

A heavy duty man with a heart of gold.



Lorens Bonnichsen Midtgaard, a Danish immigrant who built his American dream the old-fashioned way – with hard work and a firm, honest handshake – left this world on March 31, 2021 after a fierce but brief battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 80.

Lorens had the magic touch and intellect to build a premiere heavy equipment mechanic business. During his 50 years in the Gilroy community, he serviced many farms and ranches in Santa Clara County, San Benito County and Monterey County.

He was respected and trusted by farmers and ranchers. He was raised on a farm in Denmark and apprenticed on farms throughout his young adulthood. He possessed a sharp eye for detail and a driving propensity to figure things out. He was passionate about all things agriculture, and displayed a great deal of compassion and empathy when helping customers. He left for work very early in the morning, never wore a watch, never took a lunch, and worked until the job was done. All his work was done in the pre-cell-phone days. Working face-to-face with customers formed the backbone of his operation. He never advertised, but always had more than enough work. Farmers who trusted him spread the word. One farmer in Salinas said, “That guy can see through metal! ”

As author John Steinbeck pointed out in his classic novel *Cannery Row*, “For there are men who can look, listen, tap, make an adjustment, and a machine works. Indeed there are men near whom a car runs better.” Such a man was Lorens.

Lorens started his adventurous adult journey arriving in the United States in 1964 after leaving his small hometown of Østerlygum in Denmark, a country he returned to time and time again to visit his two older brothers, extended family and many friends.

His childhood blissful memories were many, but the Nazis took over the family farm and house during World War II, forcing him to sleep in a tiny alcove while they commandeered the food, livestock and simple way of life. The Nazi occupation of his family’s farm lasted five years from 1940-45. German soldiers were quartered in both the barns and the house. His vivid memories included one evening when all the children from the community were rounded up and put on the roof of a nearby munitions factory. The Germans heard about a potential bombing of the factory by the British and the thinking was that the British would not bomb the plant if they saw the

children on the roof. Such harrowing memories were part of Lorens' childhood, and it was a wonderful day in 1945 when Danes could once again fly their flags high above their rich farmlands across the countryside.

After working on many farms, saving his money, learning some English, finding a sponsor and obtaining the necessary papers, he set out across the ocean with an eye for adventure, a keen mind, an insatiable curiosity and a driving work ethic. Arriving in America, Lorens passed through the famed immigrant gateway, Ellis Island in New York. Then he crossed the country by Greyhound bus, getting off in farming communities to work for a few days to secure enough cash to keep heading west to Gilroy.

In Gilroy, his sponsor was George Hoenck who had a hay business that he ran with three sons. Previously, George had hired a Danish exchange student and thought he had the best work ethic he had ever seen and was interested in finding another Dane to sponsor. The Hoencks always said that Lorens was their fourth brother, and traveled from their hay ranch in Nevada to Placerville to visit him during his final days.

Lorens branched out again, gaining mechanical skills while working in land leveling in Northern California and working for Ashton Equipment Company in Salinas.

Then he met the love of his life, Patricia Marie Gaul, at Little Switzerland near Napa.

The football coach at San Leandro High, where Pat was teaching with her friend Patty, convinced the two young ladies to go. "He promised we would have a good time because everyone who went loved to dance," remembered Pat. "As soon as we walked in the door, the coach's wife (Caroline) came over to me and said, 'I know the nicest Danish boy who is probably the best dancer in the whole place. I'll go get him and introduce you!'"

At a beer garden with a wonderful wooden dance floor and an energetic German band, the dashing pair glided into each other's hearts, dancing the afternoon and evening away. Lorens asked for her number. She gladly gave it – and then the tall, blond, polite, handsome Dane vanished.

Lorens had plans.

Unbeknownst to Pat, he and a friend had an epic trip in the works. In a Volkswagen camper van, they travelled all the way through Mexico and Central America to the Panama Canal. Lorens liked to know how things worked, and the marvel of the Gatun Locks at the canal beckoned.

Six months drifted by. Then one evening, Pat and her friend waltzed through the door at Little Switzerland and there he was. Lorens made a bee-line to them and asked if

she and Patty would sit at his table. Six months later they were married in Reno, NV. And for 53 years, they danced together, raised three beautiful daughters and taught all those around them that the best things in life are built around love, hard work and enjoyment of the simple things.

Lorens embraced a rural life and was a naturalist at heart. The modest 5-acre, one story family farm home on Pacheco Pass with a twisting driveway up to a lookout knoll grew from simple roots. Through the years there were cows, pigs, sheep, horses, dogs and a variety of barn cats to deal with varmints. Lorens planted trees, bushes and added to the house. He built a hefty shop for doctoring large equipment and fixing everything that needed fixing. Paddocks sprouted. Alfalfa and hay were grown. Daughters Jenny, Britta and Annika learned how to mend fences, take care of animals, bale hay and fetch the right tool Dad called for.

Lorens truly was a Renaissance man. He could wield a 40-pound wrench. He knew how to sew and he and Pat taught their daughters that skill. He could break a horse, build a barn, hunt for days and identify plants and birds with an encyclopedic knowledge. His bookshelves were chock full. How-to and what's-what books were placed beside his beloved western novels. He taught his daughters many skills and insisted that they would not drive until they had mastered changing the oil and a tire on a car. He set a high standard for his girls, and through the years they raised a herd of Red Angus cattle. He was a well-known leader in both 4-H and FFA activities with youth. Additionally, he volunteered in his daughters' classes at San Ysidro School, South Valley Junior High, and Gilroy High School.

For 49 years the Midtgaards occupied the little house on the hill. Pat, who began her Gilroy life as a teacher in the Gilroy Unified School District semi-retired first. After rising to multiple principalships of Gilroy elementary schools, including opening Antonio del Bono School – she served on the GUSD School Board for 11 years. Lorens gradually slowed the business, then retired. With Pacheco Pass Highway getting busier all the time, they decided to sell and move to Placerville, CA where they have resided for the last two years.

Lorens Midtgaard is survived by his wife, Pat, his three daughters, Jenny (Mark Derry), Britta (Daren Fletcher), and Annika (Nathan Graveline). He is also survived by two older brothers in Denmark, Niels and Anton, several dear friends, and nieces and nephews in Denmark and the United States; his grandchildren Bonnevie and Solvej Graveline, Jack and Paige Fletcher, Shannon (Steven) Catalano, Cayla (Austin) Kline, and Mariah Derry, and great-grandchildren, Jackson, Tyler, and Wyatt Catalano, and Attlee Kline.

His rousing renditions of the Danish celebratory song, “Hun Skal Leve” accompanied by a toast and shot of Aquavit will be carried forward. He will be missed by many.

Skol, Lorens!