

# Who Was J Curtis Earl?

Part Three: The Problems Take Their Toll and the Quest for a Legacy



by Richard MacLean

In Part One we described J Curtis Earl's personality traits that were legendary in the NFA community and some of the key events and relationships that may have shaped the man. In Part Two we detailed the business strategy that made him a multimillionaire and his gun collection that attracted clients from around the world. In this final segment we describe the growing tensions he faced, driven in part by his fame, but also by the conflicts that seemed to accompany so many of his personal relationships and business dealings. We conclude with the efforts to build a lasting legacy in his final years.

## The Feds Arrive in Force

During the 1970s there was a series of compliance inspections by the ATF at Curtis' residence in central Phoenix where he also conducted business and

**Right:** By the 1980s, Curtis had the financial wherewithal to elevate his sights to military aircraft and specifically jets, traveling to Beijing and, over a period of several years, buying three Chinese MiG 15s from his Chinese contact (shown). Two were operational and the one that is now at the Deer Valley Airport in Arizona is destined for a military aviation museum in Boise where it will be displayed with a plaque about the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit. (*Michelle Earl Cruson*)



**Left, lead photo, opposing page:** Pancho Villa ordered four Lewis machine guns but before he could take possession of them, Arizona authorities confiscated the weapons. Curtis acquired three in pristine condition from the Mesa Police Department in the original shipping container addressed to Pancho Villa. (Chuck Olsen)

**Right:** It was called the “father and son duo” in advertising brochures for the E. H. de la Garrigue half-scale miniature Thompsons in the mid 1970s. In reality, it was Curtis’ friend and FBI agent Kelley Sanderson with his son. Sanderson was pressured by the ATF to not have any further contact with Curtis. (Chuck Olsen)

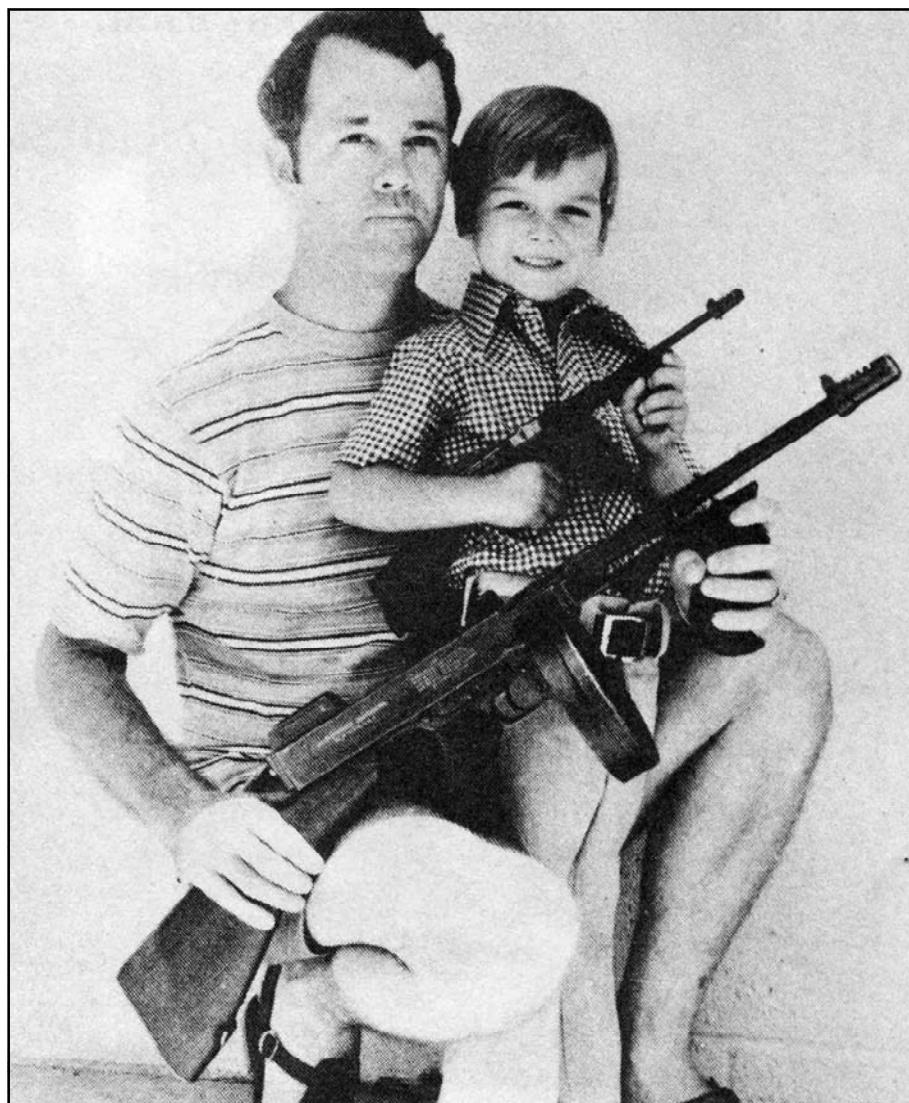
stored his collection. For the most part these were routine, but by the mid 1970s the tenor with the government agencies began to change, even though he had been cooperative with the ATF. In a number of instances his actions were, in fact, to inform on their own agents who were conducting sting operations of questionable legality.

He was “influencing people” but not “winning friends” within government bureaucracies and, eventually, this and other factors such as the Kearny, Arizona, gun deal led to the infamous 1977 raid. The details of that raid plus an entrapment scheme using a woman he briefly dated were covered in Volume 4, Number 4, January 2001 issue of *Small Arms Review*. There are, however, several additional points of note.

Curtis was extremely cautious, having almost a second sense when trouble was brewing. For example, Curtis told friends years later that he sensed something was odd the day before the 1977 raid. A telephone lineman showed up and spent a lot of time working on the telephone pole behind his house. The ATF was setting up a direct communication line to Washington.

In the Senate testimony he stated that as the raid unfolded, “A guy went running across the lawn, stretching the longest telephone extension you ever saw - something like a 250 yard telephone line.” The ATF knew he potentially had recording devices on his business line and they apparently wanted to immediately plug into a dedicated, secure line. This was in the days before cell phones.

In December 1978 the government presented evidence to a grand jury on the Kearny, Arizona, gun deal - the issue that triggered the 1977 raid. The grand jury returned a “no bill” against



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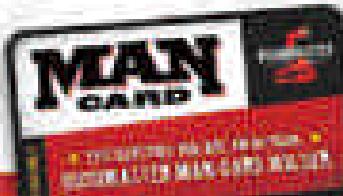
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Curtis, but indicted Donald Lane, chief of the Kearny, Arizona, police department on two counts. However, in early February 1979, the chief was acquitted on both charges. In November of that year Curtis initiated a lawsuit against several agencies for \$8.4 million for "malicious prosecution." He would later claim to friends that he had to drop the lawsuit because, "If I don't, the Feds will not renew my dealer's license."

The legal difficulties were costing tens of thousands of dollars and were wreaking havoc on his business. In July 1979 in Senate testimony he stated, "For the last two years I have been working under a suspended license. I no longer have a legitimate license to send to my dealers and customers. I have a two-bit letter that tells me I can work as an authorization on this letter in lieu of my license, which, in effect, tells everybody I do business with I am in a bad light with ATF, and most people don't know what a letter is. They are not used to seeing it. They don't know if I am in business or not, and it is greatly damaging my business reputation - what is left."

The description of the raid and Curtis' testimony is mandatory reading for all NFA collectors (transcript available online, Google: Curtis Earl CIS 1980 S181-2). Indeed, a 2003 Neal Knox report in *Shotgun News*, highlighted Curtis' testimony and the fact that it was one of the first real exposures of the problems with the NFA record-keeping problems that remain unresolved to today.

## The Tensions Build

Curtis may have prevailed in this costly David vs. Goliath battle in the 1970s, but the stress was having an impact on his health and his interactions with others. Some of these stressful situations were through no fault of his own.



**Above:** Grandson Terrance Hawley posing with a Chinese sheepskin-lined bomber jacket and matching hat in 1993. Rare in the U.S., Curtis bought dozens of these military jackets and stuffed them in the fuselage of the MiG. Customs found the jackets and he was fined but allowed to keep the jackets. (*Pat Earl Anderson*)

For example, Curtis stated in the 1979 Senate hearings, "A friend, FBI agent Kelley Sanderson, was ordered officially to not contact me, not have anything to do with me, and this was a direct result of an ATF visit to him. It is a sore deal... I took a picture of Kelley and his little boy, father and son, the kid holding the miniature (Thompson) and Kelley holding the big one. They demanded a statement why would he allow himself to be photographed, used in my book and advertising my brochure, which I have been putting out since 1966... Today, he calls me maybe once every six months to see if I am alive. He is scared to death he will be transferred to Timbuktu."

In addition, a life-changing tragic

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event intervened once again. His daughter Pat relates, "Dad was thrown into a tailspin when Mike, his son, died in an airplane accident at the age of 23, the day after he graduated from USU. Between December 1966 and March 1972, Mike logged 1,741 hours of flying; that's a lot. Having been in the ROTC at USU, he was scheduled to go into the Air Force upon graduation. He was Dad's pride and joy, his life, his legacy."

Curtis continued to make trips to Utah to not just see his two remaining children, but also the growing number of grandchildren. In some respects, he was like the proverbial Dutch uncle who could shower interesting gifts, play with the grandkids and then, literally, fly away. Pat recalls, "The grandkids enjoyed visits with him. Not every kid on the block could say they got to shoot a Thompson machine gun with their grandpa, or learn about falcons, or how to swing a two-handed sword. Adventures with Grandpa Curt were rich."

But life with relatives did not come without a price, at least for them: gifts and love always seemed to come with his unwritten and, at least initially, unspoken rules and conditions. It was quite simple, there was the "wrong way" and then there was "his way." And it was always his way or the highway.

Blood relatives always cut a lot of slack for kindred. But with customers and especially dealers in the NFA business, these affronts did not go down well at all. Even U.S. senators did not es-

cape his sting, as illustrated in the 1979 testimony transcript, "Before I start, I would like to give you (Senator DeConcini) a belated thanks for sending your assistant to my license revocation hearing, and for the five seconds he spent there during our six-and-a-half-hour session."

He was relentless right up until the time of his death. What's more, he knew it. In his 1973 résumé he stated that he was "a bit opinionated in what I believe." In addition to being a rather odd comment in a résumé, it was the understatement of the century. He proudly posted a framed inscription on the wall of his home that stated, "No man should go through life without a little trouble."

While his interactions with others were the stuff of legends, they were

rarely put in writing. One of these documented examples was in correspondence between Curtis and a rich, Scottsdale-based business executive who had bought nearly \$150,000 in weapons from Curtis over a relatively short period. The businessman wrote, "I have become frustrated and have decided to terminate the relationship." Curtis shot back with the opener, "To the smart X-suit peddler from the dumb X-farmer."

Roger Cox, author of the 1982 book, *The Thompson Submachine Gun*, wrote on page 12, "This dealer... had a machine shop produce some thin, boxy looking imitations (of compensators). When this dealer published his catalog, he referred to these poor copies as 'First Model' compensators... Since this unscrupulous dealer was the first person to give any



**Right:** Tina may have outgunned her father, but in a telling photo taken in his showroom in 1983, he always had a knack for keeping the upper hand, even with kindred.  
*(Tina Earl Wolford)*

kind of designation to different types of compensators, his scheme was adopted by nearly everyone. It is foolish to perpetuate this fraud." This allegedly was Curtis.

### The Cycle of Friendship and Animosity

Most personal and business relationships would start amicable enough only to end in bitter hostility. This was a pattern that was repeated all his life. As stated at the beginning of this three-part series, everyone has a Curtis story and we have already provided a sampling. Some of the most outlandish, although verified by reliable and independent sources, cannot be put into print. There are several areas, however, that we will explore further because they are representative of why he was so legendary.

We recognize that if he were alive to defend himself, he would have a different take on all of this. But there are some stories that are just irrefutable and supported by multiple, credible sources. Indeed, in preparing this article we would hear both sides: as he told it to friends and again, as told from the other party.

He was frugal to a fault. Sometimes his frugality was comical, as when he took the time to paste scores of two-cent postage stamps on a package. Sometimes it was baffling. For example, many readers would expect that a famous multi-millionaire gun collector would have as his personal defense gun a custom weapon by the likes of Armand Swenson or Frank Pachmayr. Instead, he asked his friend of nearly 40 years, Mike Todd, to build his from mismatched WWII surplus parts, specifically, a Remington Rand frame, an Ithaca slide and a mixture of internals.

Curtis absolutely thrived in absconding with some trivial item from someone else. Mike Todd states, "I suppose that some may call it kleptomania, but

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**Right:** Curtis' son, Mike, was a skilled pilot, logging nearly 2,000 hours of flying time in just five years. He died in 1972, the day after he graduated from USU while piloting a Cessna 150 Aerobat. The loss of his only son was another life-changing event that haunted Curtis for the rest of his life. (Pat Earl Anderson)

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on a number of occasions I was shocked to witness him take some trivial item and put it in his pocket. It was as if he was not even aware of what he was doing." One individual interviewed for this article reported that he returned some ill-begotten items to their rightful owner after Curtis died. Other highly credible sources have told similar accounts such as the widely circulated story that security procedures were changed at the UK's Ministry of Defence Pattern Room soon after a visit from Curtis.

Sometimes the excitement of a potentially questionable deal got the better of him. For example, the thought of owning historical military aircraft intrigued him and in 1982 he traded a Cessna 180 for a WWII AT-6 trainer. By 1989 he had sufficient money to not just buy prop-driven airplanes, but jet fighter aircraft. He bought a Chinese MiG-15, but the wings were improperly removed, destroying critical cables. He decided to manage the process himself and went to Beijing. Pat recalls, "He also bought dozens of new Chinese flying jackets - something really rare in the U.S. - and stuffed them in the fuselage. Well, it backfired. Customs found the jackets;



**Above:** Curtis was legendary for his frugality. His daughter Pat would later say, "Sometimes the family would joke about the extremes to which he went to save a few cents." This package, mailed in March 2000 after the postage rate changed, was affixed with over 100 stamps. (Pat Earl Anderson)

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he had to pay a fine and he gave most of them away."

These stories are fascinating and amusing, but they do not get to the area that was the source of so much consternation. Curtis had to win every negotiation no matter how petty and dictate the terms of every transaction. Even if he gave something away, he still felt it was his to control or even take back. He may have been a multi-millionaire, but he obsessed in his ability to obtain things that others wanted and thereby control or influence others. Indeed, he reveled in it. Some specific examples help illustrate this trait.

Steve Earl, his grandson, states, "In 1997 my wife, Monica, and I visited Curt at his house in Boise. We had a great time and later that year I called and asked about my dad's (Mike Earl) Maxim machine gun that he told me I could have. I also told him I would like to get a Tommy Gun from him, as this would be a great memento of my Grandpa. He told me he needed to drive his motor home to Boise and that if I did this road trip with him, he would give me the two guns. I flew to Phoenix, he did the paperwork for the two guns and I drove back as far as Logan with him.

"Curt called me that fall and asked if I could build him a used computer for a friend. I said I would be glad to and asked if he would like us to come up for Thanksgiving. He was alone and said he would really like that. We went to Boise, set up his friend's computer and did a lot of yard work. He asked if I had sent in the paperwork for the guns yet, and I told him that my apartment was packed from top to bottom and that I would send the paperwork in just as soon as I had a place to put the guns in a safe place.

"I got a certified letter in the mail a month later and was told to tear up the paperwork for the guns as they had been sold to someone else. I called Curt and asked what was going on. He said this



**Left:** The grandkids loved the adventures that Curtis offered. Here is grandson Terrance, Pat's son, shooting a PPSh-41 in 1992 and granddaughter Michelle, Mike's daughter, shooting an MP 40 in 1990, both taken near Boise. (Pat Earl Anderson and Michelle Earl Cruson)

**Right:** This is the first nugget from the "Mine Site Land Joint Venture" gold mine north of Phoenix in 1995. Curtis later willed his ownership to the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. Gold held a special attraction to Curtis and he even tried to buy the Boise, Idaho, house with some of the gold coins he had accumulated. (*Tina Earl Wolford*)

was because I didn't send him a Christmas card. I explained that I had been overwhelmed with school, work and selling computers and that I hadn't sent anyone a Christmas card that year. Well, having inherited Curt's temperament to an extent, I told him exactly what I thought about this and then some."

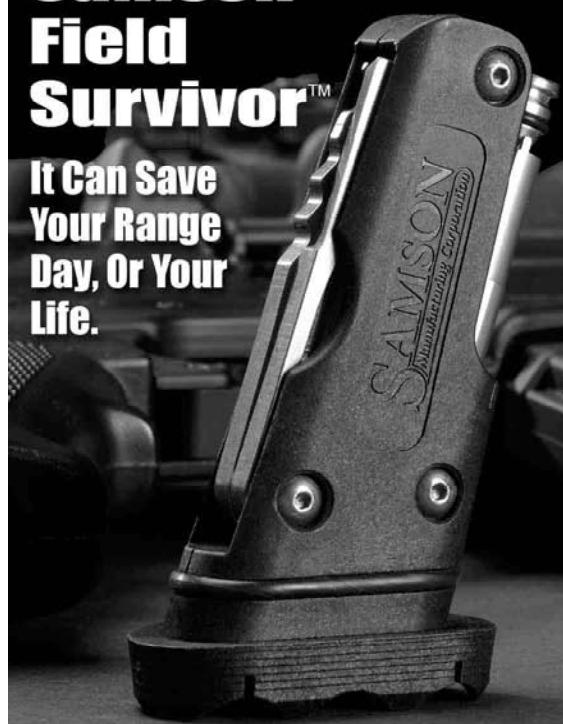
A similar story is told by Mike Todd. "Curt promised me a rare .50 Browning. I was busy and did not immediately submit the paperwork and at Christmas, the year before he died, after giving him my gift, he informed me that he had sold the gun and donated the money to the NRA. He told me, 'It could not have meant much to you if it was taking you so long to get the paperwork in.'"

Yet another story is told by his daugh-



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ter Tina. "In 1981 my husband and I helped him paint the Phoenix house and trim up the palm trees. After doing this, he surprised us and gave us a boat that had sat in his yard, unprotected, for about 10 years. We thought it could be a good long-term project and something to enjoy for years to come.

"All told, we spent nearly \$1,000 over the winter buying new tires for the trailer, cables, electrical stuff and wood that we used to fix the top of the boat over the winter months in our spare time. All winter Dad kept on us to get it done so we could get it in the water. He said

a friend was interested in restoring it if we didn't want to do it. One day the next summer Dad showed up, hooked it up and took it away. He never gave us a dime in compensation." Curtis would later tell his friend Mike Todd that he had paid for all the repairs and his

daughter was letting the boat get destroyed through neglect.

#### Reaching the Limits

The point of the preceding stories is that if Curtis did this to family and

friends, one can only imagine what happened to strangers or business associates. For many, such as this author, they do not have to imagine; they have heard dozens of such stories in the NFA community. But recognize that there is a distinct difference between the anger



**Above:** Friend Gary Christopher firing a full auto Tippmann in 1994 into a log in the fireplace at Curtis' Boise house. He had two, a .22 LR, "30 Cal." 1919A4 and a .22 magnum, "50 Cal." M2. He loved miniatures and would lecture anyone that called them models, "Models are toys and miniatures are real guns." He also had miniature Gatling guns and collected models of guns. (*Michelle Earl Cruson*)

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experienced over a bad business deal and the pain felt when Curtis interacted sometimes with friends, relatives and even lovers.

The problems he wrought finally reached a threshold limit for some Class 3 dealers and organizers of local shoots. One stated, "For years I would invite Curtis to my private shoots, but it got to the point where I would get calls from shooters who would contact me in advance to see if Curtis was coming. They would flatly refuse to go if he planned to be there... and these were

**Right:** Curtis' Phoenix house was nondescript, but his Boise, Idaho, home was spectacular. Bought in 1986 and over 4,000 square feet with an 800-square-foot guest house and a hot tub, the wife of the attorney handling the Trust was willed this in the final days of his life. (Pat Earl Anderson)

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people who got along with everyone. They had vast NFA collections and were respected by everyone. I finally had to tell Curtis that he could no longer come. That essentially terminated our relationship."

#### Few Friends, Lots of Money

The tensions also were having their

toll on Curtis' health. By the mid 1980s he suffered a minor heart attack and eventually would have two angioplasties and a triple bypass operation. He prepared a prospectus to sell the business through Smira, Oliver and Associates of Phoenix with him staying on to serve as a consultant to the new owner. There were no takers in 1983 and he again attempted in 1992 to sell off the business,



but once more, no takers. By the 1990s, the addition of fresh inventory had dropped off considerably and he was mostly selling off the stock he already owned.

Curtis had a weapon collection of unimaginable dreams, hundreds of acquaintances he called friends and a profitable business (he once complained that he had to pay taxes on a \$200 Thompson that he had just sold for over \$20,000). But in reality, he had few close, trusted relationships. Ian Scott, a gun collector from New South Wales, Australia, provides further insight. "Curt phoned me up in 1998 and more or less summoned me over to see him. He was making up his will and told me he wanted to include me in it. About two weeks later I flew to Boise to stay with him for a little more than a week. He was on his own and after a few days I realized he was a lonely old man in this great big house full of guns that collectors would give their front teeth for and few family or friends would come near him.

"I thought of all the influential and wealthy people he had met over the last 30 years that he could have been with yet here was me, a bulldozer driver from Australia, all he could scrape up to spend

part of the summer with. And, like my other holidays with him, I forgot how many times I had to bite my tongue and shut up. But despite all this, I always liked him from the first time I met him in 1980, possibly because we both grew up on a farm and, as he did, I started collecting war souvenirs at around the age of nine."

Their friendship was cemented after Australia banned the ownership of most guns in the wake of a 1996 shooting at a Port Arthur tourist spot. Ian could have

received "fair market value" for his guns, but chose instead to ship one of his best guns, a Winchester Model 1897 trench gun, to Curtis as an outright gift. Curtis would later point to this gun on his wall in his display area and reveal that no one had ever done such an act of generosity before. It deeply touched him, maybe because it was so uncharacteristic of him, at least up until the time near his death.

As indicated, his relationships with his daughters and his grandchildren were



**Above:** In 1997, Monica Earl, wife of grandson Steve Earl, admires Curtis' original M1883 Gatling gun at his second home in Boise, Idaho. This ten-barrel caliber .45-70 Gatling was the first to jacket its barrels and use an Accles feed magazine. It later became one of the central display weapons at the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit at the Old Idaho Penitentiary. (Steve Earl)

**Below:** The J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit in Boise, Idaho contains a vast array of weapons and related memorabilia. Some are both interesting and unique such as this faux MP-40 made from a sheet metal-covered, cut down Reising (left). It was used by MGM to shoot films in WWII since the real guns were not available at the beginning of the war. Not surprisingly, the Thompson display, a portion of which is shown at the right, is one of the most impressive. (Pat Earl Anderson)



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volatile and unpredictable, to say the least. One would get in his good graces only to be on the outs again for some offending remark or for some trivial affront. Be they adults or teenage grandchildren, Curtis cut no slack. As his daughter Pat explains, "He would claim that he did not respect those that would put up with his gruff, but when people did challenge him, that was the end of the relationship. This happened to my son Terrance who got along very well with Curtis for a while." Indeed, among family, his temper was legendary. Max Rigby, his childhood friend, summed up the situation, "We know he had a heart. You could still dig down and find it; but I think a lot of people put up with his temper because of his toys and his money."

He did, however, start to build a relationship with his granddaughter Michelle Earl Cruson, Steve Earl's half sister, which lasted until his death. Michelle was excited about learning to fly and her grandfather enthusiastically bought her a 1946 Cessna 140 and helped her with flying lessons. She commented, "He was very protective and specified who could instruct me. Grandfather also gave me a gun and insisted I obtain a concealed weapons permit. Once he went so far as to hire a private detective to investigate one of my past boyfriends. I thought it was cute. I had a great respect for my grandfather."

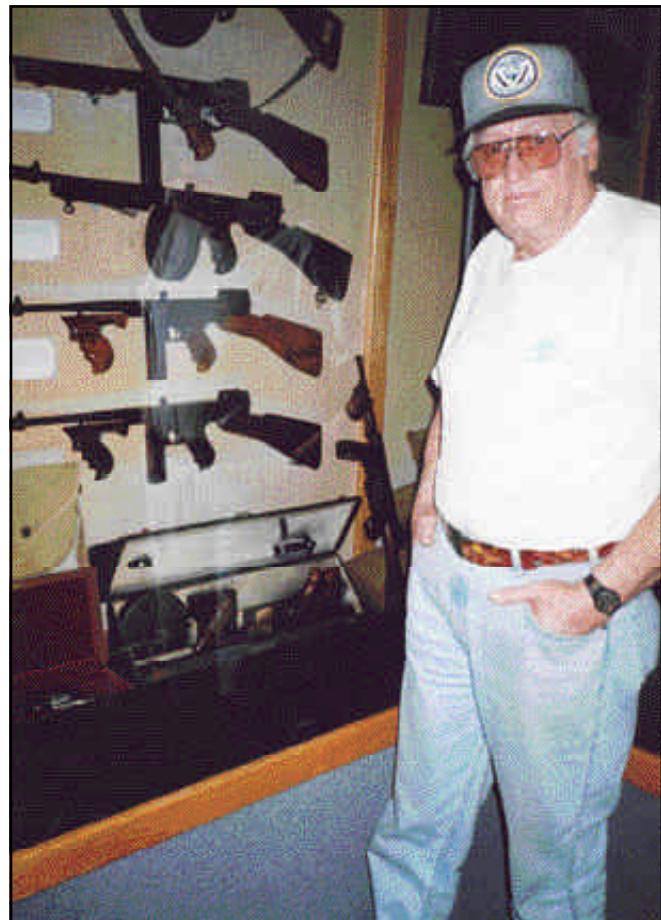
Michelle continues, "I knew he had a reputation for being strong-willed, I suppose that is an Earl trait. My husband says I have a head like titanium at times. However, Grandfather had a heart of gold even with that gruff exterior. Sure, he made me cry at times and I sometimes did not understand him, but we clicked because we shared common interests such as flying, scuba diving, and we both loved nature. Every visit was like an enchanted adventure. Flying into and fishing together at Johnson Creek, Idaho, we caught our limits, and when prospecting in Yellow Pine, Idaho, we found gold. To me these were magical times."

Probably his closest male friend was Gary Christopher, a nuclear engineer by profession, a pilot and a writer for aviation magazines. Some say that Gary was, in essence, the adult son that he never had. In addition, there were the previously mentioned Chuck Olsen and Mike Todd.

He also had two women friends that

lasted for decades. Some, such as his granddaughter Michelle, were mostly familiar with Kay. But many knew Clare Wolf, his close companion of nearly 30 years who would accompany him to key family functions. But in the very end, this relationship was terminated suddenly and cruelly.

How were they able to get along with him where few others could? Gary Christopher provides some insight. "I had listened to so many of Curtis' stories of him bitching about customers, business associates, dealers and others,



**Right:**Curtis in the late 1990s at the Champlin Fighter Museum in Mesa, Arizona admiring the Thompsons he once owned. The entire "J Curtis Earl Automatic Weapons Collection" was sold by Doug Champlin and Curtis wanted a permanent display of his own vast collection, one that would ensure a lasting legacy. (*Chuck Olsen*)

that I quickly recognized that under no circumstances could I have anything remotely resembling a business relationship with him." Olsen recognized the same restrictions, "You just could not get sucked into any type of deal. I tried once on a trivial deal involving some Thompson drums and immediately recognized this would only lead to disaster."

There were a few other close friends, but these just mentioned were the ones that were there with him, literally, to the very end. He could "squeeze a penny until it cried," as someone once said, but he could also be generous in the extreme at the same time. If the stars were all aligned in perfect order, and if you had the personality and skill to help keep these aligned, Curtis could be an absolutely wonderful, fun person to be around. (Author's note: My wife once had dinner with him and a group of friends and found him to be absolutely charming and funny.)

### The Quest for a Legacy

As the end of the millennium approached, Curtis started to turn his attention to building a permanent legacy. He would tell family members that he

was worried that his life's work would disappear, that a "safety-minded" government would confiscate his weapons and lock them up or melt them down. He believed that a museum was a way to share his life and teach the history of weapons to future generations. As de-

scribed in Part One, at Arizona air shows decades earlier, he set up a display of aircraft machine guns and explained the connection between the evolution of guns and airplanes. He loved this attention and wanted to extend the concept. He wanted something permanent, however, and in keeping with Curtis' persona, something that he controlled.

He started to talk to various museums and once the word got out, many came courting his favor. He loved the adulation as they wined and dined him. One of the main reasons that he chose the Idaho State Historical Society was that they agreed to renovate a separate, dedicated wing in the historic Old Idaho Penitentiary and name it after him, the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit. An excellent virtual tour of the museum is available online (Google: Idaho State Historical Society).

Curtis, formally trained in wildlife biology, loved Idaho's 12 wilderness areas, frequently spending summers there with Clare in a camping trailer and eventually buying a second home in Boise in



**Above:** Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne (center) at the dedication ceremony of the J Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit in February 2000. Curtis' granddaughter, Michelle Earl Cruson, is dressed for the occasion in medieval helmet and breastplate. He dedicated the Boise, Idaho, exhibition "To the memory of all those who served and fought, and especially those who paid the supreme sacrifice, in the defense of our great country in order to preserve our freedom and ideals as a free people." (Charles Olsen)

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1986. He also established the J Curtis Earl Idaho Aviation Foundation in 1998 as a companion organization to the Idaho Aviation Association. It was formed for the purpose of preserving airports within Idaho and, in particular, those associated with the Wilderness Within Reach program.

For those who only knew Curtis through these specific donations and charitable activities, he was highly admired. Friends and relatives said that it was admiration above all else, possibly even love, that Curtis desperately craved. He needed his name on the plaque on the wall, as it were, as a permanent reminder to others. His friend, Gail Halvorsen, the Berlin airlift hero, was admired for who he was and his kindness to others. Curtis must have known down deep that he needed to use his wealth to gain the admiration he so desperately sought.

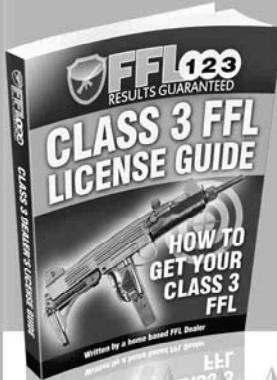
### The Final Days

In early 2000, Curtis was feeling ill and was having problems with his throat. It was quickly diagnosed as cancer. Initial treatments failed, including the removal of numerous lymph nodes in his neck and jaw. His doctors recommended extensive radiation treatments and provided brochures explaining the side effects. As Gary Christopher recounts, "I watched him take the information and toss it in the trash can in his kitchen." He would rather die at home than go through that horrific treatment process.

His doctors insisted that he would need to be hospitalized to get proper care. Not surprisingly, he became extremely agitated with his doctors and even their receptionists, so much so that one physician reportedly threatened to contact the police have him arrested if

**Right:** The last gun Curtis ever held. Delirious from imbalances in the medication and ravages of the spreading cancer in his throat and brain, 911 was called when it appeared that he may harm himself or others with this .45 kept in a holster below his bed stapled to the bottom of the headboard. He was initially detained by the police, the gun was confiscated, and he was confined to a hospital for several days. (Chuck Olsen)

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he came back to the office (he must have known about Curtis' "arsenal"). Eventually, Curtis agreed to 24/7 home nursing and hospice care. The cancer was spreading to his brain and he would be in considerable pain and in need of extensive medication, more akin to what one would receive in a hospital.

He had an attorney in Tucson, but he

fired him and called in someone he had known for years who also had been a past customer. He liked this attorney's aggressive style, he told friends, and it appeared he also liked his attractive wife. Curtis may have been ill, but he was still Curtis.

His small circle of friends, the lawyer and his wife, and his granddaughter



Michelle were the only ones allowed to know of the gravity of his illness or come to his assistance, but his condition was deteriorating rapidly. Although his résumé stated that he was a Protestant, Curtis was born into a strict Mormon family, but he was not religious. And at this stage of his life, as he was dying from cancer, he could find no comfort in his religion.

The situation was becoming grim and chaotic. Mike Todd, his friend for decades, became increasingly frustrated at what was happening, "I tried to intervene at one point and Curtis did not back me. It had reached the point where I

thought it was best if I got out of there before I became too angry and do something I'd regret."

One night the situation turned really frightening. Curtis became agitated and delirious and pulled out the .45 he kept in a holster on the headboard of his bed. Clare, fearing that he may injure himself or others, called 911 seeking medical help. Not surprisingly, the police were sent first, confiscated the gun and detained him in a hospital facility until his condition stabilized. Curtis went ballistic and never spoke again to Clare. Later the attorney and Gary went to the Phoenix police department with the ap-

propriate paperwork and retrieved the gun. The house was cleared of his loaded "security guns" within reach and most were given to Chuck Olsen.

In the final months, the "J Curtis Earl Trust" started to "change" and to friends and relatives these alterations appeared to have been based more on petty grievances in his altered state of mind than any sort of rational logic. To be sure, some such as Michelle, his granddaughter and pride and joy, were appropriately recognized in the Trust, but others received not so much as a penny even though their relations had extended over decades or they were blood relatives. For example, both his sister Marilyn and his eldest grandson, Steven Curtis Earl, the only heir to carry on the Earl lineage and Michelle's half-brother, were specifically excluded.

The wife of his attorney received the Boise home. The attorney also became the trustee of the estate with enormous discretionary powers. In January 2007, records indicate the attorney resigned from the State Bar of California in the wake of disbarment proceedings after he was "convicted of possessing an assault weapon." In addition, he was arrested in 2005 by "federal customs officials in Miami, Florida, as he returned to the United States" because he "allegedly created the phony transactions that hid the income. (He) allegedly failed to report more than \$6 million in income on his state income tax return for 2003."

The preceding documented facts, of course, do not imply that anything improper occurred with the Trust. Some friends and relatives, however, still wonder to this day what went on in those final days. Pat requested in 2000 a detailed accounting from the trustee, also a CPA, and received a one-page handwritten note that said little. In addition, Michelle reports that she had to once fly to Phoenix to take him to court to resolve outstanding issues.

So bothered was Ian Scott over the treatment of some of the friends that years afterward on a visit to the United States, he distributed the gold coins that Curtis gave him to those that had received nothing. Similarly, Curtis' daughters shared their inheritance with Curtis' sister Marilyn and grandson Steve.

On the other hand, he gave his



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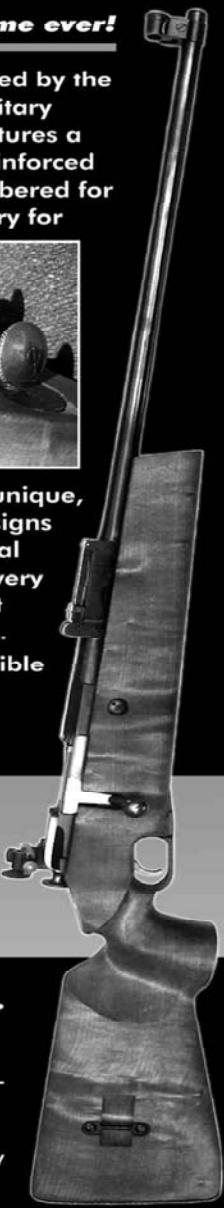


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Cadillac to the mailman who always went out of his way to properly deliver packages to the door, out of the rain. He also gave a quarter of a million dollars to the NRA because, as Chuck Olsen would later relate, "Guns have always been good to me and I wanted to do something for all gun owners." He gave his portion of an Arizona gold mine to the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. Again, his generosity and petty vindictiveness reached both ends of the spectrum.

### **So who was J Curtis Earl?**

In the end, his cremated remains were put in a .30 caliber ammo can and placed in his beloved AT-6 airplane. Gary Christopher and Michelle Earl Cruson (who were both there by his home bedside when he literally drew his final breath) departed from a gathering of friends and relatives at the Deer Valley Airport in north Phoenix. They flew off to Idaho to scatter his ashes on the back-country airstrips that he loved - a fitting urn and scattering of the ashes, if there ever was one.

Pat says it best, "My dad, J Curtis Earl, was a rambunctious, complicated enigma of a man who lived his life with passion. He gave 100% to things that he cared about; a master at staying focused on his goals and tuning out distractions."

In some respects, trying to answer the question of who he was is like the poem published in 1873 of the six blind men and the

elephant. Each had a different perspective, depending on what part they touched. I once asked Gary Christopher, "What makes him tick?" He responded, "If you are trying to find the answer to that question, you will get nowhere." He was right, but I would like to think I shined some light on this complicated man.

As for Gary, Mike, Ian and Chuck, they saw a man surrounded by many people, even the rich and famous, but down deep Curtis was a very lonely person. Gary would relate, "He would call me up and almost in a pleading tone say, 'Lets get together and do something, even if it is wrong.'" Other close friends and relatives saw this side of him. They also recognized that he was a man who treated so many others unfairly, but who suffered horribly at the end.

For fellow members of the NFA community who thought they knew this enigma, it is not right for us to summarily brush him off in a few words such as "unbelievably difficult." That he was and so much more. But at least now you have a better idea of J Curtis Earl. No one really knew him, least of all himself.

### **Epilog**

As we described in Part One of this series, we have neither attempted to build his fame, nor do a character assassination. We have

laid out the facts through detailed research, numerous interviews and the patience and support of his closest friends and relatives. A unique aspect of the article has been the inclusion of detailed information and photographs from his personal life. Yes, we have described his business strategy and famous gun collection, but this article would have provided no insight into the man himself if we left it to only those areas. This article has been as much about the man as it is in how he made millions as an early Class 3 gun dealer.

Preparing this article has been a unique experience for the author. J Curtis Earl's friends and relatives are an exceptional group of individuals. Recalling events and digging through photo albums brought back some wonderful memories, but, especially for the direct family members, it also brought back into focus some incredibly painful events. We wish to personally thank them for their support in preparing this article. In particular, we wish to thank relatives Pat Earl Anderson, Marilyn Earl Winsett, Steve Earl, Michelle Earl Cruson and Tina Earl Wolford; wives and companions Dotti Cottle Campbell, Clare Wolf; friends Chuck Olsen, Gary Christopher, Max Rigby, Ian Scott and Mike Todd; and others that assisted 

**Right:** Gary Christopher and Michelle Earl Cruson with Curtis' ashes in a .30 caliber ammo box - a fitting urn for a famous gun collector. His ashes were spread over the rugged mountains of Idaho that he loved so much. This military AT-6 trainer was left to Michelle (note Curtis' name near pilot's headset). (Pat Earl Anderson)

