From PIH to Merle West to Sky Lakes

By James F. Stilwell

James F. Stilwell was the general campaign chairman of the 1963 campaign that raised the funds to build Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital, which later became Merle West Medical Center and is now Sky Lakes Medical Center. Stilwell, 95, is one of the few people left who was an active participant in that drive. He has lived in Klamath Falls for 84 years and been actively involved in other civic endeavors and commercial enterprises.

Editor’s note: This is the second of two part on the history of the Sky Lakes hospital which is marking its 50th anniversary this month. Part 1, which deals with its history, ran Wednesday).

Merle West was a successful lumberman, principal owner of Big Lakes Lumber Company on Lake Ewauna. We needed to establish a contribution base from our local business community, which we might use as a suggestion for other donors.

Andy Collier, Dick Henzel, Mike Balsiger and I paid Merle a visit. Merle, being the prudent businessman, listened to our request and agreed our medical facilities were rather obsolete and said he would get back to us. About a week later, I received a call from Merle and was handed several stock certificates of C. S. Brewer Company of Hawaii, which were sold for approximately $30,000.

This was our first major gift and was a great service.

In 1979, 15 years after the hospital was built, the hospital received $1 million from the Merle West Trust. In honor of the Merle and Emma West College Fund the Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital became Merle West Medical Center.

Naming the facility

The name change was disappointing to many.

I received many irate calls from workers and donors and was told their gifts and efforts, however modest, was their million dollars and asked why one person be so honored.

The name Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital was not intended to be the final name.
We discussed what the final name might be, but were so exhausted, while at the same time enthused with the success of the campaign; we failed to come up with a name honoring the pioneering spirit of our people. The “unthinkable” $725,000 was now over $1.3 million. These were 1960s dollars. I was advised $1.3 million would be in excess of $9 million in 2010.

On Jan. 30, 2000, my 80th birthday, after 20 years of requesting each new board correct an obvious error, I asked again if I might meet with the hospital board.

It was imperative because those who pioneered building the hospital were fast disappearing: Mike Balsiger, Andy Collier, Dick Henzel — gone, as were most of the 800 who worked, gave and were promised this hospital was to be their legacy.

Because of a full agenda, I was told I could have 15 minutes (an offer that was later withdrawn). I immediately wrote a letter of confirmation, outlining the points I wished to make: the newspaper articles, pictures, publicity, promises the hospital was to be the people’s legacy.

I mentioned my last visit with Dick Henzel, who was gravely ill. He expressed his regret in suggesting the hospital be named for Merle West that he had forgotten our promise this was to be the people’s hospital and “It is never too late to correct an error.”

I closed my letter with: “The fact something may be difficult to do does not mean it is impossible.

“As the general chairman, with the help of so many I can no longer praise, we all kept the promise and I respectfully request the board consider these pioneers and re-name our hospital Pioneers- West.”

In the spirit of pioneers

I thought it logical to rename our hospital. It was the spirit of our pioneering families who started the movement and this would keep and honor the West name.

To have my request to address the board granted and then withdrawn was most disturbing. To my recollection no members of 2000 board had worked on the campaign to raise the initial funds to build our hospital.
May 24, 2007, after 29 years of trying to have our people’s efforts remembered, Paul Stewart, the hospital’s CEO announced completion of a new $47 million, 100,000 square-foot wing and Sky Lakes Medical Center was to be the new name of our hospital.

Paul said it best: “Because of the efforts of many who have gone before us, we drink today from wells that we did not dig, we eat the fruit from trees we did not plant.”

**Investment of ‘self’**

The new medical center is possible because of the investment — the generous support in time and talent and yes, financial donations — of people in all the communities we serve — the investment of “self” that makes us who we are, that makes the Klamath Basin so special.

I do recognize Paul’s skill and management. Paul recently advised our hospital has over 1,000 employees, is our second-largest employer and to duplicate under today’s costs would be in excess of $100 million, with a low debt ratio.

Our hospital achieved National Accreditation in just three years and has maintained this high standard ever since and is one of three hospitals to be accredited by the International Accreditation Body in Sweden.

This courageous, united endeavor, the Intercommunity Hospital Construction Fund Campaign — nicknamed “Project Remedy” officially began March 13, 1963, resulted in opening the doors to the Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital October 10, 1965.

Unquestionably, the realization we have a hospital is my proudest achievement. I have been richly rewarded to have worked with such generous, caring people.

This hospital is truly “By and For Our People.” It is not just for the present, but also for those to follow. We may benefit from the past, but we live and plan for the future.

Fifty years ago I announced our campaign was a success and the hospital would become a reality. It was an emotional time for us.

Most who had worked so faithfully have already slipped away. The campaign was concluded with a prayer of thanks, and for the success to follow.

Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital opened its doors to the community Oct. 10, 1965.