

**THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES**

# Willis provided history of desert

## Photographer documented valley's evolution

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Histories great and small are made in myriad ways but documented in far fewer. The school photograph is a small but now ubiquitous historical record. The advent of photography and public education occurred simultaneously in the mid- to late-19th century in the United States. A class picture might be the only public record of a particular person's life. Those images were taken by devoted and often itinerant photographers.

In Thousand Palms and Indio that photographer was Everett Calvin Willis. His life was one of some poignant hardship, in striking contrast to the sunny images he left behind.

E.C. Willis was born February 18, 1909 in Mapleton, Iowa. And in the first of several tragedies he would endure, his mother died when he was only three. When he was ten, the family moved to Los Angeles, where he lived for nearly 30 years. While there he served in the Coast Guard and worked as a tool designer at Hughes Aircraft. In the evenings and on weekends he began to learn about photography. He became so expert he would eventually teach the subject in night school classes.

He first visited the Coachella Valley in 1947 and was completely entranced. The dramatic scenery suited his photographer's eye. He purchased three contiguous lots in "Shangri-La Palms" as the developers were calling what would eventually be Thousand Palms.

In 1948, with his pregnant wife Ardis in tow, Willis left Los Angeles behind forever and moved to the desert. At first the couple camped on their newly acquired land while Everett, or "Willie" as his friends called him, built the first part of the house where the couple would re-



**Jacqueline Cochran and Floyd Odlum were the most prominent of citizens in the eastern Coachella Valley.** PHOTOS COURTESY OF TODD WILLIS

**Dedication ceremony for Highway 74 with desert rat, Harry Oliver at center.**

side for the rest of his life.

Willie worked doing freelance photo-journalism for a few years, capturing special events, like the Date Festival, building and road dedications, celebrity appearances and even auto accidents in the eastern part of the Coachella Valley,

on film.

In the early 1950s he opened Willis Photo on the corner of Miles Avenue and Smurr Street in Indio and became an important part of the community. The Desert Sun in December of 1956 chronicled, "The Thousand Palms Post Office

lobby has taken on a 'new look.' The Chamber of Commerce has hung two large pictures taken by Everett Willis of desert scenes."

The same little article noted, "Ardis Willis motored into Riverside and brought Mr. Willis home for two days, Mr. Willis is showing some improvement now." In another harsh life blow, he had contracted polio in 1955 and was treated in Riverside. The family carried as best he could with the photo studio, but eventually gave it up.

The Willis family now included three small boys. They made do. Ardis went to work to help pay the bills. Summers were spent in San Diego where Ardis went to summer school at San Diego State to get her teaching credential. She got a job teaching elementary school in Coachella and later went on to teach kindergarten at Agua Caliente School in the Dream Homes area of Cathedral City.

Despite the hardship of polio Willis reinvented himself in the early 1960s and began taking photographs for schools, traveling all over Riverside and Imperial counties in spite of his disability.

Willis was an important part of the east valley community, having produced school pictures for countless classes of schoolchildren through the years. He was friendly with some of the most prominent citizens and photographed Harry Oliver, Floyd Odlum and his famous aviator wife Jacqueline Cochran. (The Willis family used to go swimming in the summertime at the Odlum Ranch, part of what is now Indian Palms.)

The Willis home had a dark room. Years of photographs were piled up and stored in that space. The remarkable images found there tell of the history of Thousand Palms and Indio. Everett Willis, despite much hardship, documented it beautifully for us.

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