



**MCHENRY
MUSEUM**
& Historical Society



**HISTORY
LESSON**

Newsletter

September 2022

Please call us at:
(209) 618-5387

In over one hundred and fifty-two years, the landscape of Modesto has experienced drastic changes, it is always a treat to celebrate staple businesses who have remained to serve the community. Modesto is lucky to have these monuments who have stood the test of time and remained in operation for a century or more. JS West, Modesto Junk Company, and Gowans Printing Company have been fortunate to hit the century mark. This year another Modesto institution, Wille Electric Supply Co., hits that century mark. We at the MM&HS were fortunate to have sat down with the Robinson/Neumann family, owners of Wille Electric, to learn the history of their family business. Let us light up your autumn with the story of Wille Electric.

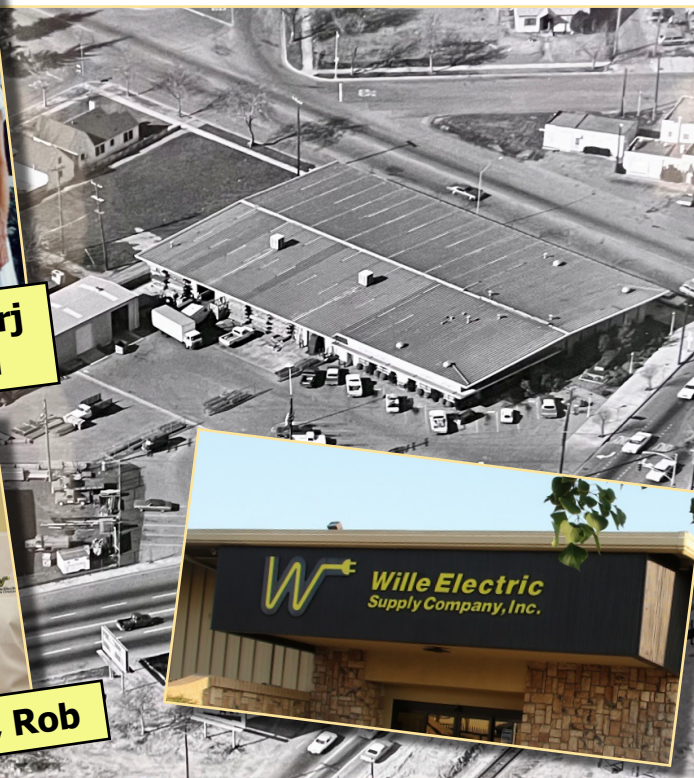
Carl Wille was born in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada on February 14, 1900. He was fifteen years old when he was sent by his parents to San Francisco, California to live with his uncle. World War I was in full swing, and his parents believed it would be safer as Carl was of German descent. At that time, the Canadian Government was taking land from people of German descent.



**Larry Jr. & Marj
Carl & Helen**



Seth, Larry III, Rob

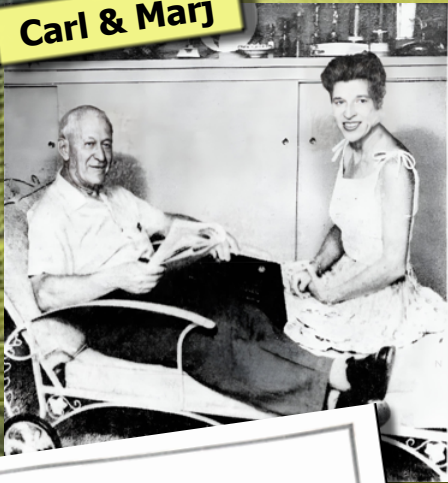


In around 1921, Carl and his wife, Helen, took a road trip and stopped in Modesto. Carl saw a sign in the window of Turner Hardware asking for someone to run the electrical department. He applied and was hired. Carl worked for Turner for one year, before Turner no longer wanted an electrical department. He asked to buy the inventory and moved it to another location. Due to a friendship with a banker, Carl received a loan from the Bank of Italy to start his business on I Street Wille Electric Supply Co. officially opened in 1922 and has remained in business ever since.

In 1924, the Wille's welcomed their only child, daughter Marjorie "Marj". It would be Marj's lineage who would continue the business to present day. During the depression, Wille Electric Supply Co. moved their headquarters to 1016 "G" Street, the location of the current police station. They would remain in this location for the next three-plus decades.

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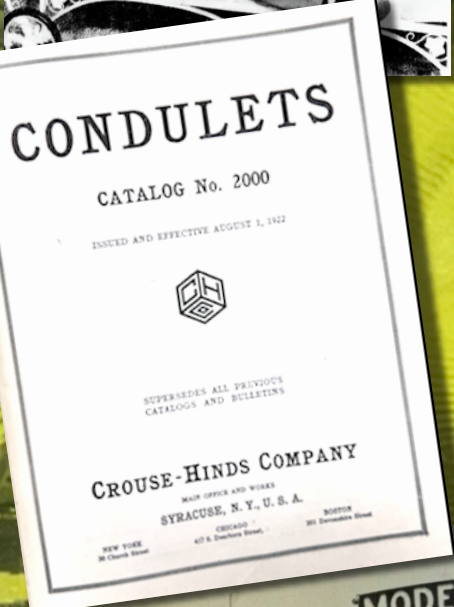
Carl & Marj



In 1942, Marj married Larry Robinson Jr. Larry Jr would embark on a different career path than the electric business. He ran Robinson Seed Co. and was eventually appointed Director of General Services by Governor Ronald Reagan, and later served as Executive Director of Memorial Hospital in Modesto. Marj and Larry had three children Larry III, Gary, and Pamela.

More than simply running a business, the Wille and Robinson family remained active in the community. Not only would the entire family be lifelong members of the Del Rio Country Club, but Carl belonged to the Masons, the Elks, the Lion's Club. Carl and Helen's favorite past-times was their membership to the Delta Yacht Club. In 1966, Carl would rise to the rank of Commodore, a title for which he took great pride. The Wille and Robinson family could be frequently seen in the society pages hosting various get-togethers at their respective homes on Buena Vista Avenue in the La Loma Neighborhood. Though the family no longer lives on the street, the prolific "R" remains on the Robinson chimney.

With the story of most businesses, there seems to be a trend of passing down the reins from father to son, in this case it is the story of grandfather to grandson. Larry Robinson III joined Wille Electric in 1965 after graduating from Oregon State University with a degree in marketing. Other grandson, Gary also worked for the business but would later move on to other endeavors, Granddaughter Pamela worked on a part-time basis for several years. Larry III did not know anything about the electric business. He learned quickly.



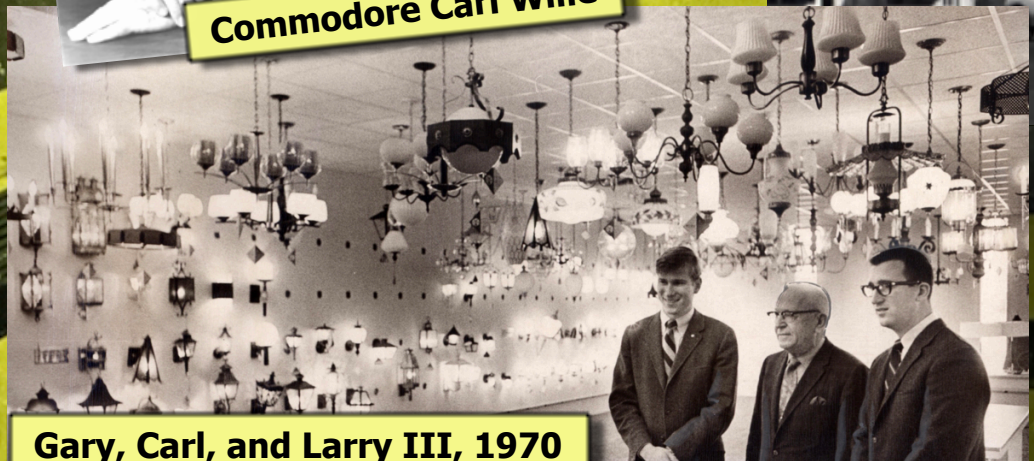
Original "I" Street Location



Commodore Carl Wille



1016 "G" Street



Gary, Carl, and Larry III, 1970

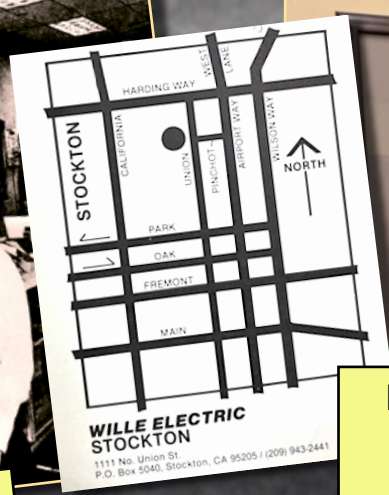


WILLE ELECTRIC

By the end of the 1960s, the city of Modesto needed the location of Wille Electric. The business moved to its current location at 101 South Seventh Street in 1970. The larger location did include a showroom for light fixtures, which was eventually phased out. The company focuses on parts for industry. By the early 1980s, Larry Robinson III became president of the firm. His son Rob joined the business in 1990, as well as his sister Pamela's son Seth Neumann, who joined in 1996. The addition of Rob and Seth made Wille Electric Supply Co. a three-generations deep business. In 1983, the company expanded to include a Stockton location and purchased San Leandro Electric in 2003. Carl Wille died at age eighty-nine on September 9, 1989. He never retired from the company, working until his health declined in February of that year. Helen Wille sold their home on Buena Vista to live in a retirement community, she passed away on July 9, 1998, at age one hundred and two, a number she did not want the world to know as she was four years older than her husband, so her headstone is adjusted to match the age of her beloved husband. Larry Robinson Jr. passed away March 19, 2015, at age ninety-four, and Marjorie Wille Robinson departed from this earth on June 4, 2021, at age ninety-seven. With no end in sight for this family business, I think Carl and Helen, and Larry Jr. and Marjorie knew that Wille Electric Company was in good hands, not only with their family but their loyal employees for another century to come.



Rob & Larry III, 1997



Larry Robinson III, August 15, 2022 with a 1920 photograph of Grandfather Carl Wille

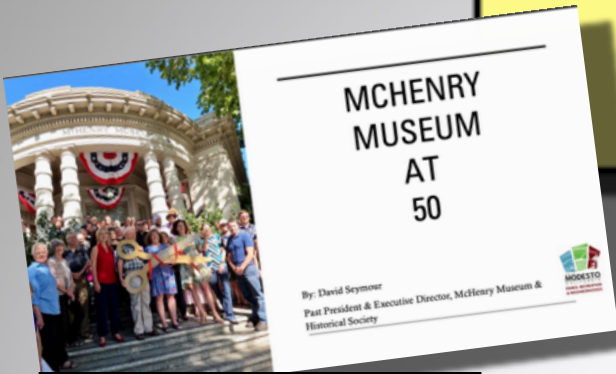
*Information for this article comes from an August 15, 2022, interview with Larry Robinson III, Rob Robinson, and Seth Neuman. Several photographs come from the family, others from the McHenry Museum Archives, and various materials come from *The Modesto Bee*.

Updates



Betty Jean Reynolds
1927-2022

- On August 15, 2022, we said goodbye to long-time former docent Betty Jean Reynolds. A former educator, Betty Jean dedicated her retirement to the MM&HS and the McHenry Mansion Foundation. We would like to thank Betty Jean Reynolds for her dedication to both organizations, she will be missed.
- On August 11, 2022, MM&HS Executive Director, David Seymour, presented to the Kiwanis Club of North Modesto on the history of the McHenry Museum and the MM&HS, titled "McHenry Museum at 50."
- On August 23, 2022, the Board of Directors of the MM&HS met for the first time with our new Executive Board, President Ben Sivils, Vice President Cece Hudelson, Treasurer Michelle Gallagher, and Secretary Talitha Agan.
- We are looking for volunteers to help with the Christmas Faire, formally the Dicken's Faire, which will take place early on Saturday, November 26, 2022.
- The Executive Board of Docents of the McHenry Museum will meet September 6, 2022 at 10am at the McHenry Museum, the General Docent Meeting will occur September 13, 2022 also at 10am at the Museum.



Second Saturday is Back!

New Exhibit



Our new exhibit "The Changing Faces of Modesto 1982-2022." Celebrates the photographs of the late Robert "Bob" Gauvreau (1948-2019), a teacher of photography at Modesto Junior College, who had a mission to memorialize in photos what remained of early Modesto. With the support of curator Heidi Warner (1925-2008) and the McHenry Museum Society, Bob's book "Modesto: Images of Yesterday, Images of Today" was published in 1984.



On Saturday, September 10, 2022, at 2pm, MM&HS Secretary and MJC Instructor Dr. Talitha Agan will present a historical talk "Grizzly Bear and the Gold Rush."

