Whitney twice, ran marathons, played a lot of tennis and parachuted 11 times out of perfectly good military planes. All the time, riding horses. Through the years pulling off devilish hijinks and all manner of daring escapades with his cowboy buddies.

Thankfully, Dick has written a book, as charming as its author, and full of true tales as astonishing as anything conjured up by the best writers of fiction. Patient confidentiality and lawyers prevent its wide distribution now, but someday it will be "declassified," and Dick's remarkable adventures will be known to posterity.