



McHENRY  
MUSEUM  
& Historical Society



# Newsletter

June 2021

Please call us at:  
(209) 618-5387

## History Lesson

On May 18, 2021, Merlin "Mel" Nomann was presented the Stanislaus County Outstanding Senior Citizen of the Year for District 4 by Supervisor Mani Grewal. Mel and his spouse, John Crabb, have volunteered tirelessly for many years in the community and worked especially close with the McHenry Mansion Foundation and the McHenry Museum & Historical Society (MM&HS). We take great **Pride** in being able to share the story of the lives of these two extraordinary fellows.



### John Crabb and Mel Nomann

**Mel Nomann** was born on a 120-acre farm in Palmer, Iowa in 1928. Both pairs of his grandparents immigrated from Northern Germany (then Denmark). He was reared in a staunch Lutheran family and attended Lutheran College. Mel worked his way through college babysitting or cleaning out barns. By answering an ad in the newspaper, he found employment at the Purple Fox Night Club in East Dubuque, Illinois, a swank night club only open twice a week. Eventually, while working toward medical training, he earned the position of Masters of Ceremony and ended with a radiology degree. Guided to go where help was needed upon graduation, Mel found work as a laboratory and radiology technician at a hospital in Tillamook, Oregon, where he remained for three years until being drafted. He spent seven months in Fort Dodge, Iowa before the Navy shipped him out to Korea, leaving behind a spouse and a month and a half old son, whom he would miss for two years.

While there, Mel worked tirelessly as a front-line medic and remained on line for three months at a time. A highlight from his service includes nursing Marilyn Monroe back to health when she became ill while performing in freezing temperatures to boost the troops' morale. Such encouragement was pivotal amidst the perils of warfare one faced. An instance of this occurred when Mel followed orders and was preparing to leave his bunker and patients behind, when, suddenly, a mortar struck the exit. A 14x14 beam collapsed and buried him. He counted four days and five nights by "the warmth of the body of the land," maintaining his sanity through the recitation of the Lord's Prayer backwards before the North Korean prisoners of war who had been housed at his camp dug him out. His relief from being rescued was short-lived, as the sound of bombs dropping began. He quickly knelt behind a metal garbage can but realized a day and a half later that a ricocheted bullet hit him in his leg. Thankfully, it did not impede his efforts to care for the injured during the remainder of his service and he was able to extract the bullet himself. He did not report the injury to stay on the front line.

Upon returning home after the war, he procured a job at a children's hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. During his residence there, he continued his education and became a specialist in Orthopedics, using this knowledge to teach 380 paramedical students throughout his tenure at the hospital. In 1956, Mel moved his family, which had grown to include a daughter, to work at Husband Medical Group in Modesto. Seven years later, in 1963, Mel's son passed away at age 10. Prior to his divorce from his wife, they adopted another son, imparting on him the same love they had shared for their beloved in Heaven.

Continued on Page 2 >





Mel



John



John and Mel and their beloved dog Max

**Johnny “John” Crabb** was born and raised in Pratt, Kansas, a small town of about 10,000 people in 1936. Raised in a family of seven daughters and five boys, he was number eight out of twelve. His father was a “railroader” for Rock Island and his mother had the ever important task of caring for her twelve children, of which four daughters and one son were hearing impaired. These siblings attended school for the deaf in Olathe, Kansas. Additionally, three of John’s brothers served in World War II. Upon his graduation from High School, John left for Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, aspiring to become an assistant youth minister. He worked as a part-time minister in Wichita, Kansas where he not only preached, but also taught sign language at his church, something he would do for several decades to come. John eventually came to Modesto in 1960, after the restauranter in San Jose, whom he was working for at the time, wanted a new restaurant at Yosemite Lanes.

Mel and John met in 1966, while singing in church group choirs in Modesto. John was first tenor for First Christian, Mel was first tenor for Grace Lutheran. With the addition of Fred Beyer, who was lead tenor for First Methodist, they became known as “the Three Tenors”, having all met through a group of eleven people known as “Birds of Feather.” Much of their time together was spent volunteering with San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk, whom they considered a close friend, to work closely with AIDS patients and charities.

Never setting still, Mel and John started Modesto Estate Sales over forty years ago, acting on their lifelong passion for antiques. They live and breathe antiques, having also belonged to the Kettledrum Antique Club. John’s greatest pastime is his collection of antique inkwells, which has led to him develop one of the world’s largest collections. Part of his collection has even been featured in the book *The Collector’s Guide to Inkwells*, which was published in 2000. Their antiques business has ultimately allowed them to do what they love best, travel.

Moreover, Mel and John volunteered with both the McHenry Museum and McHenry Mansion for several decades, where they always relished helping their friend, Wayne Mathes, who was the Cultural Services Manager. They became involved with the Mansion after it was gifted to the city by the Gallo family and helped with acquisitions for both the MM&HS and The McHenry Mansion Foundation. Applying their lifelong passion to their volunteer work, Mel and John helped supply antiquities for the McHenry Museum basement area during its restoration in the early 2000s. One of their greatest finds was the currently displayed antique refrigerator, but they are also proud of the circus display and all the displayed cast iron, which had belonged to Mel’s family. Most recently, just prior to the pandemic, Mel found a finial from the original Stanislaus County Courthouse, which will likely be exhibited at the Museum.

Mel and John officially married on July 12, 2008, 43 years to the day they met, and have spent a total of 55 years together. They both remain active with their hobbies and both are also incredibly artistic. Mel and John possess a love of people and a zest for life, with Mel living by the motto: “truth and love takes you a long way.”



Mel in the Military



John



# Updates



- The McHenry Museum remains closed with hopeful opening dates in mid-June.
  - An Email will be sent to members once the official opening date is known.
- Memberships are being worked on and should be mailed soon.
  - Memberships can be purchased online via the website
  - [www.mchenrymuseum.org](http://www.mchenrymuseum.org)
- The annual meeting is once again postponed this month.
  - We are hoping to move it to the end of the year.
- We would like to keep the Board of Directors as is for the time being.
  - We will be recruiting new members once the museum is open.

## In Memoriam



**Joy Johnston Madison**  
July 15, 1962–May 25, 2021

It is with great sadness we announce the passing of MM&HS Board of Directors member, Joy Madison. Joy joined our board in 2019 and has remained very active. She helped in re-writing our bylaws, aided in the hiring of our last executive director and was a trusted advisor to the historical society. For the City of Modesto, she was the past President/CEO of the Chamber of Commerce, and recently worked as an Executive Director for the Manufacturers Council of the Central Valley. She was also a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Rotary, and MoBand. A service for Joy will be held from 4-7pm June 3, 2021, at Franklin & Downs Funeral Home in Modesto. Thank you Joy for all you did for the MM&HS and the City of Modesto.



\*We will be taking July & August off, the Newsletter will return in September so we can focus on a new edition of "Stanislaus Stepping Stones."