

Who Was J Curtis Earl?

Part One: Curtis War Stories and the Formative Years



by Richard MacLean

Some claim he was one of the most important figures in the Class 3 firearms world, a courageous individual who was willing to take on the ATF, a major benefactor of the NRA, the founder of a world-class arms museum and a mentor to many. Others viewed him as an abrasive, tightfisted, petty man, ready to challenge family, friends and customers alike at the slightest perceived wrongdoing. Indeed, he was all these things and much more. This article sheds light on the life of this complex individual through whose hands thousands of machine guns passed... maybe even one of yours.

Small Arms Review has published many articles about famous figures in the gun world. For these luminaries, the focus was on the chronology of their business dealings in developing the gun industry as it exists today. Each contained a brief out-

line of their lives with little mention of their personal affairs. They are famous and respected for what they did, invented or created.

J Curtis Earl was *famous* as an early and influential Class 3 dealer who amassed one

of the largest private gun collections in the world. But he was *legendary* for his abrasive personality and sometimes questionable business practices. At the time of J Curtis Earl's death on July 19, 2000, he had amassed a throng of embittered indi-

Lead photo, above: Curtis' first machine gun was a Maxim 08/15, possibly the one in this picture taken in 1963. He often told the story that at the age of nine he asked for and got two from the local veterans group that was throwing them out with other WWI souvenirs. He strapped them to his bicycle and lugged them three miles home. (Gary Christopher)

Right: Hunting was a major part of Curtis' life, having majored in wild-life biology at Utah State University. "Butch," Curtis, and Dotti are on the left with friends on a hunting trip around 1947 in Cache Valley, Utah. He always had a dog, usually a German shepherd, and later in life they served as watchdogs for his business. (Pat Earl Anderson)



viduals to whom the mere mention of his name would prompt scornful, disparaging remarks.

His passing was reported in Volume 4, Number 4, January 2001 issue of *Small Arms Review* with a brief, factual summary of his life and a description of the infamous ATF raid and his Senate testimony. Back then, sensitivities about Curtis Earl were still raw and the timing was not appropriate to go into much more detail. Even today, a few reacted bitterly when asked to recall events about Curtis for this article. They responded, in effect, "Why should I help promote his fame?"

We are neither attempting to build his fame, nor are we doing a character assassination. Nearly a decade later, it is possible to step back and objectively describe the man, both the positives and the negatives. This three-part article lays out the facts, and the readers can make their own determination as to who J Curtis Earl was. There are thousands in the gun world who have had personal interactions or business dealings with him. Were their experiences consistent with the others who dealt with him? Were their experiences unique? This article may bring closure to these and many other questions. Plus, to those unfamiliar

with the man, it will most assuredly be a fascinating journey.

This first part describes his well-known personality characteristics and the early events in his life that shaped the man. Part two, in an upcoming issue, will outline his business strategy and a detailed description of his breathtaking inventory of NFA weapons. Part three will describe his growing isolation from the gun community and his quest for a lasting legacy.

A unique aspect of each part is the inclusion of detailed information and photographs of his personal life. Yes, as in past articles, we describe his specific business dealings and the famous guns he owned, but if this were all that we portrayed, we would provide no insight into the man himself. And this narrative is as much about the man as it is in how he made millions as an early Class 3 gun dealer.

This article is the result of the integration of scores of sources; most of the information is revealed here for the first time anywhere. Surprisingly, relatively little hard documentation exists on J Curtis Earl. Rumors and stories abound, however. For example, he was believed to have equipped his AT-6 aircraft military trainer with machine guns. Not true, but this rumor provides a perspective of just how odd the stories are that evolved. Separating fact from fiction was our primary goal. Again, we want to present the available information to readers so they can make their own assessment.

Primacy was given to public records such as Senate testimony, census, birth, marriage and trust records. Family members were interviewed and a draft of this article was reviewed by his daughters, first wife and several of his grandchildren. Their recollections are considered true and accurate: they were there, as it were, at the time of certain events. First-person descriptions of events from friends are considered accurate to the extent that they describe the actual events that they observed. A few events directly observed by reliable individuals were not included since they were, frankly, too controversial and potentially upsetting to the family.

A number of direct conversations between Curtis Earl and others are repeated and these are considered accurate in so far as the story told. They represent the world as experienced and sometimes embellished by Curtis. For example, sometimes his

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stories varied depending on whom he was talking to. A similar problem occurred when evaluating the few newspaper and magazine articles in existence: they typically were based on what Curtis provided the writer.

Second- and third-hand descriptions (i.e., a friend told me that Curtis did such and such) are given little credence unless several individuals provided multiple examples of such events. In this jumbled universe of information, no doubt there may be inaccuracies in this article, but the overall presentation is believed accurate.

Curtis War Stories

Within the senior ranks of the NFA community, everyone has a Curtis Earl story; his reach was just that wide. To begin this article, it is instructive to tell three of my own "Curtis stories" to illustrate a representative cross section of the personality traits he exhibited throughout his career. At the time these events occurred, I was unaware of their telling implications and it was only after conversations with others that I recognized the underlying themes. In other words, while the stories are mine, the inferences are absolutely consistent

with the broader context in how he interacted with others and ran his business.

In many respects, these traits were as famous as the weapons he sold, so it is appropriate to start with these first. Following these stories, we will return to the beginning and describe the events which may have influenced and shaped the man that so many thought they knew.

Curtis Stories

In 1996, I was in the market for a Reising and a friend told me that Curtis Earl probably had a wide selection in stock. Since I live near Phoenix, I gave him a call to set up an appointment to examine his inventory in person. I wanted to convey to him the message that this was a se-



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Above: In January 2000, six months before he died, he held a private shoot near Wickenburg, Arizona, to use up the ammunition for several weapons, including (L to R) 20mm Lahti, 37mm Bofors and 25mm Peteau. The cannon in the foreground went to the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit at the Old Idaho Penitentiary. Left to right, Curtis, Chuck Olsen seated near the truck and the author facing Curtis. (*Chuck Olsen*)

rious inquiry and already had done some research, including talking to some of the other dealers in the area. A few sentences into the conversation I mentioned a particular local Class 3 dealer, and this instantly resulted in a ten-minute tirade over why this dealer was a low life, incompetent cheat and SOB. I was totally flabbergasted by this uncalled for diatribe spewed at a potential customer. (*Trait 1: He could unleash his wrath even upon total strangers if his mood or feelings about an issue prompted it.*)

I later learned that the subject of his wrath was one of the early local dealers that, in Curtis' mind, directly took business away from him. (*Trait 2: He had an almost paranoid hatred of competition.*) But Curtis was in a unique position, namely, an unsurpassed inventory, and I set up an appointment in spite of the baffling conversation. (*Trait 3: He knew he could, and did, get away with a lot of bad behavior because of his unique collection.*)

I asked a friend and local gun collector, Charles (Chuck) Olsen, to meet me at his house since he had known Curtis from a decade earlier and I assumed that this would help in the negotiations. That earlier relationship ended when Curtis told him, "Don't bother calling me unless you

are ready to do business." Olsen took him at his word. (*Trait 4: He could terminate a relationship in a second, and sometimes rather bluntly, if he perceived there was not something in it for him.*)

I was twenty minutes late to the appointment, but was not overly concerned since it was at his house and knew that Olsen would be there ahead of me. After all, Chuck and I were ready to talk business.

As it later turned out, this brief delay proved pivotal since it provided the opportunity for Curtis and him to reacquaint. Indeed, after this get-together they became close friends until the day he died. (*Trait 5: On rare occasions, Curtis could become even contrite and apologetic and be willing to reestablish friendships.*)

As I walked up to his door, Curtis came charging out, sans welcoming smile, stat-

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ing that "I am going to have to charge you \$50 for wasting my time, you're late." A rather odd way of starting a business relationship, I thought to myself. *(Trait 6: Diplomatic business manners were infrequently exhibited; and Trait 7: He would often overstate the importance of his time and self-worth.)*

He brought Chuck and me back to the vault and showed me the several dozen Reising's, mostly parkerized military versions, all at premium prices. I later learned that Curtis always charged top prices for his merchandise. The compensating factor, of course, was that a \$1,000 Reising then is a \$5,000 machine gun today. *(Trait 8: He was absolutely correct in his predictions of the market and he used it to his business advantage.)*

The second story occurred several years later when he was shipping the major portion of his weapon collection to the Idaho State Historical Society for the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit. He had an inventory of ammunition for a 37mm Bofors and 25mm Puteaux and needed to dispose of it before shipping the cannons. He chose the best way possible: shoot it. A small group of friends were contacted to participate in the "disposal," including Chuck Olsen who invited me along.

We arrived at his home at the appointed time and no one was around. Instead, we found what could best be described in legal jargon as the mother of all "attractive nuisances": the two cannons on a flatbed and an unsecured truckload of ammunition and other weapons. *(Trait 9: Towards the end, he had almost a cavalier attitude, not paying much attention to the potential implications and dangers of such behavior, not to mention the issue of monetary loss.)*

We tracked him down at a restaurant and soon we were headed up the Black Canyon Freeway with a string of gawkers staring at the weaponry on the move. The group was comprised of experienced shooters, and there was no review of the range rules. Reactive targets were set up and the firing began. I had an M16 with optics and proceeded to pick them off on semi-auto. Curtis went ballistic and shouted, "No optics." I removed the offending optics and started to pick them off with open sights. Curtis again went ballistic, "Full-auto only!"

I used aimed fire on the first round and proceeded again to take out targets, albeit

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with an accompanying burst of noise. Yet again, Curtis went ballistic. At that point, I had had enough and shouted back, "What do you want me to do? Point down range and just spray?" (*Trait 10: He often had unwritten or unspoken rules, at least until you violated them and then all hell would break loose. It was thus difficult to keep in his good graces.*)

When the cannons were unloaded and positioned, he gave the "honors" to one of his closest friends to fire the first round from these antiques not shot in decades. I got far away and shielded myself with Olsen's van. What I found fascinating was that Curtis also removed himself from the proximity of the cannons and stood beside a truck. A dozen years later I had the opportunity to discuss this event with his friend that did the firing and he too had noted at the time that Curtis retreated to safety. (*Trait 11: He always looked out for his own welfare. The welfare of others, including close friends, could be strangely problematic.*)

The final story, and one that probably is the source of much of the consternation over Curtis' business dealings, concerns a shoot that occurred after the sale of the machine guns from the J Curtis Earl Auto-



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matic Weapons Collection at the Champlin Fighter Museum in Mesa, Arizona. Several Class 3 dealers were present, including one that had recently acquired a Soviet PPS-43 submachine gun. Another dealer, also present, was one of the several dealers involved with these museum weapons after the collection was disbursed. It was the first time that very knowledge-

able people had fired and thoroughly examined this weapon since it was sold to Champlin.

In Curtis' catalogues he went into some depth to describe how you tell the good from the bad when it comes to remanufactured guns that are potentially "accidents waiting to happen" and the need to deal with "someone you can trust." But

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Right: Future machine gun collector extraordinaire at the age of four in 1928. Who would have guessed? Three years later he was severely burned and nearly died. The accident prevented him from entering the military in WWII and changed his life forever. (Pat Earl Anderson)

upon close examination, the gun turned out to be a reweld, significantly lower in value than an uncut original. I watched the dealer's jaw drop as he recognized that he would have to disclose this information in the next transfer and take a potential loss.

Some of this responsibility to "inspect first, buy second" fell on the shoulders of the interim dealers, but the point is that buyers found themselves in similar situations where the description given on a gun, sometimes bought sight unseen in other states, did not seem to match the item delivered. For example, on one occasion he held up a bottle of cold bluing to a friend and proudly declared, "This little bottle has made me tens of thousands of dollars." (*Trait 12: He claimed to always be fair in his business dealings, but this assertion would not always match reality.*)

After reading these stories, seasoned NFA weapons collectors and dealers may be thinking, "Yup, these twelve traits pretty well summarize who Curtis was." But he was far more complex than this. For example, Robert Segel, senior editor for this magazine experienced another dimension. As Robert explains, "I was interested in machine guns at a very early age. While attending a gun show with my father at the age of 9, I got my first machine gun - a Dewat Sten MkII for \$25. I still own that gun. Of course I was too young to own a live one, but Dewats were within my realm. When I was about 13 or so, I ordered Curtis' catalog and found an excitingly wide range of machine guns within my reach. I called and he was extremely helpful offering me whatever I wanted and if it was live, he would deactivate it for me. Even though I was a kid, still with a kid's voice, I had done my homework, asked intelligent questions and apparently came across as a true potential, long term client. After a couple of phone calls, I raised the money to fly down to see his collection in person (wow!) and pick out an M1 Thompson in 1965. Over the next several years I bought 7 guns from him and he was always very patient with me and instructive about these guns, almost like a mentor to me. I have no 'war stories' about Curtis. All my dealings with him were straight

forward, polite and honest."

His granddaughter, Michelle Earl Cruson, experienced the humorous side of him. She shares some of her memories: "During one visit around Halloween, I displayed my pirate costume, complete with a plastic sword. I stashed it in the pillowcase I used to carry my goodies. As I was leaving, the bag poked me in the leg. Lo and behold, he had put a real antique sword in its place. He called it a 'toad sticker' and now my sword is displayed in Curt's museum at the Idaho State Historical Society. Near the end of Curt's life, when Hospice came, they asked him if he had any guns in the house. He cheerfully replied, 'Yes, lots of them, everywhere!'"

So who was he - the mentor, the friend to some, the jokester, or the cantankerous, difficult business man? To gain some insight, it is necessary to start at the beginning and explore the major events that shaped the man.

Growing Up J Curtis

Curtis was born on July 15, 1924 in Tremonton, Utah to Jesse and Wanda Earl. His father, a farmer and WWI veteran, was born into a large family of farmers with four sisters and three brothers. His grand-



father, Charles, was originally from Canada. By the 1930s, Curtis' uncles, Leo, Frank and Ernest, were branching out into the grocery, sales and printing businesses, respectively.

What is intriguing is that even at the age of 5 he is listed along with his younger sister Marilyn as "J Curtis" on the 1930 census. But what did the "J" stand for? His daughter Pat explains, "He was named after his father, Jesse Wilson, but my grandparents did not want him called Jesse, Jr. so they named him 'J Curtis' from the very beginning and without the period. I suppose he would sometimes include the period because most people would expect it

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and think it was a typo if it was missing.”

He was a depression-era child which no doubt influenced his propensity for extreme frugality in later life, but unlike many of that period, his family was relatively well-to-do. At the age of seven, he became interested in collecting arrowheads on the family’s extensive property, which soon expanded to hunting and collecting other forms of weaponry, including cartridge collecting. The specifics vary as to how he got interested in guns. Max Rigby, his best friend from that period, said, “I believe his first gun was a .22. His Dad would take him out rabbit hunting with it. He also had a falcon when we were in high school that he trained to hunt. It was really interesting, I enjoyed going out with him.”

As far as his interest in machine guns, he told friends that he was given a crew served WWI weapon that was being thrown out by the local veterans group. In a 1981 newspaper article, he was quoted as saying that one of his father’s friends was going to throw out a pile of WWI souvenirs and rather than seeing them lost, “I laboriously hauled it home, using my bicycle as a cart and making several trips through the pre-pavement period mud lying between Tremonton and Garland some three miles away.” A 1983 prospectus for his business states, “His first two guns were acquired at the tender age of nine, he still has those two guns, both Maxim 08/15 machine guns.”

He attended grammar school in Fielding, Utah and at a young age suffered a major, life-changing event that would haunt him all his life. He would tell friends that when he was ten he was helping his father tar the roof and afterwards, while cleaning the tar off his hands and arms with gasoline, the volatile residual ignited when he got near the fire used to heat the tar.

What actually happened according to his daughter Pat was, “At the age of seven, while playing ‘Cowboys & Indians’ behind their Fielding farm home, Dad wanted their smoldering campfire to be bigger. He was drenched in gasoline while filling a small can from the old pump by the garage. As he poured the can of gas onto the embers, it flared and caught him on fire. Grandma Earl said she heard screams and saw him, totally engulfed, running around the backyard. She grabbed a blanket and ran to him. He was burned over most of his body, but it was the severe, third-degree burns

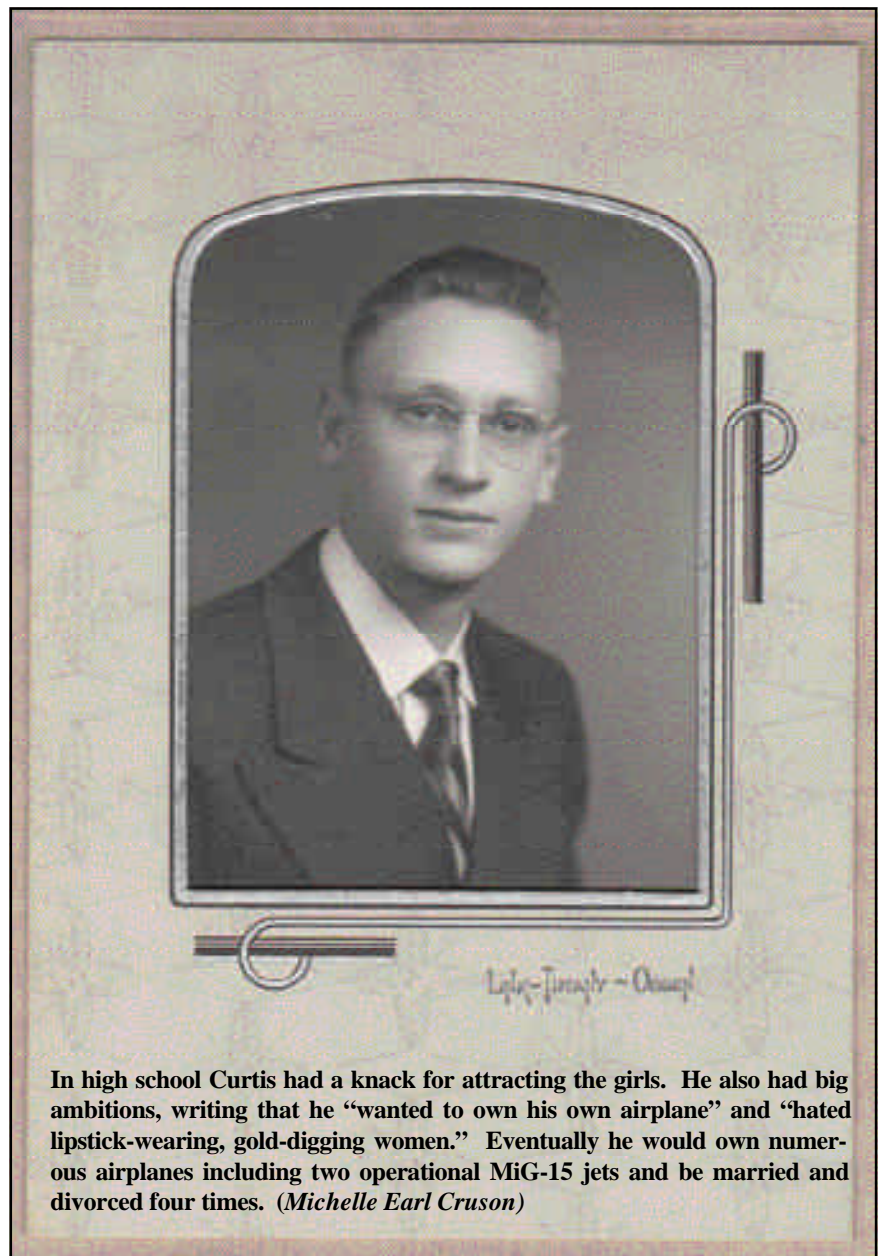
over twenty percent of his body that took a very long time to heal. Most people in the area who knew of the event said that it was only by the power of Grandma’s prayers that he survived.”

Much later he told friends that the medical bills nearly bankrupted the family and his father resented him because of this. While plausible, this story is not true. Not only was the family quite wealthy, but Max Rigby recalls that he was treated at the LDS Hospital in Salt Lake City and the church picked up the balance of the bills, as was common in those days since the family was a “member in good standing.” Curtis seemed to have a knack for eliciting sympathy rather than rigidly adhering to the facts. In this case, it was the hard-work-

ing son versus the boy playing with gasoline.

He was in enormous pain and the family was so distraught that they did everything to help Curtis. For example, he asked for a pet monkey and got it. He also took up an interest in plinking while convalescing after the accident. Plinking sparked more than just an interest in weaponry; it led to a lifelong interest in hunting and the great outdoors. In addition, he became interested in the Boy Scouts, worked his way up to Eagle Scout and treasured his badge all his life.

One thing he was definitely not interested in was farming, and friction began to develop between him and his father. His father was a hard-working stickler, and he



In high school Curtis had a knack for attracting the girls. He also had big ambitions, writing that he “wanted to own his own airplane” and “hated lipstick-wearing, gold-digging women.” Eventually he would own numerous airplanes including two operational MiG-15 jets and be married and divorced four times. (Michelle Earl Cruson)

Right: Curtis met his first wife Dotti Cottle while spending summers at Bear Lake in Fish Haven, Idaho beginning in 1943. Her parents ran the general store/post office and his father was a partner at the Fish Haven Resort across the street from the store. His trim 6 foot, 2 inch frame would fill out in later life to the 200-plus pounds familiar to many. (Pat Earl Anderson)

expected no less from his son. He would later relate stories to close friends about how his father would even resort to corporal punishment if he did not meet his expectations. He told another friend, Mike Todd, that his father did not want him to have the machine guns that were being discarded by the WWI veterans and made him haul them back on his bicycle. He took them back, crying all the way, and hid them.

One thing that was certain, even among friends and relatives, he did not talk a lot about his relationship with his father. Dotti Cottle, his first wife, describes how he got along with his parents, "His mom doted on him. His relationship with his dad was work and money-oriented."

The Early Days

He attended Bear River High School in Tremonton and as Max Rigby explained, "He was a charmer. He had a knack for getting all the girls at the high school dances. We went on dates together and had lots of fun times." This interest in beautiful women continued all his life, to both his detriment and benefit. After attending high school, he went on to The University of Utah for a year and later to Utah Agricultural College, now Utah State University, for five. In 1949, he graduated from the School of Forestry with a B.S. degree in Wildlife Biology with minors in Civil Engineering and Photography.

It was during the 1940s that he developed a love for flying and received his private pilot's license in 1943. He told friends that he tried to enlist in the military during WWII, as his father had in WWI, but was rejected because of the damage done by the burns. One spot on his thigh never closed properly and was a constant source of concern for infection. As late as 1990, he was trying new proce-





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dures for skin grafts at the University of Utah Burn Unit to close the wound.

He was able to volunteer, however, to fly observation missions for the Civil Air Patrol near the end of the war. This proved to be the perfect combination since he could satisfy his love for flying and also have access to free rationed aviation fuel. All his life he sought such winning combinations. But nonetheless, to family and friends he repeatedly stated that it was hard to see all his friends serve, some coming home heroes, but not him.

During college he married his first wife, Dotti, in 1946. "After his parents sold the farm in Fielding, his father bought into the Fish Haven Resort. Curt worked at the resort during the summers of his college years, renting the boats, working in the restaurant and maintaining the guest cabins. That's where we got to know each other since my parents ran the main store and post office in Fish Haven, Idaho."

In addition to the resort, Curtis' father, Jesse, ran a business in Logan, Utah that sold some of the first automatic washing machines. Dotti worked with him instructing the ladies on the use of their new Bendix Washer. Jesse's 100-year-old home in a prestigious part of Logan had the first automatic garage door opener in town, another business line that the industrious Jesse expanded into.

All the while, Curtis continued to expand and upgrade his weapon collection, particularly from veterans returning from the war. No doubt, the family indirectly helped in this regard from a financial standpoint. Dotti explains, "Grandpa Earl (Jesse) gave us a home on Center Street as



Above: The Earl family at their first house on Diamond Street in Phoenix in 1953. Back: Curtis, his mother Wanda, Dotti; Front: Butch, daughter Pat and son Mike. Second daughter Tina would be born two years later after the marriage unraveled. (Pat Earl Anderson)

a wedding gift. It was big and had four apartments in it, which brought us a little income. In 1948 our son, Michael Curtis, was born while Curt was out rabbit hunting."

The family moved to Owensville, Missouri after he was hired by the Missouri Conservation Commission in 1949 to support the development of the August A. Busch Memorial Wildlife Area. He often told friends that this wildlife management area was his proudest accomplishment and must have influenced his later building of the Idaho Aviation Foundation.

Just after his first daughter Pat was born in 1951, the family moved to Phoenix where he secured a job as a wildlife biologist working on five federal projects as a project leader for the Arizona Game and Fish Commission. While he loved working on wildlife conservation projects, his deep-seated interest was in flying. Even his sister Marilyn caught the flying bug and worked as a United stewardess in the early 1950s. He similarly infected two of his children and two of his grandchildren (Michelle and Terrance).

His childhood friend Gail Halvorsen may have contributed to this love for flying for both him and his sister. Marilyn remembers fun times with Gail and the Halvorsen family. Gail became a command pilot during WWII in the United States Air Force. He became famous during the Berlin airlift as the original "Candy Bomber" who threw candy to the block-



Left: Friends would joke that Curtis bonded more easily to animals than to other humans. Dogs were a constant companion, including King shown perched atop one of the three MiG 15s he acquired later in life. Pet desert tortoises and falcons in addition to wild foxes, turkeys and other critters could be found around his homes. (Michelle Earl Cruson)



Left: In the early 1950s, trips to the Phoenix airport were an important part of family life. Son Mike and Dad explore a Ford Tri-motor 1954. (*Pat Earl Anderson*)

aded children as the C-47s and C-54s approached the airport. After the end of the blockade, Colonel Halvorsen did a “victory tour” around the state of Utah and Curtis flew in an accompanying plane taking photographs, some of which appeared in the book Halvorsen wrote about his life, *The Berlin Candy Bomber*.

It also may have been this love for flying that led to a major change in careers. In 1952, he went to work in the quality control and inspection planning department for Garrett AiResearch, a manufacturer of small gas turbine engines. The family lived on Diamond Street not far from Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. Pat states, “In that house we had gun cases everywhere and we often drove to the airport to watch the airplanes take off and land. Dad loved animals; we had a dog (Butch), a cat and a pet desert tortoise so large that we tried to ride it. We were taught to respect weapons and thought everyone had guns and did such things.”

The Turbulent 50s and 60s

But those relatively care-free days would soon be over. The marriage began

to unravel, but not before Dotti was once again pregnant. His frequent scuba and fishing trips to Mexico, the land of the lovely señoritas, no doubt contributed. A frequent traveling companion on these trips was a secretary at Garrett. He was not happy about his wife’s frequent trips taking the kids back home to Utah. It was an extremely stressful period and Christine arrived two months premature in 1955, the day after the divorce became final. Christine was so small at birth that the nick-

name “Tina” remains to this day.

Curtis claimed to friends that his father disowned him after the divorce. As stated earlier, his relationship with his father was tense at best much of the time. But in reality, his father helped him buy the Diamond Street house and set him up with the income from several businesses including a furniture manufacturing plant and several warehouses. Finally, when his father died in 1974 he received a sizable inheritance. There is a certain bitter irony in this, consider-

ing how he structured his own trust at the end of his life.

Dotti took the three children and moved back to Utah, living in the Earl’s big family home for the first few months while they wintered in a warmer climate. She found work as a secretary and returned her lifestyle to her calmer Mormon roots. Curtis remarried around 1959 to Beulah Holmes of Phoenix. Beulah had children of her own, slightly older than those of

Below: The 1950s was a period of numerous hunting, fishing and scuba diving trips to Mexico. These trips and other issues put a strain on the marriage, and he was divorced in 1955. (*Gary Christopher*)



Curtis, and his own children got along well with her. But once again things started to unravel, this time on both the work and the marriage fronts.

Curtis was terminated from his job at Garrett in 1960, not for poor performance, but for what can best be described as a conflict with a certain female employee. Resolution of the matter involved company security coming to Curt's house and leaving with hundreds of "artsy" photos of the young woman, although they didn't get them all.

Curtis went through a string of jobs, most lasting brief periods, some part-time and overlapping. He went to work for Hollar Tool Engineering, Skyway Manufacturing, and DeVelco Manufacturing, all in quality control. He then changed careers again and went to work for Del Webb, an Arizona real estate, development and construction operation in Phoenix as a project estimator, then back to quality control for Apex Manufacturing while also working at Arizona Land Corporation. For a while he was selling real estate in Holbrook, Arizona. All this occurred from 1960 though 1968.

As for his marriage, this one was much more tumultuous than the first. So bitter and acrimonious had the relationship grown that Curtis was in fear of his life. Chuck Olsen explains, "Curtis told me that he knew his wife had a .380 automatic and knew how to shoot it. The marriage deteriorated to the point where he thought that she possibly might use it - on him - so he



Above: During the 1950s, Curtis owned two airplanes, the Timm N2T and a Cessna 140. Later he bought faster, more sophisticated planes. At air shows he would set up a display of aircraft machine guns and explain how aviation advanced exponentially when planes became the delivery platform for weapons. (Pat Earl Anderson)

removed the firing pin. One morning not long afterwards when shaving, he heard a snap behind him and the clink of a round hitting the floor as another round was chambered." This story has been confirmed by his granddaughter, Michelle Earl Cruson, and others.

Needless to say, he was soon divorced. He remarried a third time to Mary Bess, but that only lasted a few years. His fourth

and final marriage was to Lois Haselton in 1968, but it lasted literally a few days. The most consistent thread in this turbulent period was his uninterrupted dedication to gun collecting and flying. Sometimes he could creatively combine the two. At Arizona air shows, he set up a display of aircraft machine guns and explained the connection between guns and airplanes. From his (accurate) perspective, aviation advanced exponentially when airplanes became the delivery platform for

weapons and the forward eyes of our troops. The guns, he would say, "were the fangs and claws of the war birds." Kids of all ages were drawn to his booth.

He loved this attention and wanted to extend the concept to a permanent display. That may have been one of the reasons that years later he insisted that the Champlin Fighter Museum's display of weapons bear his name, even though all the guns were owned by Doug Champlin. It also may have given him the inspiration for the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit at the Old Idaho Penitentiary.

Another point of stability in this turbulent time was the frequent visits to his children in Logan, Utah. Friends got the impression that he was estranged from his children all their lives, when in reality he flew up several times each year and showered them with interesting gifts such as a live tarantula and baby alligator. His three children always looked forward to these visits.

Part Two

In an upcoming issue, we will explore the strategy he used to develop a gun business that made him a multi-millionaire and provide a description of the NFA collection that was world famous.



Christmas, 1969. Curtis would make trips to Logan, Utah, to visit relatives during the holidays. Curtis was an avid photographer, having minored in photography at Utah State University, and owned some of the earliest home video equipment. (Pat Earl Anderson)

