

Jal dentist Killed in accident

MARK R. FLETCHER

HOBBS NEWS-SUN

Jal dentist Ron Willard, long known for his gentle manner and hobby of welding, died Saturday in a single-vehicle accident on State Road 128.

While some speculate that Willard, 65, may have suffered a heart attack while driving, the New Mexico State Police say they won't know that until the Office of the Medical Investigator's report is complete.

According to a state police report the accident was a single-vehicle rollover accident that occurred at 12:50 p.m. Saturday on State Road 128.

Willard was traveling southbound near mile marker 12, when the vehicle left the roadway on the west shoulder. He then returned to the roadway and corrected his steering, causing the vehicle to skid sideways. As the vehicle slid, the right-side tires deflated after the bead on the tires broke. The rims of the vehicle then dug into the asphalt causing the vehicle to overturn.

The vehicle overturned about two times before coming to rest on its roof. Willard was ejected from the vehicle.

Southwest Air Ambulance, Carlsbad Fire Department and an ambulance from the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant were on the scene rendering aid. Willard was transported to Carlsbad Medical Center where doctors pronounced him dead.

Regardless of the details concerning the accident, the people of Jal say they have lost a close friend and compatriot.

Friends remember Willard, who served as Jal's only dentist for the past 37 years, for his gentle manner and friendship.

Jim Pierson, 75, said Willard wasn't just his dentist, he became a friend.

Pierson also recalled that like anyone who cringes at the sound of a drill he had a certain apprehension about visit-

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ing the dentist when he first started going to Willard.

"When I first started going to him, I hated dentists," Pierson said.

He admitted, however, he didn't know exactly how long Willard had been his dentist.

"It's been so long I can't remember," Pierson said.

Not only did he overcome his fear of dentists, but he and Willard became lifelong friends.

"I couldn't say anything but good about him," Pierson said.

Over the years Willard acquired a following across the southern half of Lea County for his "touch" with those fearful of dentists.

"He was a painless dentist," said Kelly Armstrong.

Armstrong worked with Willard for more than 10 years and said "he was gentle."

Sen. Carroll Leavell, R-Jal, said he has known Willard since they moved to Jal and he considered him "a wonderful

family man and valued friend."

Beyond the dental chair, Willard also had a reputation for lightheartedness and humor that made him a favorite among the citizens of Jal.

"Every day he had a different joke," Armstrong said. "He was the type of person who would joke with you; he made you feel good about yourself. He was warm, friendly."

His wife of 44 years, Joann Willard, said in the past few years he took up an amateur interest in welding. On something of a whim Willard decided to take a welding class at the junior college and discovered a fondness for metalwork.

She said he enjoyed making barbecue pits and other household items.

"He was always finding something to fix or make," Willard said.

As the only dentist in town, Willard would have known just about anyone with teeth, which would mean of course he knew just about every soul in Jal — which has a population of just less than 2,000.

"Everybody knew him," Armstrong said.

One of those people is Mayor Claydean Claiborn.

The mayor recalls one incident that she said illustrates much about Willard's character:

Once Claiborn awoke during the night with a terrible toothache, but suffered through until the morning when she stopped at Willard's office.

"And, boy did he let me have it for not calling him for medication or something," Claiborn said, adding that he would have gotten out of bed even at midnight if she had bothered to call.

Claiborn, who lived just a few houses away from Willard, said for a community like Jal the loss of one person feels more like losing a family member.

"The community has lost a friend as well as their dentist. That's the best way I know to say it," Claiborn said.

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