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Former Water Board member Saint-Amand dies at 91

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Former Indian Wells Valley Water District Board President Pierre Saint-Amand died at the Stanford Medical Center Friday. He was 91.

By John V. Ciani

Former Indian Wells Valley Water District Board President Pierre Saint-Amand died at the Stanford Medical Center Friday. He was 91.

Saint-Amand was born Feb. 4, 1920, in Tacoma, Wash. to Cyrias Zepherin Saint-Amand and Mable (Berg) Saint-Amand at the Tacoma General Hospital. After serving honorably as a sergeant in the United States Army in Alaska in WWII, Pierre earned a Bachelors of Science in electrical engineering from the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. While at Fairbanks, Pierre identified and named Alaska's famous Denali Fault.

His early work in geology included formulating the theory of the rotation of the Pacific Ocean Basin, which was quite controversial at that time, and studying the Tehachapi Earthquake of 1952. He was present at and prepared the definitive reports on the Chilean Earthquake of 1962 and the Alaskan Earthquake of 1964. Saint-Amand was a Navy scientist for more than 38 years, until his retirement in 1988. His career included a two-year stint with the State Department, where he helped establish the graduate school of Geology at the University of Santiago in Chile. At the Naval Ordnance Test Station China Lake (now the Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake), his accomplishments included groundbreaking scientific research and patents in weather modification. His list of awards includes the Distinguished Civilian Service Award (1967), the LTE Thompson

Award (1973), and Charter Membership in the Senior Executive Service of the United States of America (1979).

He was also a Past President of the Ridgecrest Sister Cities Association, International Footprinters Association Chapter 60, and the Rotary Club of China Lake.

Saint-Amand was an avid pilot who owned his own Cessna and was instrument and multiengine rated. His other interests included gardening and leading geologic tours for the Maturango Museum. He was multilingual in French and Spanish, and loved American history and South American music and literature. Pierre's favorite motto was "If someone loves me, I love them back."

He served three terms on the water board and was an emeritus member of the Ridgecrest Regional Hospital Board of Directors.

Saint-Amand was also a driving force behind the creation of the Indian Wells Valley Airport District, and he was on the first board of directors.

"When it came to water, Dr. Saint-Amand's vision for the IWV was always long term and inclusive," said Education and Conservation Coordinator Lucinda Sue Crosby. "He taught me so much about water issues and encouraged in every curious mind a deep connection to and understanding of that most precious of natural resources locally, nationally and globally. His command of an array of sciences, his ability to translate statistics into relevancies and his unconventional sense of humor served him, and us, superbly."

Saint-Amand appears in Who's Who in the World and is a fellow of the Geological Society of America as well as a registered geologist and geophysicist in California.

Through the years, Saint-Amand saw challenging and highly instructional field experience in some most unusual settings, including the Atacama Desert in Chile (the second driest place on Planet Earth) and the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia. During his stint in Southeast Asia, he was instrumental in developing cloud seeding at the behest of the US government. "By creating extra rain during the monsoon season, we prevented tens of thousands of enemy soldiers from crossing into Vietnam, thereby saving many, many American lives." The formerly classified program was known as "Project Popcorn."

Saint-Amand also aided governments in India, Canada and the Azores.

Former and current water board members shared their thoughts about Saint-Amand.

"He was a good guy," said former Director Don McKernan. "He contributed a lot

about the water in the Indian Wells Valley. He made a whole life of working on the geology. He was a very valuable asset.”

Director Peggy Breeden said she served with Saint-Amand on the water board and the airport board.

“He was adamant about what he believed in. He was willing to listen to what people said,” she said. “He didn’t hide behind anything, and he said exactly what he thought. He was honest to a fault, and he never, ever equivocated on anything.”

Former Airport District Manager Nancy Bass called Saint-Amand one of her favorite people.

“He was not only intelligent. He was witty and fun,” she said. “He had common sense. He had it all.”

Bass said Saint-Amand was one of the spearheads on the committee to form the airport district.

“It may not have gotten done if he hadn’t been on there,” Bass said.

Airport Board President Mark Backes called Saint-Amand a local institution.

“He was very active in getting the district set up,” said Backes. “He was always willing to participate and provide his expertise and time.”

Former Ridgecrest Regional Hospital David Mechtenberg said Saint-Amand was instrumental in hiring him as administrator in 1981.

“Pierre was helpful in hiring me as the administrator,” Mechtenberg said. “After his stint on the board, he was named a hospital board member emeritus. He was very conscientious about attending meetings.”

He said Saint-Amand served on the hospital’s Community Needs Assessment Committee and the Building committee.

“He spent a lot of time, even after he was finished on the board, serving in the capacity of a boardmember emeritus,” Mechtenberg said.

Pierre is survived by his beloved wife of 65 years Marie Saint-Amand, children Gene Saint-Amand, Barbara (Gniewek), Dr. Denali Saint-Amand and David Saint-Amand; grandchildren, Dr. Laurel Saint-Amand, Ian Harper, Cyrus Saint-Amand Poliakoff, Emily Saint-Amand Poliakoff, and Abram Saint-Amand Poliakoff.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that a donation be made in Pierre’s name to the Rotary International PolioPlus program or the American Heart Association. The family is planning a memorial service for April 30 at 2 p.m. The location has not yet been determined

