Industry pioneer William Hewlett dies

EBN Staff - January 12, 2001

William R. Hewlett, co-founder and former president of Hewlett-Packard Co., died at home in his sleep today of natural causes, the company announced. He was 87 years old.

Hewlett, considered one of the founders of Silicon Valley, retired from active management of HP in 1978. Together with David Packard, who died in 1996, he founded Hewlett-Packard Co. in a one-car garage in Palo Alto in 1939. The legendary garage -- designated the birthplace of Silicon Valley -- is a California state historical landmark.

Years after founding HP, William Hewlett (right) posed with David Packard in front of the Palo Alto garage in which they did their first work together.

Their original company now consists of two multinational enterprises: Hewlett-Packard Co. and Agilent Technologies, which had combined revenues of nearly $60 billion in the last fiscal year and employed nearly 140,000.
"Our hearts go out to the families, as we join them in mourning the loss of a great and gentle man," said Carly Fiorina, HP chairman, president and chief executive officer. "We, as stewards of his legacy, will cherish and nurture Bill's bright spirit of invention, remembering and celebrating the rich heritage that he and Dave entrusted us with."

Funeral arrangements are pending.

While at Stanford University, both Hewlett and Packard were influenced strongly by the teaching of one of their professors, Frederick E. Terman, Ph.D., a pioneer in the field of radio engineering. At Terman's urging, the two young men explored starting an electronics company. On Jan. 1, 1939, they founded Hewlett-Packard Co. with $538 in personal capital.

The graduate thesis Hewlett wrote while at Stanford -- which focused on practical applications for the new electrical-engineering technology of negative feedback -- became the basis for HP's first product, the audio oscillator. One of the young company's first orders was from Walt Disney Studios, which used eight of the products to develop the state-of-the-art soundtrack for the movie "Fantasia."

Despite their lack of business experience, the two entrepreneurs realized a modest profit in their first year in business -- starting an unbroken string of 61 consecutive years in the black.

After serving as a U.S. Army Signal Corps officer during World War II, Hewlett returned to HP in 1947 and was named vice president. He was elected executive vice president in 1957, president in 1964 and chief executive officer in 1969.

Hewlett resigned as president in 1977 and retired as chief executive officer in 1978. He then served as chairman of HP's executive committee until 1983, when he became vice chairman of the HP board of directors. In 1987, he was named director emeritus.

In 1966, the Hewlett family established the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to direct the family's extensive philanthropic interests.