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GENERAC

History Minute

Arkansan Kemmons Wilson, founder of Holiday Inn

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College
South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society
kbridges@southark.edu

For decades, they have been a common site for weary travelers along the highways of America. The Holiday Inn has become one of the largest hotel chains in the United States. And the story of the iconic hotel has its roots in one small town in Arkansas.

Charles Kemmons Wilson, the founder of the corporation, was born in Osceola in 1913. His father was an insurance salesman, and his mother was a homemaker. Tragedy marred his early life when his father died in an automobile accident when he was nine months old. Forced to find work, his mother took him to Memphis where she found work as a dental assistant. Wilson proved to be very determined and very enterprising at a young age. When he was six, he began selling subscriptions to the popular Saturday Evening Post and soon began a paper route delivering the local Memphis newspaper. When the Great Depression hit, Wilson's mother lost her job, forcing him to quit high school and take any manner of odd jobs to support him and his mother.

He soon borrowed \$50 from a friend to buy a popcorn machine and started selling popcorn at a local movie theater. It was wildly successful. He soon started buying pinball machines and racking up a tidy profit in the process. By 1933, he had saved up \$1,300 (or almost \$31,000 in modern dollars). He expanded his business by setting up coin-operated jukeboxes in small diners across the city. In the 1940s, he began moving into property. He began a home construction business, and with postwar housing demands, business was brisk. He hired his mother as vice-president to help advise on decorating details for the new houses. Wilson soon teamed up with another Memphis homebuilder, Wallace E. Johnson, and the two soon became the most successful homebuilders in the South. By 1950, Wilson had amassed a fortune of over \$1 million (or \$13 million in modern dollars). While this would have been an impressive rags-to-riches story for a paperboy and popcorn salesman to become a millionaire, it was the only the beginning.

In 1951, Wilson took his wife and five children on a road trip. As he traveled, he was disappointed by many roadside motels and began thinking of ways to set up his own chain of hotels. He began devising a hotel that would be the best of what 1950s America had to offer the traveler - mid-range room prices with air conditioning and TV sets. His partner Johnson was impressed with the idea, and they asked their architect Eddie Bluestein to start coming up with designs. But they still needed a name. It was Bluestein who half-jokingly suggested "Holiday Inn" after the popular 1942 Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire musical. By August 1952, the first Holiday Inn opened on US 64-70-79, the main highway in Memphis between Nashville and Little Rock and Pine Bluff.

The hotel was a success, and Wilson and Johnson opened up three more on the highways leading in and out of Memphis by the next year. Memphis's relatively central location in the U. S. helped make the hotels a success. By 1957, there were 30 locations, and it grew rapidly, thanks to the initial concept by Wilson and franchising partnerships. Wilson again hired his mother as vice-president, and her favorite colors, green and yellow became the standard colors on the eye-catching Holiday Inn signs increasingly dotting the highways of America. By the end of the decade, there were more than 100 locations. The first location outside the United States opened in 1960. And this had increased dramatically to more than a thousand locations by 1968. The sprawling hotel corporation added a toll-free service in the late 1960s to help coordinate reservations. The chain was so successful that many other hotel chains began copying their innovations. By 1972, Wilson made the cover of Time magazine as "The World's Innkeeper."

Wilson briefly retired in 1979 after a heart attack, but he soon jumped back in. The company branched into other businesses, including nursing homes, the Trailways bus company, camp sites, and started building luxury hotels and golf resorts under "Wilson World Hotels." Wilson and Johnson gave heavily to local charities. In 1982, Wilson was inducted into the National Business Hall of Fame. In 2002, the Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management opened at the University of Memphis, training students in a fully-operating hotel.

In 2003, Wilson died in Memphis at the age of 90. The small hotel he started with his partner is now a multi-billion dollar corporation operating 19 different hotel brands at more than 6,000 locations on six continents.

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Saturday Jan. 20th 10am
462 County Rd 2320 Clarksville AR

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