

John Carl Hamel, 92

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John Carl Hamel, 92, son, brother, husband, musician, citizen and great friend, passed on during the early morning hours of Feb. 18, 2015, at The HealthCenter in Kalispell. He had a wonderful life.

Born to Stanley and Florence Hamel in the small farming town of Glenwood, Indiana, on Sept. 3, of 1922, John was the eldest of three boys. John's father, having been a World War I veteran and automobile mechanic in the United States Army Transport Corps, moved his small family in the mid-1920s to Ferndale, Michigan, gaining employment in the rapidly growing automobile industry. John's boyhood home was only about 8 miles from the Ford Motor Company's first factory of the famous Model T.

John took up music very early in life, beginning to play the clarinet when only about 7 years of age. He was a high school band member and graduated from Lincoln High School in Ferndale in 1939. Also during high school, John played on the baseball team, truly loving that sport. At one point he lamented how he wished he yet had the ball glove given to him by his father.

Shortly after graduating from high school, and true to his "independent nature," John left home, playing big band swing music with the bands of the Big Band Era. He first played for several years with the band of Ace Brigode, decades later telling his Kalispell friends that the key reason he landed his first job was because, even though a saxophone and clarinet player, he was also able to play flute passably well. Later, John enjoyed several very satisfying years with the Bernie Cummins Big Band, of which he spoke frequently and fondly. Many winter months he spent at the Casa Marina Hotel in Key West, Florida, as well as the Last Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas. One-nighters were then a way of life, as John's bands traveled the USA from venue to venue. Very often and in his later years, John told stories of these memorable gigs — from Chicago to Indianapolis to Kansas City to Las Vegas to New York, and more. He often spoke of playing in the famous Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City, namesake for the famous Glenn Miller tune, "Pennsylvania 6-5000." One of his most enjoyable and memorable stints was playing for a time with Louis Armstrong and his band in Las Vegas. With happy memories, John liked to recall that Louis called him "Johnny." And, of course, the times he played music with, rode horses with and played baseball with Harry James, are not to be forgotten.

In approximately 1950, and as the Big Band Era was winding down, John resigned from the Bernie Cummins Big Band, and returned to his parents' home in Trenton, Michigan. Following John's return, his younger brother Bill was involved in a very serious auto accident. In taking Bill on one occasion to visit the family doctor, he met his first wife Ruth Sylvia, the office nurse attending to Bill. "Ruthy," John would always call her, was a mass general nurse, very knowledgeable and very commanding. Matched quickly, John and Ruthy fell in love and were married in 1955. John joined the steel industry, finding employment with Great Lakes Steel in Ecorse, Michigan. They made their home in Gibraltar,

Michigan, about 18 miles south of Ecorse, and Ruthy continued her career in medicine.

John's career in the steel industry was meaningful. True to his nature, he took his work seriously, and rose to the position of parts manager. Retiring in early 1978, and with Ruth developing health problems, John and Ruthy moved to the warm climate of St. Petersburg, Florida. After a few years in St. Pete, their desire to travel took them first to the east coast of Florida and then to Abaco, Bahama West Indies, where they bought a home. Developing many friends and with John following his music, several happy years followed. When Ruthy developed serious health issues, they moved back to Florida, settling in Lantana. She passed on in October of 1986.

A year or so passed, and John developed an acquaintance with Elizabeth “Betty” Lee Harris. Beginning with a helping hand in assisting her with the move of her residence, their relationship flourished, and they were married on Dec. 1, of 1987, settling in Ocala, Florida. Happy years passed, but with John developing health issues, they moved in 1999 to Kalispell, the home of Betty's daughter.

Life in Kalispell was great for John and Betty. Purchasing a home on Fourth Avenue East, they enjoyed one another immensely, making new friends and engaging in their new adventure in Northwest Montana. Regrettably, Betty developed serious medical problems, and passed on in December of 2003.

Losing Betty was difficult for John. But rather than retire from social interaction, he engaged in making new friends everywhere he went. Although by now a senior citizen, he truly began to thrive. His music became a key “purpose in life” — the other, his countless friends. John was a founding member of Three Roses & A Thorn in 2002, and was quite proud of naming the ensemble. John played the bass clarinet, but with three ladies of the foursome on Bb or Eb clarinet — the “roses,” of course. John played bass clarinet for many years with the Flathead Valley Community Band; baritone saxophone with “The Don Lawrence Orchestra”; 12 very meaningful years on bari sax and solo clarinet with Swingin' On High Big Band; and was the instigator and founding member of Swingin' Light, helping to acquire the entire music library for Swingin' Light from his good friend Paul Luciano of Sommerfield, Florida.

This last decade of John's life was happy, meaningful and loaded with purpose. He practiced his instruments relentlessly — usually five to six hours every day. Although the Bb clarinet was his first love, and always beginning with clarinet, he would usually practice several additional and different instruments in one day, depending on whatever musical gig might be coming up next. A common routine was for him to sit by his window, clarinet in action and with a Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw CD on the player. Hours on end he would work diligently with his beautiful tone, perfecting his phrasing and articulation, in order that the musical product would be superior. At the same time, he was also the neighborhood “grandpa,” loving to watch the children going to and from school (worrying about them, of course), and especially enjoying the Young children — as if they were his own grandchildren — directly across the street.

John was preceded in death by his father, Stanley Golden Hamel, in 1973; his mother, Florence Louise Hamel, in 1988; his first wife, Ruth, in 1986; his second wife, Betty, in 2003; and by his younger brother, David Stanley Hamel, in 1989.

He is survived by his brother, William James Hamel, and wife, Juanita, living in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

John Hamel will be greatly missed. To one and all he was an example — an example of citizenry, of responsibility, of independence and self-reliance, of work ethic and pursuit of excellence, of superb musicianship and the discipline required to get there — but most of all, of friendship. Truly, there was not a soul on this earth who knew him, who would not agree. He leaves behind wonderful memories and a great legacy, and it is to us all — his family and many friends — to honor his memory in our daily lives and by the choices we make.