A MEMORIAL
To
John C. Jahnke
Professor Emeritus of Psychology
1929 – 2011

Composition of memorials for former colleagues provides the opportunity to celebrate accomplishments, to provide context for colleagues, and to inform future choices. This is especially true in the case of someone like John Jahnke whose rich career greatly impacted his Department and all of Miami University.

John was born in Barrington, Illinois in 1929 and died in Portland Oregon August 3, 2011. He completed the A.B. at the University of Illinois, Urbana in 1951 and his Ph.D. at Northwestern University under Benton Underwood in 1955. He was appointed to the psychology faculty at Miami University in 1957 and served the University in numerous capacities until his initial retirement in 1998. After John and Melissa left Oxford to live in the Pacific Northwest, he continued mentoring graduate students at the University of Washington until advancing dementia led to his complete retirement.

John’s arrival at Miami coincided with a period of enormous change in higher education. In the 1950s, the National Academy of Sciences suggested the need for training of additional graduate students to serve as faculty for an anticipated increase in the number of students seeking post-secondary instruction. Along with other Ohio state universities, Miami was encouraged to submit proposals to develop doctoral programs in nine disciplines including psychology. The Department’s successful proposal included a heavy emphasis on research following a program outlined by Donald Hebb. With Lax Milton, John contributed to that proposal as well as to the funded application to the National Science Foundation for construction of a new building solely for use by the Department of Psychology.

From 1969 until 1977, John served as Department Chairman with major responsibilities to maintain high quality undergraduate instruction and implement the newly approved psychology Ph.D. programs. He was also intimately involved in recruitment of additional faculty to meet the increased demand for instruction and research supervision. John provided a template for the several new faculty who joined the Department during and after the era of his Chairmanship. He exhibited steadiness and consistency, maintaining calm patience in the face of the many challenges and frictions always to be found in small, highly interactive communities of capable, opinionated people. He sought consensus in decision-making encouraging everyone to contribute both in meetings and through committee assignments. John kept the door of his small office open and was readily available, even on Sunday mornings. The current strength of the psychology graduate program can be attributed in no small measure to John’s early efforts.

John’s work to establish new academic programs coincided with significant turmoil regarding the war in Vietnam throughout Ohio as well as nationally. In addition to whiffs of tear gas, the 1960s witnessed transportation by U-Haul Trucks of student protesters from the Naval ROTC building to jail in Hamilton. Following the deaths at Kent State University, Miami classes were again suspended for a brief period. Throughout this period John retained a clear focus on the overarching goals of Miami University: to teach, to learn through focused, disciplined research, and to share the fruits of those efforts with the broader society.
John was a dedicated teacher. His work with students was underpinned by the goal of understanding ourselves and the world around us through empirical research. In his research methods classes he strove to clarify procedures that permitted researchers to arrive at valid conclusions as well as to be aware of pitfalls awaiting the unwary. This was consistent with the research emphasis in the original doctoral program proposal. John fully understood that investigation of human behavior was and is extraordinarily challenging.

John included his children, John, Kurt and Stephanie, in his professional work. They helped as assistants in John’s experiments as well as those of his graduate students. Stephanie avows that working with her father helped her learn to address the complex diagnostic challenges she encounters as a veterinarian.

John participated fully in undergraduate instruction teaching courses ranging from introductory psychology to physiological psychology, statistics and research methods. Many of his undergraduate students developed an appreciation of experimental psychology as an empirical science as a result of enrolling in his courses. John was also deeply involved in graduate education ranging from core courses to specialty seminars and research supervision.

John led a very active research laboratory with thorough and meticulous dedication while helping his students develop from assistants to independently functioning colleagues. This led to the publication of over 40 peer-reviewed papers in prestigious journals including the Journal of Experimental Psychology. His paper on the Ranschburg Effect, published in the Psychological Review in 1969, was especially widely cited. His research work with graduate students included supervision of 9 doctoral dissertations as well as numerous masters’ theses. He was awarded two National Science Foundation grants to examine issues related to short-term memory. His book Cognition (Prentice-Hall, 1998), written with former graduate student Ron Nowaczyk, distilled much of what John learned during the preceding 45 years. John’s research leadership is attested by invitations to review numerous journal submissions as well as appointments as Associate Editor of the Journal of Motor Behavior and the Board of Editors of The Psychological Record.

John delighted in growing things both at the orchard on Booth Road where he cultivated several apple varieties with colleagues Pat Capretta and Dick Sherman and at his home on Whidbey Island in Washington. John also retained a strong interest in aviation and space flight and was proud of his younger brother Tom who was an Air Force pilot. He took special pleasure in playing the organ and helping to navigate small aircraft when travelling to professional meetings as distant as San Antonio. Even if you didn’t know John and Melissa, you certainly knew their stylish, contemporary home near the entrance to the Springwood subdivision where they hosted many a New Year’s Eve party.

John is survived by Melissa, his wife of 54 years, children John, Kurt and Stephanie, 3 grandchildren and 2 brothers.

John Jahnke was a gentleman and a scholar. His colleagues and Miami University benefited from his presence.