



Gerald W. Thornhill

August 2, 1931 - August 8, 2024

Living in Hampshire, Illinois, most of his life, Jerry met and married Jean Wright from Marengo in 1951. Within 8 years their family grew to five daughters. Some of Jerry's last words shared were "I am a very lucky father." He sadly but comfortably passed away of skin cancer-related causes on August 8, 2024, after just turning 93.

Anything Jerry set out to do, he could do and do well. Early on he earned trophies for model airplane competitions and boat racing and with cheerleader daughters he loved filming football games for HHS. At age 34 he pursued his greatest passion – flying, which became a big part of his life for over 40 years. His claim to fame was test flying six WWI airplanes built by renowned builder Carl Swanson and then building his own exact replica of a WWI Sopwith Camel. He enjoyed flying this unique plane and ultimately sold it to Peter Jackson (Director of Lord of the Rings) where it now resides in New Zealand.

Having an eclectic work history, he was a "builder" working in kitchen and sign factories often given the more intricate jobs. He managed the DeKalb airport and was a flight instructor. He ran the Hampshire sewage treatment plant and was a driver's license examiner in Elgin where he had the nickname of "flunk 'em Jerry" – never suffering poor drivers!

Much to the family's surprise while not personally having a high view of

politicians, he was elected Mayor of Hampshire in 1973 on a “Clean Sweep” platform. A one-term mayor, he and his board achieved success in keeping the railroad from establishing a 36-train storage yard (with no chance of commuter service) and in shutting down shoddy construction in a new subdivision. When the inside of the water tower was being re-painted, Mayor Thornhill climbed up the tower and found they only did half the job. Not likely many other mayors did this type of personal inspection!

The family never hired a repairman as Jerry could build or fix anything. He built the family’s first ski boat from a kit, made custom water skis for his girls, and ultimately sold skis under the name of Aquaflex. In his 20’s on nights and weekends while working in a factory, he built a tiny home and then when the family grew, he built the “big” pink house in Hampshire where the family lived for 60 years. He rebuilt and repaired all the family cars, built the home stereo and even built a frame and flooded the north yard so his girls could have their own ice-skating rink one winter.

He and Jean taught their kids the love of travel which became a big part of all their lives. Summers brought adventurous two-week camping trips from Yellowstone to Canada to Lake of the Ozarks.

A very accomplished and special family man, he will be greatly missed. Jerry is predeceased by his much-loved wife Jean, and siblings Rosemary Rissman, Carolyn Sapp and Muriel Knowling.

He is survived by his siblings Priscilla McChesney and John Thornhill, his five daughters Gail Thornhill, Susan Thornhill, Denise (Bill) Gower, Kathy (Rick) Hemphill and Marsha (Dickie) Wood, his grandchildren Elicia (Dan) Michaud, Jennifer Stevens, Sarah Gower, Billy Gower and Kathryn (Chris) O’Reilly and three great grandchildren Jack, Avery and Hudson.

Please join in a Celebration of Life in the basement at the First United Methodist Church, 207 E. Grove St. in Hampshire on Saturday, October 12. Visitation at 3 p.m., the program starts at 3:30 p.m. with a light supper to follow.

The family requests no flowers.

Cemetery Details

St. Charles Borromeo Cemetery

Getzelman Road
Hampshire, IL 60140

Previous Events

Visitation

OCT **12**. 3:00 PM - 3:30 PM (CT)

First United Methodist Church
207 E. Grove Ave.
Hampshire, IL 60140

Celebration of Life

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Tribute Wall



“ I helped wash Gerry's Mooney airplane at Ramee airport north of Genoa. I was about 16 in 1982
I think Gerry's wife suggested he give me a ride because I got under the plane and cleaned the bottom. Art Leffelman and I went for a ride and we flew low over Art's farm house on new Lebanon rd.
Thanks Gerry! I am sorry for your loss Mike Carpino Genoa IL.

Michael Carpino - March 17, 2025 at 07:02 PM



Sorry I apologize misspelled Jerry's name. Tired. Mike Carpino

Michael Carpino - March 17, 2025 at 07:04 PM

PB

“ I am Phyllis Bohlander while living on a farm with an airstrip my husband knew Carl Swanson through which we met Gerry. He came and flew Spad on our airstrip. What a great guy and I realize I hear he really was even greater. He lived a great life. Sorry for your loss but a great man!!

phyllis bohlander - October 08, 2024 at 04:13 PM

ST

Thank you so much Phyllis and Michael, we are touched to hear these stories! And we all knew about Bohlander's air strip. Dad walked away from three airplane crashes which was a testimonial to his sharp brain, skill and teachings of ... always stay the pilot and don't become the passenger if you are going down. He was the guy you would want in charge in a mishap. He had a great life and we had him a LONG time. So very blessed!

Susan J Thornhill - October 08, 2024 at 08:34 PM

MA

“ Margarita purchased the Strength & Solace Spray for the family of Gerald W. Thornhill.



Margarita - October 07, 2024 at 11:48 AM

MA

“ Margarita planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Gerald W. Thornhill.

Margarita - October 07, 2024 at 11:48 AM

TK

“ Ted, Jane, Bob, Chris and Amy Knowling purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Gerald W. Thornhill.



Ted, Jane, Bob, Chris and Amy Knowling - October 04, 2024 at 06:37 PM

DJ

“ I always liked Jerry. We were neighbors for many years. Once while I was working for John Thornhill as a surveyor's assistant, Jerry took us up in his plane so we could check out some land John was going to survey for AT&T. I knew his 2 oldest daughters, Gail and Sue pretty well and bid them and their sisters my condolences. R.I.P.

Darrel Johnson - October 03, 2024 at 12:26 PM

ST

Very kind, Darrel. I am sure my Uncle John will enjoy hearing this story.

Susan J Thornhill - October 03, 2024 at 11:22 PM

MB

As a Young Man Jerry taught me many things about working on airplanes I'll never forget what a great mechanic he was and an innovator. I watched him fly many many times a lot of different designs Newport spad 13 spad 7. Siemens schuchert and some other ones I forgot. I'm sorry I missed reconnecting with him again.

Michael Bohlander - October 08, 2024 at 05:40 PM

ST

He LOVED his flying days and the unique opportunity to fly Carl Swanson's planes. Thanks for the memories, Michael.

Susan J Thornhill - October 08, 2024 at 08:34 PM