



## **J. McKenny Willis Jr.**

August 4, 2004

J. McKenny Willis, Jr., a well-respected Talbot County businessman and community leader, died on Wednesday, August, 4, 2004 at the Wm. Hill Health Care Center where he had resided for five years. He was 100.

Born on a farm near Oxford, MD, October 30, 1903, he was the son of the late James McKenny, Sr. and Wilhelmina Seth Willis. He was educated in the public school at Oxford, MD. After leaving school, he managed the family farm until he was 23 years of age.

In 1927, he accepted a job with Armour and Company, working for them in the capacity of salesman and Assistant Sales Manager, until 1940. However, in 1930, while working for Armour, he founded a company known as J. McKenny Willis and Son in Easton, which for a number of years sold both wholesale and retail Armour agricultural products, principally fertilizer. By 1940, this company had grown to the point where Mr. Willis felt it needed his full attention, so he resigned his position with Armour.

The company had meanwhile started a grain division and was buying and shipping wheat, corn and barley. Talbot County farmers at that time produced wheat as their main cash crop. The volume in wheat reached a peak in 1944 of over 400,000 bushels shipped from the one location in Easton. By 1946, this company had become deeply involved in the manufacture of feed,

principally for broilers and, at time, was incorporated with key employees allowed to buy stock.

In 1961, the management of Willis and Son decided to develop an integrated broiler operation. Having already established its own hatcheries and feed mill, it merged with Burris Processing Company of Milford, DE and started processing its own brand of poultry with distribution from Philadelphia to Boston and many other northeastern cities. This plant had a capacity of 150,000 chickens per week when it joined the Willis organization. Over the next few years, it was producing from 10,000 to 12,000 per hour.

In 1963, the Willis and Son firm merged with St. Michaels Milling Company, thus forming Bayshore Foods, Inc. giving it a capacity as an entirely integrated operation of about 35,000,000 chickens per year. In 1965, Mr. Willis stepped aside as President and was made Chairman of the Board continuing in the management of the company.

Mr. Willis was well-known as an outstanding community leader who would give any amount of his time for a cause that would benefit the citizens of the state and county. During World War II, he acted as Chairman of the Ration Board for Talbot County and participated in all the fund drives, such as Red Cross and USO during the war. In 1951 and 1964, he helped organize the team that raised \$1,000,000 and \$2,600,000. for the Memorial Hospital at Easton. He served as a Director of the hospital for a number of years and was, at present, an Honorary Director. In 1965, he helped organize the YMCA drive which resulted in the construction of the new building on Oxford Road. He was one of the founders of the Talbot County United Fund and served as a Director and on the Budget Committee from its inception.

Other areas of civic activities were an appointment in 1969 by the Second Judicial Circuit Court to serve as a member of the Board of Property Review of Talbot County. Mr. Willis served as an Advisor to the Talbot County

Commissioners from 1941 until 1954. During this 13-year period, Talbot County saw many important things happen such as the first zoning law for the county, which was one of the first counties to have a zoning law. The establishment of this zoning law was of monumental importance to Talbot County and its ability to maintain some order and control over development such as the then mandatory two-acre now 20-acre requirement for waterfront lots. At that time, Talbot County was eyeball to eyeball with a major oil company about its plans to build an oil refinery near Claiborne. Other civic areas of tremendous impact were the integration of the schools, building new schools after World War II and the enlarging of the court house.

In a letter to Mr. Willis, dated September 18, 2003, Patti Willis (not a relative), Vice President, Corporate Communications at Shore Health Systems of Maryland, in which she informed him of a paragraph which was included in the 2003 Annual Report to the Community honoring him for his noteworthy interest and contributions to the hospital, she said and I quote: "I had grown up hearing about you. When I came to work at the hospital, I came to know what another business associate of yours meant when he spoke of your "persuasion and leadership." I often watched in amazement as you took command of an issue, quietly put it into perspective for your colleagues and led the group to a positive resolution. Later I saw you put those same skills to work persuading folks that giving in support of the hospital was the right thing to do. They don't make many leaders like you anymore." Mr. Willis did have a unique ability to motivate others in the community to become involved and interested in Talbot County's growth and areas of need.

In 1933, Mr. Willis became a member of the Board of Directors of the Easton National Bank and became its President in 1946. In 1948, he planned and carried out an acquisition whereby the Farmers and Merchants Bank became a part of Easton National Bank. He remained as President of this organization

until it merged with Maryland National Bank in 1962 at which time he became the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Easton Branch and later a member of the board of the parent bank in Baltimore, the only active member serving on the board from outside of Baltimore City. In 1962, he was nominated and elected to a three-year term on the Board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, being the first Eastern Shoreman so honored.

In the late 1930's, he served as a Director of the Boards of Maryland Credit Finance Corporation and the Easton Publishing Company.

In the early 1960's, he was appointed by Congress to be one of seven representatives to inspect the Mint in Philadelphia.

On a state level, Mr. Willis served in several capacities under three different governors. He had been appointed by Governor Lane to serve as a member of a seven-person Advisory Committee to study and executed the building of a bridge over the Chesapeake Bay and to help direct the State Roads Commission in the building and rehabilitation of \$200,000,000 worth of roads. Governor McKeldin appointed him as a member of the committee, known as the Grotz Committee, to study the State debt under the chairmanship of Arthur Grotz, President of Western Maryland Railroad. Governor Tawes appointed him as a member of the committee to establish the Maryland Development Credit Corporation and later as a member of the committee to recommend a new salary scale for the members of the State Legislature, the Comptroller of Maryland and the Governor.

In addition to his many business, bank and civic duties, Mr. Willis continued to operate farms and worked closely with the University of Maryland on projects beneficial to Maryland agriculture. He, also, in conjunction with the University did a lot of research on hogs, particularly in raising them in confinement known as "pig parlors". He was awarded a Certificate of Merit by Dr. Elkins,

President of the University of Maryland, in 1956. He also served as Director of the Eastern National Livestock Show for many years and helped raise funds for the 4-H organization to show their animals.

As you can see, he maintained a life-long love and focus in farming. Despite his many interests, a part of him was always interacting with farming. From a fertilizer salesman, to establishing his own feed and grain business, to working with the University of Maryland on a number of experimental projects which have been beneficial to the agricultural community, to breeding cattle, then sheep during his 40-years of retirement, he was always working for the good of agriculture. At the age of 90, he was still delivering lambs in the middle of the night.

His first wife, the former Macqueen Gibbs whom he married on November 16, 1935, died October 28, 1964.

Mr. Willis is survived by his wife, the former Sarah Grace Henry whom he married in 1971; three daughters, Ethel Dixon MacGill of Baltimore, Sally Willis Vermilye and Virginia McKenny Sappington, both of Easton; eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

At Mr. Willis' request, there will be no services.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to Memorial Hospital Foundation,  
P. O. Box 1846, Easton, MD 21601.

Arrangements are by the Fellows, Helfenbein and Newnam Funeral Home, P.A., Easton.

# Tribute Wall



“ *J. McKenny Willis Jr.*

October 26, 2023 at 06:42 PM



“ *J. McKenny Willis Jr.*

January 28, 2023 at 12:44 PM



“ *J. McKenny Willis Jr.*

January 28, 2023 at 08:03 AM