



John Wesley Gaeddert – Obituary

John W. Gaeddert died on November 12, 2020 at Kidron Bethel Village. He was 96.

John Wesley Gaeddert was born February 7, 1924, in Nowata County, Oklahoma, the son of Peter R. and Lena (Janzen) Gaeddert. The Gaeddert family had moved to Oklahoma from Kansas in search of improved farming prospects. Instead they found land ravaged by prolonged drought and economic collapse. The family returned to Kansas, where John was baptized in the Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church in rural Inman. As John wrote in his memoirs, the Gaeddert family was “poor but not poorly.”

John was a graduate of Buhler High School and Bethel College (Kan.) with a degree in music education. He later obtained an MRE from Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Ill.) and a BD from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Ind.).

John’s college career was deferred when he was drafted into service as a conscientious objector during World War II. His service took him to the Sierra Nevadas of northern California, where he fought forest fires, surveyed road projects, repaired telephone lines, and worked in a TB hospital. Upon returning to Kansas from California, John enrolled at Bethel, where during his junior year he began courting Mary L. Voran. The two were married on June 1, 1951 at Bethany Mennonite Church in Kingman County, Kan.

John began his career with three years teaching K-12 music at Lehigh and Hillsboro, Kan. John felt a calling to ministry, and moved his young family to Chicago (Ill.), then Elkhart (Ind.), to attend seminary. He pastored three churches during his career: Bethesda Mennonite Church, Henderson, Neb.; Tabor Mennonite Church, rural Newton, Kan.; and Halstead First Mennonite Church, Halstead, Kan. He often directed the church choir as well. Interspersed with these pastorates were administrative positions: a three-year stint as country director for Mennonite Central Committee in Congo (Zaire); director of admissions for Bethel College; and executive secretary of education for the Commission on Education, General Conference Mennonite Church. Conservative estimates put the number of weddings John officiated somewhere near the century mark, including the marriages of his three children and two of his grandchildren.

After retirement from ministry, John pursued a lifelong dream, turning to sculpture as a full-time pursuit at the age of 65. John produced hundreds of sculptures, many of which were made from his favorite medium, bristlecone pine. In 2016, Bethel College hosted a retrospective of John's work at the Luyken Fine Arts Center gallery. From teaching to singing to ministry to administration to art, John had several careers but one vocation: the exploration and celebration of beauty and love in our common, lived experiences.

John was an outsized public figure, a person of deep faith and longing for justice. In private, his family and friends knew him as fun-loving, goofy, and even a rascal. He loved a good joke, especially practical ones. He loved wordplay. He loved peppering his speech with Low German phrases and aphorisms. He loved fishing. He loved playing tennis. He loved his family.

John is survived by his wife Mary, to whom he was married for 69 years; three children: Susan Bartel (Allan) of North Newton, Kan.; Dee Gaeddert Dorsey (Jim) of Grant, Minn.; and Russell Gaeddert (Jean Flickinger) of Hutchinson, Kan.; four grandchildren: Nathan Bartel (Kendra Burkey); Megan Bartel (Chris Lowen); Adam Gaeddert (Rebecca Woodruff); and Sam Gaeddert (Keila Quenzer Gaeddert); five great-grandchildren; and one sister, Velma Stoesz (Charles) of Mountain Lake, Minn.

He was preceded in death by his parents; two sisters, Lorene Balzer (Victor) and Erma Goering (Wilbert); and two brothers, Melvin (Velda) and Elmer (Elfrieda).

The family deeply regrets that, due to the pandemic, they will not be able to celebrate John's life with the people of the communities he so loved. A private memorial service and interment is being planned. Remembrances of John can be shared with the family by sending them to john-gaeddert-memories@googlegroups.com. Memorial gifts may be made to Bethel College, Mennonite Central Committee, or Kidron Bethel Village.

He will be dearly missed. May he rest in peace.