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John R. 'Jack' Skees

Lifelong Great Falls resident and business owner John R. "Jack" Skees, of 1104 6th Ave. N., who owned and operated Skees Gas Shop with his wife, Bertha, from 1928 to 1976, died of natural causes Thursday at Peace Hospice House. He was 100.



Skees

Funeral Liturgy is 10 a.m. Monday at Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, with private entombment at Hillcrest Lawn Mausoleum. Schnider Funeral Home is handling arrangements.

Survivors include a daughter, Bertie Skees Sigvardt of Great Falls; a son, John R. Skees of Great Falls; grandchildren Mary Austin, Joe Sigvardt, Layni Moore and Sherri Stewart; four great-grandchildren, and several great-great-grandchildren.

Jack was born May 29, 1902, in Great Falls, where he was raised and educated.

He enjoyed motorcycles and opened a motorcycle store before going to work for Great Falls Gas.

He married Bertha Gallus on June 28, 1926, at St. Ann's Cathedral in Great Falls.

In August, 1928, Jack and Bertha opened Skees Gas Shop with the help of two of his greatest mentors, Art and Russell Strain. They operated the business until he sold it to his son, John, in 1976. Jack continued to work with his son for many years.

One of Jack's more colorful contributions to Montana history came in 1923, when the Shelby Promoter offered heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey $200,000 to defend his title against challenger Tommy Gibbons in Shelby on July 4. A news wire service hired Jack, who was then operating his motorcycle store, to run its film of the fight from ringside to a railroad car converted into a photo darkroom, then to a waiting plane. During the fight, Jack later recalled, he sat in the bleachers and watched Gibbons go the entire 15 rounds, the first time anyone had done so against Dempsey. When a photographer finally beckoned to him, he and Jack ran for Jack's motorcycle at the main gate. Jack drove the photographer to the converted railroad car, waited while he processed the film, then ran the film out to the plane, where the pilot was waiting.

After the job was over, Jack went to the wire service director who had hired him. "I asked for 'all the money in the world,'" Jack recalled in a 2000 interview with the Tribune. He wouldn't say the amount he asked for, only that he was embarrassed to ask for a figure so high.

"But money was no object to him – he just took a wad of money out of his pocket and began peeling off $50 bills," Jack said.

"There weren't any ribbons hanging off me, but I was a little better-than-average motorcycle rider," he said.

The greatest love of his life was the cabin he built. His hobbies included riding horses, snowmobiling, hunting, playing poker, and taking vacations with his wife to Las Vegas, Mexico and other places.

If there was something Jack wanted, he was always able to make it happen, and he taught that to his son and daughters.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Bertha; a daughter, Jackie Batts; a granddaughter, Ivy Giffin; a daughter-in-law, Darlene (Glantz) Skees; three sisters and one brother.

Memorials are suggested to the Darlene Glantz Skees Memorial Nursing Scholarship, c/o Benefis Foundation, Box 7008, Great Falls, MT 59406-7708.

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