

A quiet, gentle man with an insatiable desire to learn

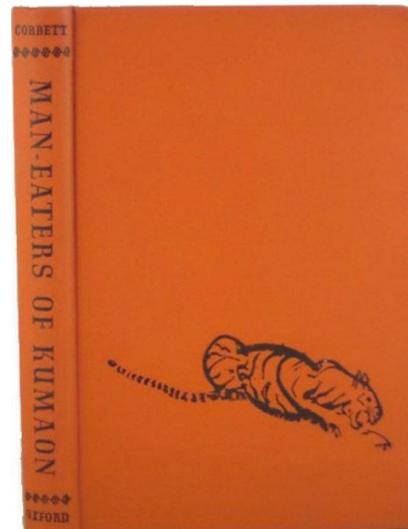
Written by Jean Bartlett, October, 2017



MATTES, DAVID (1945-2016)

It's not a surprise that Dave Mattes often had his nose buried in a book. One reason was he was the son of Merrill J. Mattes, a dedicated, published historian. In "The Great Platte River Road," Merrill captured the journeys of European settlers who travelled this natural pathway. The road began in several locations along the Missouri River. These locations all converged near Fort Kearny in the middle of the Nebraska Territory, and then took pioneers westward following the Platte River. "The Great Platte River Road" is the most famous of Merrill's numerous and meticulously researched authoritative works. The book in fact, put its author on his own 30-year research path into westward family diaries and old passageway maps. First published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1969 (republished by the University of Nebraska Press, 1987), "The Great Platte River Road" offers more than 700 overland narratives and is the recipient of multiple awards: the Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, the Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History, and the Silver Spur from Western Writers of America. Merrill Mattes, who spent 40 years with the National Park Service, taught his son by doing, the solitude of books.

But Dave's wife Ruth Mattes explained that while her late husband had "an insatiable desire to learn," the fact that his parents, in his own words, didn't put much effort into him, made books his lifelong friends. His favorite book from childhood, which he kept throughout his life, was "Man-Eaters of Kumaon" by hunter-naturalist Jim Corbett, Oxford University Press, 1946, with an introduction by Sir Maurice Hallett (Governor of the United Provinces) and a preface by Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, 1936-1943. "These stories are the true account of Major Corbett's experiences with man-eating tigers in the jungles of the United Provinces," Lord Linlithgow writes in the forward. Corbett was brought in by residents of remote communities in India to specifically kill tigers that had become man-eaters. While Corbett was an excellent tracker and marksman, he was also a conservationist with a deep appreciation of wildlife. He established India's first tiger sanctuary in Uttarakhand, India.



Dave Paul Mattes was born in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, on May 25, 1945, to Merrill (1910-1996) and Clare (1914-2002) Mattes. Dave had two older half-brothers: the late Warren Mattes born in 1939, and John Mattes born in 1941. His father's first wife, Eleanor (Shutt) Mattes, died in childbirth in 1941. In 1942, Merrill married Colorado-born Clara Gertrude Ritschard. They were married 54 years until Merrill's death in May of 1996. Dave's paternal grandparents were Edgar and Pauline (Neumann) Mattes and his maternal grandparents were Arnold and Louise (Egli) Ritschard. Early in Dave's childhood, the family moved to 2821 S. 35th Street, Omaha, Nebraska, where they can be found in the local phonebook in both 1949 and 1951. In 1958 they are listed at 3918 Castelar St., Omaha, NE.



Dave, in his first year, with his father Merrill.



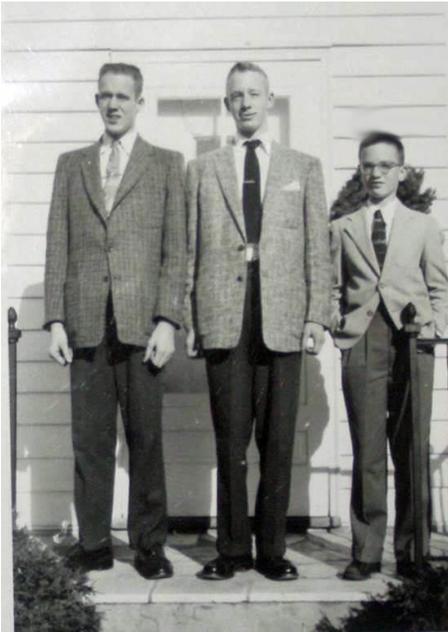
Dave, age 2 or 3, with his mother Clara.



(Left. John, Warren, Merrill and Dave Mattes, Omaha, NE, circa 1949.)

"Dave had to direct himself during his childhood in many ways because his parents were doing their own things," Ruth said. "I know he learned to swim when he was a kid but I don't really know what all he did – for instance, I don't think he played sports – primarily because no one in his family was overly involved with him. Dave would say, 'I had a stunted childhood.' But there were places from his childhood that he loved and he always enjoyed visiting them or pointing them out when he went back to Nebraska as an adult.

"However, with his father's job with the National Park Service (NPS), Dave definitely grew up loving being out in nature and he always enjoyed walking. He had good memories of his paternal grandfather's log cabin, somewhere in the Midwest. It came with an outhouse! I guess before Dave was born, and probably when Merrill was a kid, Dave's grandfather used to haul water up from the river for drinking and for planting a great many trees. I don't really know anything about Dave's grandparents other than in this Christmas 1955 picture below, on the left, the brothers are visiting with 'Grandmother Shutt,' Warren and John's maternal grandmother. I suspect Dave's father married Clare because he needed a mom for his two boys and she said yes because at 28, she was at an age in those days when you were getting kind of up there in years for not being married. To me, they didn't have a lot in common. "



John, Warren and Dave, Christmas 1955.



At Grandpa Edgar's cabin: Merrill, Warren, Dave, Clare & John, 1957.

Dave attended Central High School in Omaha, NE, graduating in 1963. Records show that he was in the Delta Chapter of the Junior Honor Society.

"One of the places that he liked that I believe dates back to his high school years was Dodge Street," Ruth said.

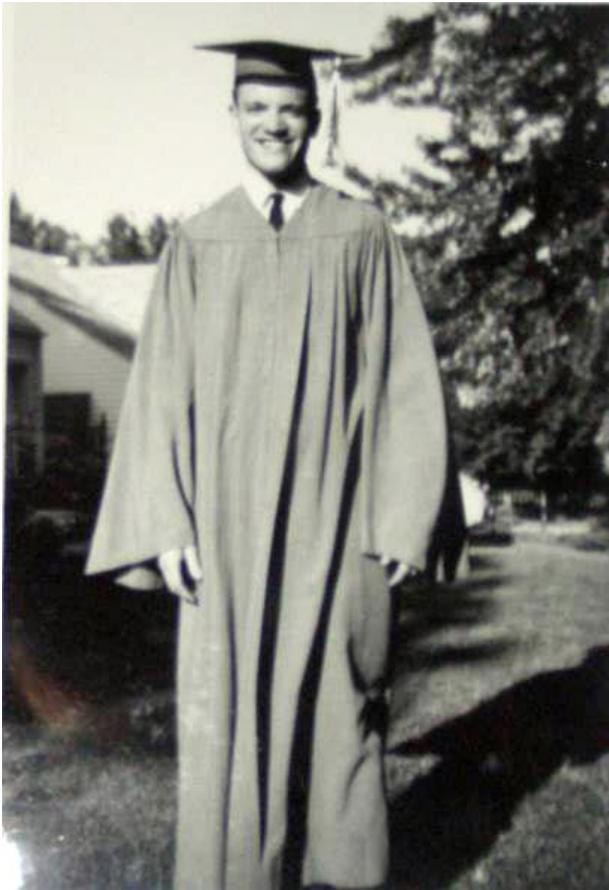
This makes total sense. Apparently cruising Dodge was hugely popular among teens and was a tradition that dated back to the 1950s. In fact, not only did Dodge Street star in Dave's social scene in the 1960s, it remained hugely popular for the decades to come until cruising was permanently banned on Dodge by Omaha's City Council in 1992.

"I met Dave in fourth grade, when my family moved to Omaha," Dave's longtime friend Larry Roberts said. "It was at Windsor Elementary School in Omaha. Dave was probably the second smartest kid in our

school. He was always on the honor roll. In fact, Dave was kind of a nerd in grade school but definitely fun to be around. He 'tried' to teach me to play chess. I think he used to play some chess with his dad."

"Funny thing is, we were both born in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, just a few months apart," Larry continued. "And here we meet up in Omaha! We were in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts together and when our parents met, I think it was our dads that got to talking and they figured all this out."

The boys' parents became friendly acquaintances and whenever one set of parents had to take off on the weekend, that son would stay the weekend with his buddy's family. They were together through high school and there was a third friend that topped off the group and that was Martin Andrews. Ninth grade was at Norris Junior High and the rest of high school was Omaha Central High School. "I got him his summer job at McDonald's," Larry recalled.



The three friends used to hang out every Friday night. "If someone could get the family car!" Larry laughed they were all kind of "nerdy," so they weren't that much into girls until they got a little older. Larry said their most "legendary" high school story was when this friend of Dave's, whose name was Phillip, said he wanted to test drive a car. Dave and Larry piled in and Phillip took the car for a test drive around Omaha's Memorial Park, a park that was created as a memorial "for all the men and women from Douglas County who have served in the Armed Forces." Apparently Phillip did not have permission to test drive this car and he was going too fast, and spinning it in semi-circles until he just laid it on its side.

"Fortunately no one was hurt, but the whole time Phillip was driving, Dave and I are looking at each other kind of nervous. In the end, Dave and I did not get into trouble. The same cannot be said of Phillip. He was a character. As for Dave and me, I probably got in trouble more often than he did, but he would always back me up.

"We went off to different colleges but always kept in touch and I was best man at his wedding. I considered Dave one of my very best friends."

Following high school, Dave headed off to his mom's home state of Colorado and attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs. While his father worked as the regional historian at the NPS Region 2 office in Omaha, Nebraska from 1946-1966, he and Clare had a home in Littleton, Colorado where they frequently travelled and eventually settled.

When his father's job with the NPS brought him to San Francisco in 1966 (Merrill was Chief of History and Historic Architecture in San Francisco from 1966-1971), Dave stayed with them at the place they rented in Tiburon, while he attended San Francisco State University.

After graduating from SFSU, Dave moved to San Francisco and went to work for the Post Office, the San Francisco Rincon Annex branch, famous for its murals by the Russian-born artist Anton Refregier. When the site closed as a post office, Dave decided not to relocate with the Post Office and went to work for San

Francisco Municipal Railway/Muni. (The Rincon Annex post office lobby, with its thankfully-saved-murals, would eventually lead the way into the mixed-use development, Rincon Center.)

His first route with Muni went through Chinatown. Besides driving buses, at one point he worked on the cable car, not as the brakeman, but taking fares. Ruth noted that in all the years Dave worked for Muni, the only time he really talked about the skills of the operators was when he worked with the cable car brakemen.

It was when he moved to his second apartment in San Francisco at 1405 Franklin Street, that he met Ruth Gam. It was 1975 and Ruth was another resident of the complex.

Born in Guangzhou (Canton), China, Ruth immigrated with her parents and her siblings to the United States in 1951. Her father, Samuel King Gam, had attended college in the United States, graduating from Vanderbilt University in 1935 with a master degree in sociology before heading back to China. Samuel Gam's father was Gam Sing Quah who first came to the States in 1884, at the age of 21, and was converted to Christianity at Ft. Worth, Texas in 1890. In 1904, Ruth's grandfather established the first Chinese Cumberland Presbyterian Church in San Francisco and was the church's first Chinese pastor. Following the death of his first wife, Gam Sing Quah returned to China in 1908, met and married Ruth's paternal grandmother and established more missions in China.

As a minister, Ruth's father was considered a probable "dangerous capitalist" by Communist forces which entered Canton on October 14, 1949. The family's 1951 arrival in McKenzie, Tennessee, was sponsored by The Board of Foreign Missions. In 1952, with the kids still learning English and Ruth's mother, Soo Li Koon Gam (Mamie) getting used to their new country, the family took the train to San Francisco where Dr. Samuel King Gam, son of Gam Sing Quah, succeeded the Reverend Tom Jung as pastor of the Chinese Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Sadly Ruth's father died on June 6, 1955 of a brain tumor and the family's circumstances changed drastically.

"Needless to say, it was terribly hard for my mother to support the family. To my knowledge, my father did not have life insurance or much money. I was just 11 years old and didn't really know anything about my father's financial situation.

"To support our family, my mother worked two jobs. By day, she worked as a maid for the Chan family. In the evening, she taught Chinese School at the Chinese Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The family took in odd jobs to do at home for additional income.

"Because of my mother's amazing, super-human effort to care for her family, we did not lack for food or clothing or a roof over our heads."

Ruth was working downtown at a textile place on Townsend when she met Dave. At that point she had moved from the family home on 40th and Taraval to the apartment building on Franklin Street.

"Dave was friends with the building's landlord, Roland Worthington," Ruth said. "Apparently, Dave had seen me coming in and out of the building and asked Roland to introduce us. Roland had a Chinese girlfriend at the time so we all went on a double date to North Beach for pizza."

Ruth said there were no fireworks that went off, but they liked each other and Dave would pick her up from work sometimes and they would visit each other at Ruth's apartment over a cup of coffee. It was very relaxed dating.

"Eventually Dave was introduced to my family and my mom would always welcome and invite Dave to have dinner with the family. He was readily accepted into my family and they liked him from the start. In fact, in later years, my two brothers, Philip and Matthew, maintained a close friendship with Dave."

In 1978, Ruth started working for the post office, on the graveyard shift, as a clerk in the massive postal facility at Third and Evans in San Francisco.

"I had told Dave all about my life story. He didn't tell me much about his parents; they pretty much spoke for themselves. They came out for a visit and I met them. It was obvious they were not thrilled with their son's 'Chinese' girlfriend. As for me, I thought they were rednecks! But as I got to know them, I realized the better word for them was 'racist.'"

"Dave and I went together for a good four years and then Dave asked me to marry him and I said, 'yes.' I'd always considered myself a spinster. But somehow, despite the fact that we were both introverts, we found each other. We married on April 28, 1979 at Lakeside Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. I was 35 and Dave was 34. When Dave had told his mom he wanted to marry me, she said, 'Oh! There are all those nice American girls.' So there was a problem there but you can't change prejudice. She never said anything mean to me but she never said anything nice either. After we married, Clare wrote me a letter, 'You know how we feel about mixed marriages, but we won't stand in your way.' Decades later and to my surprise she said to Dave, 'All my sons married well.'"



L to r: Merrill, Clare, Dave, Ruth, Li Koon and Uncle Soo Tai Wah, April 28, 1979.



On June 7, 1980, Dave and Ruth's son Steven was born at Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco.

"We weren't expecting him until July and the night before he was born, my water broke!" Ruth laughed. "But I was so ignorant I didn't even know my water broke. I had gone ahead and washed my hair and put it in curlers. Dave was working a late shift at Muni and when he came home, I told him I was having pains. This is midnight. Thankfully he was smart enough to call the hospital. Kaiser said to come right away. I didn't even take my hair out of the curlers!"

Dave was told it would be a while and was sent home. He was called back at 7 a.m. when Ruth was rolled into the delivery room. He came in but didn't stay. Ruth said he just felt too awkward and so he waited outside. After Steven was born, Ruth finally removed her curlers.

"Steven's birth was the greatest moment of my life," Ruth said. "And it was the greatest moment for Dave too. He was so proud to be a father. As to Dave's mom Clare, she loved her grandson from the start, which is more than I can say for her grandson's parents!"



Dave, Steven and Ruth, celebrating Mother's Day, 1987.

The family lived in the Parkmerced neighborhood of San Francisco the first 13 years of Steven's life, 725 Gonzalez Drive. Dave also went back to work for the post office, this time at the Bulk Mail Center in Richmond, CA. He worked for the post office until he retired in 2005. In 1993, the family moved to Pacifica.

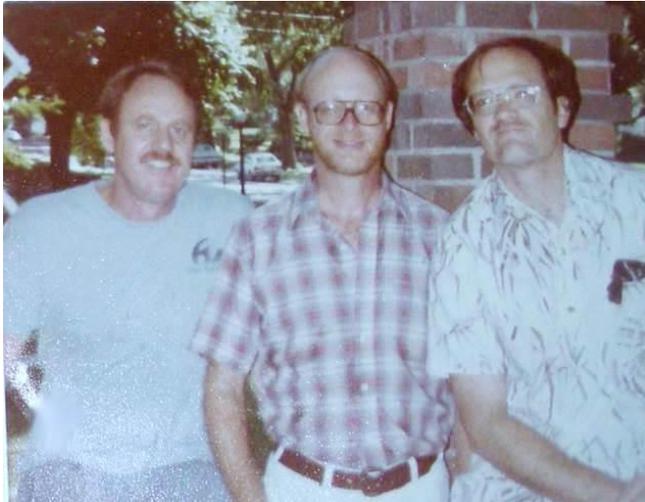
"Just like we did when we dated, we used to go on a lot of hikes as a family. We hiked the trails on Mt. Tam (Mount Tamalpais State Park in Marin County). We spent a lot of time in San Pedro Valley Park in Pacifica. We took trips. We went to caves and caverns in Lake Shasta (California), and we canoed at Boundary Waters in Minnesota. I suppose the vacation that got the most laughs was when we went rafting in Nova Scotia (Canada) and I got stuck in a sandbar while rushing to get back into the raft before the tide came in. I had to be hauled out like a dead fish and dumped in the raft!"

Ruth noted that the three most memorable vacations were: the Great Wall of China, Huangshan and the Forbidden City in Beijing.

"We visited the Great Wall of China twice," Ruth recalled. "The first time was in 2005 and again in 2007 when we took our son Steven with us. It is an amazing tourist attraction that is a once-in-a-lifetime vacation. Of course, one has to be in good shape to not walk but climb over steps that are over a foot high. We managed to make it up to at least two towers on both visits. The spectacular view from the wall is certainly worth the strenuous effort. Huangshan, translated to Yellow Mountain, is another must-see venue. There is a tram that takes you up to the top, or if you prefer, you can walk up the thousands of steps. It is amazing that coolies walk up carrying heavy loads on their backs every day. And of course, the Forbidden City is well known. It is so huge and so well preserved that even past earthquakes were not

able to destroy it. That is quite fortunate as it is an important and educational treasure of Chinese history, and we certainly were fortunate to have visited these amazing places."

Another strong interest of Dave's was theater. His favorite playwright was Shakespeare. Both he and Ruth were strong supporters of local theaters, particularly the Pacifica Spindrift Players. Dave's favorite music was bluegrass, and after they both retired, they would head off to catch local concerts or go to festivals. He also thoroughly enjoyed reading poetry. His favorite movie of all time was "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." He knew it so well, he liked to show it to his friends and explain the various scenes.



John, Warren and Dave, circa 1983.



Dave at home with Emmie, late 1980s.



Ruth, Steven and Dave, summer of 1994.

"Really, what Dave loved to do the most was to read about and study all kinds of topics. One time he decided he wanted to learn Mandarin and he flew to Beijing to study for the entire month. I didn't go with him. It was in the fall, I believe, of 2006. He was not prepared for the cold. But he went to school every day. He said everyone in the class was very respectful of him because he was an elder. One young student

called him 'Grandfather.' But Mandarin wasn't the first language he tried. He tried studying Japanese for a while and then he switched to German. Then he tried studying Russian. The last language he tried studying was Spanish. He would listen to tapes in the car. He took some Spanish lessons from someone he met here in Pacifica. He spent a good part of his money buying tapes and workbooks but he didn't have stick-to-itiveness. He also had several paperbacks of the Quran which he went through thoroughly. On many of the pages he made notations. He was trying to understand Muslims and terrorism."



Dedication at The Merrill J. Mattes Research Library at the National Frontier Trails Museum, Independence, Missouri. 2000. Front row, l to r: Dave, Clare, Warren and John. Back row, l to r: Ruth, Steven, Merrill's brother Paul, Warren's wife Carmen and John's wife Wanda.

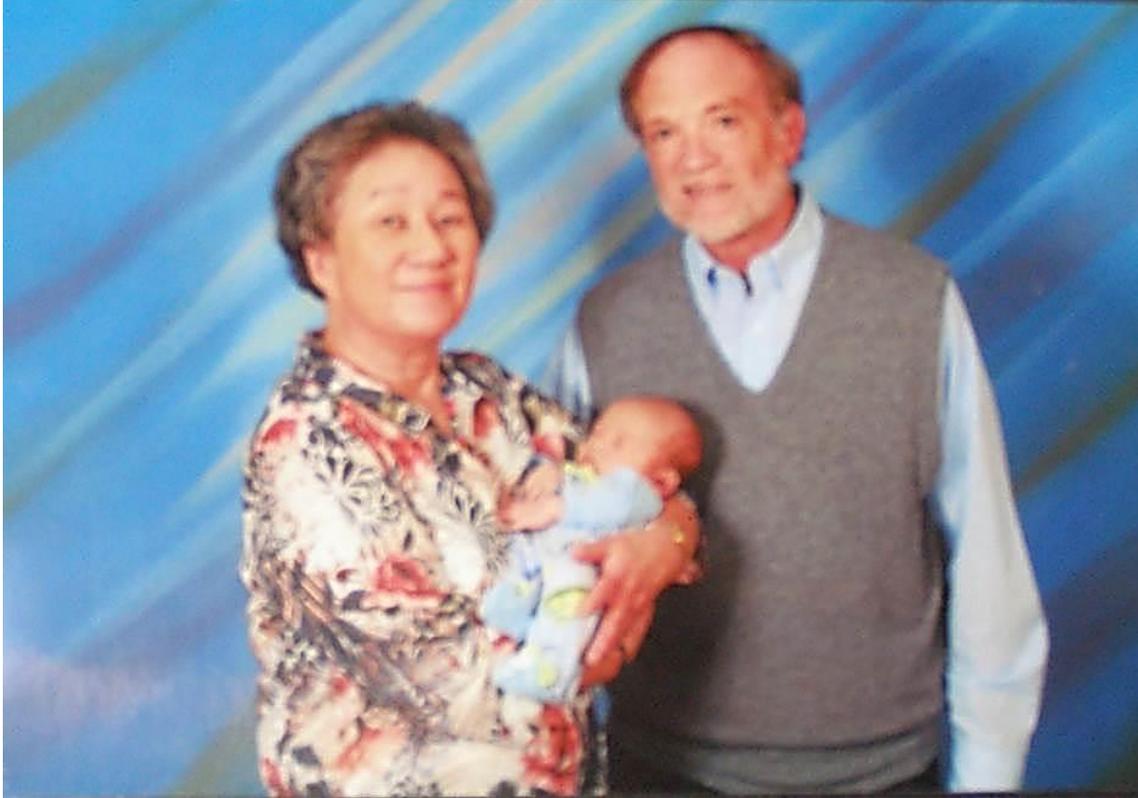
He subscribed to Forbes, National Geographic, The Christian Science Monitor, and many other publications.

"Although he was a member of the Christian Science Church, he was also a Buddhist and belonged to a Buddhist Sangha," Ruth said. "He went almost every Sunday to a Christian Science Church – for many years to the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in San Francisco and then the Christian Scientist Church on Francisco in Pacifica.

"When Dave got sick he didn't want to do chemo. Maybe that was his Christian Science faith but I said, 'If you don't want to do chemo, then just pack your bags and get ready to go.' After a few weeks, he decided to do the chemo. But it was too late anyway. When they found the cancer it had already metastasized in his liver. It had travelled to his lungs. That's how they found it. He was coughing and they took an X-ray and the cancer had spread. He was diagnosed in June of 2014. After suffering for 22 months, he died from melanoma cancer on April 21, 2016, one month shy of his 71st birthday. He tried to fight it. We spent a small fortune trying to find a cure in Mexico through the Issels Cancer Treatment Center. It was too late.

"In October of 2015, reluctantly he went on a vacation with me to Italy. I told him this would be our very last trip together. He was a good sport and went. But it was too much. The day we were to fly home, he

had to be hospitalized. He was in the hospital in Rome for six days before I – with the help of the hotel owner and his wife – could get him discharged.



Ruth and Dave pose in 2012 with their grandson Jonathan.

"It was all very hard. Dave knew it was a matter of time and we both kind of kept to ourselves. There are no handbooks on how to get through this. I know he wished that he could have been around longer for his grandchildren, long enough to see them grow up and to know them. I know he would have wished them to have a happy life.

"After his death, many of his church friends wrote to tell me, 'He was a kind, gentle and hardworking man. He was well-liked and respected.' That is all true. He was also my best friend."