

ARCHITECT OF TENNIS CHAMPIONS
BY
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A lot of good things happened to tennis in San Diego in the '30s. This decade saw the first ten courts built at Morley Field (no Folsom Tennis Center) with some help from the WPA. Perhaps the most significant event of this decade was the installation of Wilbur Folsom in a small pro shop next to three city courts at University Heights (now North Park) playground.

While ostensibly a teaching professional, Folsom was really the all time philanthropist, giving lessons for 50 cents an hour at a time when others were getting \$4 to \$5 a half hour. Everyone in those days had a Folsom serve and was on his books which he kept on old paper matchbox covers stored in his cuff. Folsom later moved to Morley Field and became even more of an institution, but not before setting in motion the prime influence of the century on junior tennis in San Diego.

Just a few doors from the University Heights Courts lived a little girl who delighted in throwing her dolls, not in anger but from sheer athletic exuberance. Eventually, Maureen Connolly, then eight, began to shag balls for Folsom in return for his teaching her some fundamentals. Eight years later she won the first three women's singles titles at Forest Hills. The year after that (1952), she captured the first of three Wimbledon world championships.

Folsom overcame a handicap which would have quickly halted a sports career for the average person -- the loss of his left leg in 1927 after he was hit by an auto at Park Blvd. and Meade Ave., only a block from what was to be his last residence. The accident occurred two days after Folsom graduated from San Diego High. He was in the singles and doubles finals of the County matches with Hughie MacArthur the day he was injured. His loss of leg did not decrease his love of tennis nor his desire to help others excel in the sport. He subsequently graduated from San Diego State, where he earned his teaching credentials. Folsom also attended the University of California at Los Angeles.

A native of San Diego, Folsom spent all his life here. For someone who as a youngster considered tennis a "sissy game", Folsom devoted thirty-five years to helping youth learn the sport here, becoming known as the "Architect of Tennis Champions." He developed his own playing technique -- Bob Barth, one of his students recalled: "He'd take one big step on his good leg and a short hop on his wooden one and give us the fits. He could place the ball very well and he had a real tough serve."

After rearing a family of seven children, Wilbur and Ruth Folsom came to the conclusion that there weren't enough good Christian Camping areas in San Diego. They bought 90 acres in 1964 along the Lyons Valley Road, about six miles east of Jamul. After seven weeks of preparation, they opened it and called it Indian Hills Camp. At first, Wilbur was

active in helping clear the area, but this ceased after he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a grave degenerative disease of the nervous system. Today, the camp provides activities and guidance for more than 10,000 eight to fourteen year old youngsters per year. Mary Ruth Folsom, Wilbur's widow, continued to play an active role and served on the Board until her death at 85 on October 20, 1997.

On Folsom's 59th birthday, on October 28, 1967, he was honored at Morley Field It was Wilbur Folsom Appreciation Day, by proclamation of Mayor Curran. In January 1968, Folsom was given the Marlboro Award by World Tennis Magazine for his outstanding sportsmanship and service to tennis. Then on February 19, 1968, he received a special Breitbard Athletic Foundation Award. He died at age 59 in August 1968 at his home, in University Heights, 4539 Park Blvd., a little more than nine months after he retired from the operation of his tennis shop at Morley Field in Balboa Park.

In spite of the handicap in his youth and the crippling disease that limited his mobility and his ability to talk in his last year, he was a great inspiration to the thousands of San Diegans, young and old.