A man of honor, integrity, and sound moral principle, Gene White was truly an inspiration to those around him. He was a true gentleman if ever there was one and offered unconditional love and acceptance to all who were near. It was clear to see the love that Gene had for his family, and although he loved being a father he just may have argued that there was nothing like being a grandfather. He was well respected in his career and accomplished much of which to be proud, but he was a humble and gracious man whose true happiness was found in the love he shared with his family and friends. Although life will never be the same without Gene here, his timeless legacy will live on through all those who follow him.

The 1930s were very much defined by the unrelenting grip of the Great Depression. Although people were willing to work, jobs became hard to come by leaving cities, communities, and families to come together to weather the storm. Rising unemployment, a severe drought, and escalating tensions overseas all added fuel to the fire that remained in place throughout the entire decade. Despite the trying times around them, a young couple from Linden, Michigan, was delighted with the birth of a baby boy on April 30, 1932. Gene R. was one of eight children born to his parents, James C. and Marion E. (Smith) White, and he was raised on the family farm alongside his siblings, Ellen Jo, Lorraine, Sue, Jim, Janet, Celia, and John.

In many ways Gene experienced a typical childhood for the youth of his generation. His father worked hard as a farmer while his mother was busy inside the home. Gene worked on their farm and worked for other area farmers as well. He was a member of the local 4-H and attended Blair School, a one-room schoolhouse in Linden, through the eighth grade, walking two miles to and from school each day. Gene also played basketball while in high school.

Not to be forgotten during Gene’s years in high school was his introduction to the woman with whom he would write a love story that would span more than 50 years. Her name was Wilma Gage, and they met through 4-H activities while in high school. They began dating, but their relationship soon became a long distance one while Gene was serving in the military.

Gene entered the United States Air Force after high school graduation during the days of the Korean Conflict. He took great pride in being in the USAF. During that time he had a Doberman named Jessie that he trained for competitions while stationed in Japan as part of the Korean Theater. Gene’s
sweetheart was never far from his mind, and he wrote home letters including some to Wilma’s mother so that she could put in a good word for him.

With his military duties fulfilled, Gene returned stateside and attended Michigan State University where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Engineering. Prior to starting college, Gene married his true love, Wilma, in 1954.

After earning his degree, Gene was poised for a rewarding career. He began working as a Territory Manager overseas for Deere and Company, handling both sales and service. Gene worked hard and became a Service Supervisor in 1975. His work took him all around the world, and Wilma was able to accompany him on many of his trips. Their family, which grew to include their three wonderful children, Lee, Carl, & Nancy, spent some time living in Chile and the Dominican Republic because of Gene’s work. Throughout his longtime career, he was responsible for opening new markets and doing everything from setup to training, meeting some of the most amazing people along the way. Gene was also a wonderful father who was devoted to his family and loved them deeply. Their family dogs were an important part of his life as well, and he most recently has enjoyed the companionship of his cats including Midnight, Fluffer, Tipper, and Blackie. Once Gene retired they moved back to Michigan and had a Christmas tree farm.

In addition to his career, Gene’s strong work ethic was appreciated within his community as he served in countless ways. He was a member of the Big Rapids First United Methodist Church, where he was active in a variety of ministries and activities. Gene was also a member of the Big Rapids Lions Club, the Boy Scouts of America, earning the prestigious “Silver Beaver” Award, the DAV, the local “Greasy Fingers” and the National Two Cylinder Club. Together Gene and Wilma were involved with many local organizations and activities, too.

A man of many interests, Gene was always busy with something. His passion was for John Deere tractors, especially two cylinder tractors. Gene and his brother, James, started a few two cylinder clubs in Western Michigan including the Greasy Fingers Two Cylinder Club, the one in which he was more heavily involved with. He also loved going to tractor shows. Gene enjoyed several trips to Yellowstone National Park including one in celebration of his 50th wedding anniversary with Wilma. Christmas gatherings with family were also a favorite. It was Gene and Wilma’s interest in genealogy that took him out East to New Hampshire,
Massachusetts, and New York to do research. He was an avid reader who enjoyed books from all genres, and his family and friends knew that he was all about the Michigan State Spartans. Gene enjoyed working with his hands and was into woodworking. He and Wilma enjoyed making wreaths, garland, and grave blankets at Christmas time. Gene converted two school buses into camper prior to the “motorhome.” He also enjoyed keeping up on current events as there was nothing like a good debate from time to time.

Outgoing, approachable, engaging, and intelligent, Gene White was an extraordinary man to know and love. He was a people person who loved things like attending his class reunions, engaging in meaningful conversations, and meeting interesting people all across the globe. Gene was practical and optimistic in everything with a fantastic work ethic that brought him much success. He had a special place in his heart for all people as well as a soft spot for animals, and he loved nothing more than having people, especially children, out to the farm to fish. Gene will be deeply missed but never forgotten.

Gene R. White, of Big Rapids, died on Thursday, April 3, 2014. Gene’s family includes his daughter, Nancy (Richard) Janoski of Rock Island, IL; two sons, Lee (Carol) White of Rochelle, IL and Carl (Lynn) White of Moline, IL; seven grandchildren, Alex and Nick Janoski, Stuart (Stephanie) and Kyle White, Ian, Evan, and Jennie White; great-grandson who will be born in May; three sisters, Lorraine Murphy, Sue Robar, and Celia Kelly; brother, John White; sister-in-law and brother-in-law, Nita and Emery Bennett; and several nieces and nephews. Gene was preceded in death by his parents; wife, Wilma; son, David James White; two sisters, Ellen Jo Cavanaugh and Janet Watkins; and one brother, James M. White. Funeral services for Gene will be at 11:00 a.m. Tuesday, April 8, 2014, at the Big Rapids First United Methodist Church with Pastor Rebecca Morrison officiating. Visitation will be Monday, April 7, 2014, from 4:00-7:00 p.m. at the Mohnke Funeral Home in Big Rapids. Burial will be at Hungerford Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made to the Big Rapids First United Methodist Church or the DAV.

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