

Longtime Lower Valley farmer dies of emphysema

By Louie Gilot

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Ben Ivey, a Lower Valley farmer, political leader and patriarch of one of region's most influential and well-known families, died Saturday at the family's adobe home.

His family said he was found to have lung cancer 18 years ago, and he succumbed to emphysema. He was 80 years old.

"'King of the Hill,' that's a good way to describe him, or 'Gentleman Farmer,'" Michael Ivey said



of his father.

Ben Ivey was the oldest of King Benjamin Ivey's seven sons, and he was born in a tent in a West Texas oil field in 1920. Two years later, the family moved to El Paso, where King Benjamin and his two brothers began to plant cotton along the Rio Grande.

"What cotton did for this family

was give us everything we have today. It put all the kids through school and put food on the table," Ben Ivey told the El Paso Times in 1991.

It did a lot more than that, though, because over the years the Ivey empire grew into about 2,500 acres of farmland from Ysleta to Tornillo, with crops of onion, chile, alfalfa, cabbage and the Ivey family staple, cotton.

When Loop 375 cut through the family property and transformed rural farmland into high-value

commercial real estate, Ivey and his brothers developed exclusive subdivisions such as Rancho del Rey.

Ivey, who majored in horticulture at Texas A&M, was also a World War II fighter pilot. He never held public office but was active in El Paso County Water Improvement District No. 1 and a fought for water rights for farmers.

He also sat on many boards, including the Bank of Ysleta board, El Paso Airport Advisory Board and El Paso Electric board.

Ivey had an infectious sense of humor, said his friend Bill Newkirk. With fellow pilots, for example, Ivey created an informal club called OOPS, the Old Obsolete Pilots.

"He was a deeply religious man and yet always ready to laugh," Newkirk said.

Ben Ivey is survived by his wife of 56 years, Leona; 12 of his 14 children; 26 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. One of Ivey's 11 sons, David, is a priest who was ordained in Rome by

Pope John Paul II in 1986. Ben Ivey was preceded in death by his sons Matthew and Patrick, who died in car accidents in 1973, and one brother, Paul, who disappeared in 1967 while flying to Los Mochis in Mexico.

Ivey will be buried later this week at Mount Carmel Cemetery, the family said. Arrangements are pending with Hillcrest Funeral Home.

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