

Obituaries

WILLIAM J. GEDNEY (1915–1999)

William J. Gedney, a giant in the field of Thai language and literature, died Sunday, November 14, at his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He was born April 4, 1915, in Orchards, Washington. He married Choy Manachip in 1953, who preceded him in death in 1981. He is survived by four children and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. After graduating magna cum laude from Whitman College in 1935, Gedney began his academic career as a high school teacher of English in Oregon and Washington. It was during the summers at various institutes that Gedney began his serious study of linguistics. At the outbreak of World War II he was drafted and assigned to the Army Language Unit in New York City. While working on the Thai language with the army, he pursued a Ph.D. in Sanskrit at Yale.

Gedney graduated from Yale in 1947 and then took up residence in Thailand, where he continued his Thai language and literary studies with some of the best scholars in the country. At the same time he began to amass a collection of Thai books and materials that was to grow to over 14,000 items, a library that was donated to the University of Michigan in 1975. In 1960, Gedney began teaching linguistics and Thai at the University of Michigan. In the early years at Michigan he was also instrumental in developing language programs for the earliest Peace Corps training programs. For the next two decades Gedney devoted himself to strenuous fieldwork and research on the Tai language family, seeking out speakers of remote dialects from various parts of Southeast Asia and southern China. Working with native speakers of the dialects, Gedney became noted for his meticulous care in describing tonal and phonological systems. Coupled with this respect for the data was his emphasis on precision and clarity in writing and presentation of material. More than once, Gedney would describe his discourse as nothing more than “writing to the folks back home.” In all, Gedney worked on more than twenty-two languages and dialects. Some of them, such as Saek, Lue, and Yay, he explored in great depth; others he merely outlined the tonal system. All of this impressive research was finally published in eight lengthy volumes by the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan. In 1980 Gedney retired from teaching from the Department of Linguistics, where he had served as chair from 1972–75. Throughout his career Gedney was active in the Linguistic Society of America, the American Oriental Society, the Siam Society, the Association for Asian Studies, the Southeast Asian Linguistic Society, and the International Conferences on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics. In 1981 he served as the vice president for the American Oriental Society and then in 1982 as its president.

With his emphasis on the data and his wide-ranging expertise on Tai languages, Gedney became one of the pre-eminent figures in the comparative-historical study of Siamese and other Tai languages. But his influence went beyond linguistics. Scholars in other fields such as history, political science, art history, and anthropology, to name a few, regularly sought his expertise and point of view. Those who worked with him appreciated his knowledge, his insight, his friendship, and his sense of humor. He will be sorely missed.

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