

# Ms. Foster Whipped Every Boy in the School

*A Talk with Hershel Dewitt Curtis*

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, what ever possessed me to even be out on the road on such an ominous day? At my age, I'm at such a loss as to even what year it is much less what day, so until I took out my tape recorder to begin my interview, I didn't even know that it was Friday 13, 2009. But I wouldn't have missed this interesting visit even if a black cat ran across the road in front of my car, or I broke a mirror, or I walked under a ladder. Hogwash!

There he sat, dressed in his blue jeans, western vest and cowboy boots; all dressed up and ready to go out on the town. I'd never met him before, but I was so happy to be able to have him tell me his story. Oh! Did I mention that he is nice-looking? And one more thing, he will be ninety-two on May 17. On Friday and Saturday nights, Hershel Dewitt Curtis goes to the VFW to dance the nights away. I have a hard time putting my shoes on at sixty-six years of age, so I can't imagine going dancing twice a week when I reach the age, if I ever do, of ninety-two.

Hershel was born in Pryor Ridge in Marion County, Tennessee, the firstborn child of Jerry Dewitt Curtis, born 1895, and Mattie Rose (Green) Curtis, born 1897. Jerry and Mattie were married June 13, 1913, at the home of Henry Haynes. The couple had twelve children: Oma Lee, Hershel Dewitt, James Mitchell, David Wesley, Mary Rose, Maggie Marie, Jerry Moses, Ben Franklin, Dan Houston, Bessie Mae, Alton Henry and Lloyd Charles. Oma Lee, David, Bessie and Lloyd died between the ages of one and two. Hershel's paternal grandparents were King David Curtis and Margaret (Magourik) Curtis; his maternal grandparents were Dan Wesley Green and Mary Jane (Shrum) Green.

The house where the family lived in Pryor Ridge was an old company house that Jerry and Mattie bought to rear their family in. It had four rooms with one grate for heat. The one grate did not always keep the whole house warm, so Mattie kept so much cover on the beds that the children felt as though they were weighted down. Their mattresses were two layers, the bottom one being made of straw or corn shucks, and the other full of feathers. Hershel saw the chickens under the house through the cracks between the board flooring, proof that the old house had to be cold. "But we never were sick," he explained.

When his father worked in the mines, he walked from Pryor Ridge to the Palmer mines every day except Saturday and Sunday. Off through Bryant's Cove, up over the mountain at Palmer and then down to the mines, was the route he traveled on foot.

Mattie fixed him some breakfast, packed him a lunch and saw him off, all while the children slept. He left home at 2:00 in the morning and didn't get home until 9:00 at night. Because of this schedule, the children only saw their father on the weekends. When they did see him, he would lay out all the work that he expected to be done before he saw them again the next weekend.

Hershel was the oldest boy, so he had to take the lead in the week's work, but all the boys did their part. The family had an old jennet that was used to plow the fields. Hershel thought that he might have been eight or nine-years-old before he was strong enough to control the jennet, the plow and reins. It was awful hard work and so aggravating trying to get the jennet in the right spot to position the plow and then to get her in the mood to go forward. Lots of times, by the time she was ready to go, Hershel had to drop the reins, relax the plow and rest a moment. But remembering what his Dad had told him, he didn't rest long. I can attest to the stubbornness of a mule; my first ride on one let me know immediately that I was not in charge—a situation that I did not like to be in.

“Hershel, were you happy as a child?” I asked. “Lord, yes!” he answered. “We all helped with the work, even neighbors and other relatives came to help, as we did for them in their times of need. We helped Mama plant a big garden, and she canned or dried everything she could—green beans, apples, peaches, peas, berries, etc. She'd slice the apples and peaches and lay them out in the sun to dry and string the green beans onto a string and let them dry. We planted peas between the potato rows; sometimes we'd have ten or twelve of those twenty-five pound feed sacks full of dried peas that needed to be shelled. Mama poured them out on a big sheet, and everyone gathered around to do the shelling. And we'd eat everyone of them.”

Pryor Ridge School was but a few yards from the Curtis house, so the children were lucky in that they didn't have far to go in bad weather. Some of the children got to the school early and built the fire in the big pot-bellied stove that sat in the center of the one room building. The old stove was kept red hot most of the time in cold weather, and the teacher's desk was right up close to it. When I told him, that that didn't seem fair to the students, he said that the kids didn't care where they sat. A teacher named Swafford, who became a lawyer later on, lived with the Curtis family at one time. The boys' outdoor toilet was in front of the school, and the girls' toilet was at the back. There was a coalhouse on the property. It was in that coalhouse that Ms. Foster (*probably Ruth Foster*) placed her old mule each day. She rode several miles each day from Foster Falls to Pryor Ridge School on that old mule that had one large leg and “went a hopping” down the road.

One day the boys in the school got some saw briars and carefully placed them under the saddle on Ms. Foster's mule; then they hid to watch the show. When she mounted it, to start her ride back to Foster Falls, the mule went up the road bucking like crazy.

The boys had a good laugh until the next day when Ms. Foster lined them up and whipped every one of the boys in the school. On another occasion, the boys knew that there was a knothole in the floor right where the teacher stood to do her lecturing. They acquired a lot of yellow jackets and forced them up into the classroom through the knothole. Several people were stung that day, and the hateful pests were so bad in the building that they had to turn school out—ah shucks! Hershel was bent over with laughter while telling the story. I thought this would be a good place to ask him who some of his friends were in school—Leonard Harris, Paul Kilgore, Lewis Harris and James Byars were a few. I wonder if they were in on the stunts carried out by the boys. *(Since I might want to pull this trick on someone someday, and since I did not know how one “acquired” several yellow jackets and transported them, I asked my husband about it. He said, “The boys would find the nest, force the mouth of a drink bottle into the entrance causing the insects to rise up into the bottle. As soon as the bees filled the bottle, they would cover it and decide how best to use the little devils.)*

When Hershel was twelve years old, his father got him a job with a Mr. Sweeton over in Battle Creek. He walked from Pryor Ridge over into Sweeton’s Cove to begin his first venture that would actually pay money. His job entailed working with two mules, a momentous task in itself, while plowing the fields to prepare for planting. He was given fifty cents a day, room and board. “Was Mr. Sweeton good to you?” I asked. “Yes, he was very good to me.”

The year 1935 was a tragic turning point in the lives of the whole Curtis family. Hershel’s father passed away leaving Mattie with a large family to rear. Hershel was only eighteen and the oldest son, but all the boys stepped up to do whatever it took to help their mother carry on. Mattie was a strong woman and never left off caring for her children. She kept potatoes roasting in the ashes under the grate for her children to eat as snacks; she always saw to it that the children had plenty of hot food. Every bit of the food that she stored for the winter was eaten. I can’t imagine feeding all those boys. Since in those days, the young men stayed outdoors for the most part, they surely could eat a week’s supply of food in one day. For years, I fed three growing boys and thought I could never get them full.

Hershel married Louise Nunley, and they had two children, a daughter and a son. He didn’t know how they made it financially for there was little work in the area. He remembered cutting “slick” wood, black gum and maple; then it was peeled and taken to the railroad and shipped out. Soon he started working for the Partin family who had moved to the mountain from Pelham Valley to start a general merchandise store. They had a small store between Flurys and Roy Wright’s Store. My husband, who is a Partin, and I searched our thoughts as to what that building might have been. Unless it was the old Lee and Julia Ann Goodman cafe, we really don’t know. Since Lee Goodman was a half-brother to Octavia (Goodman) Partin, wife of Willie Partin, it may have been that the Partins opened up a small business in the little Goodman Café building while they

were building their store on Colyar Street. Anyway, Hershel said they furnished him with a mule and wagon, and after the folks came in and gathered their groceries, he would deliver them to their house, no matter how far away it was. Many people had no automobiles to drive to the stores in town, so they had to walk. If they bought a large amount of groceries, it was difficult to carry them home. Hershel also worked on building the new store and then continued to work for the Partin family until he was drafted.

Like many Grundy County men, Hershel was shipped overseas to fight the Germans in World War II. He left his wife and two children behind. Reluctantly, he spoke of some of his trials on the war fronts. There were times that his eyes teared up, and he stopped talking about a particular event, and quickly went on to something else. Hershel Dewitt Curtis was on Normandy Beach during the D-Day invasion in June 1944. He was with the third battalion that went in, and they fought their way up to the base of the hill occupied by the Germans where they dug in for about a day and a half. In that one battle, over 5000 men lost their lives. Visibly saddened and bothered, he spoke softly, "It makes me shake to think about it." They were waiting on the paratroopers who were dropped behind the enemies; this squeezed the heavily fortified Germans from two sides. After much fighting with many deaths and wounded resulting, the Germans were defeated there; then the long march toward Germany began.

It was during this march, and on French soil, that Hershel saw an American flag on the ground. He picked it up and put it in his overcoat pocket saying to himself, "I'm going to fly that in Germany!" The long trek to liberate France and eventually place their feet on German soil took months—tedious, dangerous months. On September 13, 1944, the U. S. Troops finally crossed the Siegfried line and found themselves on German soil. Somewhere in Germany, Hershel took the flag out of his coat pocket and hung it for all to see. On October 12, 1944, Hershel's luck ran out. His whole left knee was shot off, and his back and hip had painful shrapnel wounds. They sent him to England where he stayed in the hospital for six months. They rebuilt the knee with artificial material that was so strong and so well constructed that years later, when he accidentally let his chainsaw rip into it, he said, "It tore up my chainsaw!" Dr. Harbolt put twenty-one stitches in his knee, but the core of the knee was still intact.

Hershel was reclassified, put in the Air Force and sent to Germany where he said he didn't have much to do. At the war's end, he came back to his family in Grundy County only to find that his marriage had ended. With his two children, he started a new life. Later, he married Ruby Seagroves who helped him rear his children by his first marriage and the two sons they had together. Trying to leave the war and his failed first marriage behind, he turned to trucking. Sam Werner wanted Hershel to haul coal for him, but Hershel needed a truck. So Sam and he went to Dunlap to buy a truck—the money would later come out of Hershel's pay. They drove an old "dog car," a term I was not familiar with, over to Dunlap. He explained that it had no windows just screens, and

nothing worked on it except the motor. It was a mighty cold trip with the wind howling in on them.

After Hershel and Sam made their purchase, Sam decided that it would be much more comfortable to ride in the newer truck with windows and a great heater. So they loaded the “dog car” onto the back of the big truck, but the back wheels were not all the way on the truck bed. Hershel suggested that it might roll off the truck while coming up the mountain, but Sam was sure that all would be well. The two climbed into the warm cab, and off they went toward the mountain. As suspected by Hershel, the old “dog car” rolled right off the big truck and down into a ditch. Sam got out, went down to the “dog car,” started it up, flew passed the other truck, and Hershel never saw him again until he reached home. Soon Hershel and his brother Jerry bought a truck together, so they had two trucks running. On the Fairmount Curve in Monteagle, Mr. Phillips kept a barn and stock. As Jerry was rounding that curve one day, one of the animals, a jennet, from the barn appeared in the road; the jennet went up and over the cab of the truck, hit the ground and took off to the barn, but the truck was damaged.

Hershel explained that living on this mountain just made it hard for a man to make a living for his family. Jasper Hargis, or “Jap” as he was known around Gruetli Laager, was living in California, and he sent for Hershel and his friend Rod Messick, a tough macho of a man, to come out and work in a huge sawmill operation out there. They loaded for the trip that took a week to make. On a scorching hot day in Phoenix, Arizona, at a red light, when Hershel pressed the clutch to change gears, it fell to the floor. There was traffic all around on the busy highway, and the heat was exhausting. When the policeman came, he controlled the traffic so that Hershel could get the car out of the road. Rod was a good mechanic, so Hershel went to the junkyard for parts while Rod took out the old ones, but not without getting into a fire ant hill. By the time Hershel got back with the parts, Rod had blisters all over him. Soon they were on their way to that new job.

At first they worked on the green chain line, making plywood; Rod was at the end throwing off the cull stuff and feeding it to the “hog” which ground it up for making pressboard. Soon the local sawyer quit, and the boss of the business asked Hershel to take his job. Reluctantly, Hershel gave it a try, but not without much prodding from Rod. The huge band saw was nearly three stories high. One of the big redwood tree logs could be twelve feet in diameter and measure forty feet long. Hershel had gotten to the point of cutting 80,000 feet of lumber a day. He made more money as a sawyer, and this enabled him to bring his family out west. Rod had gotten a job as a bouncer, and he, too, brought his family to California. All the children went to school with the Indian children in Hoopa.

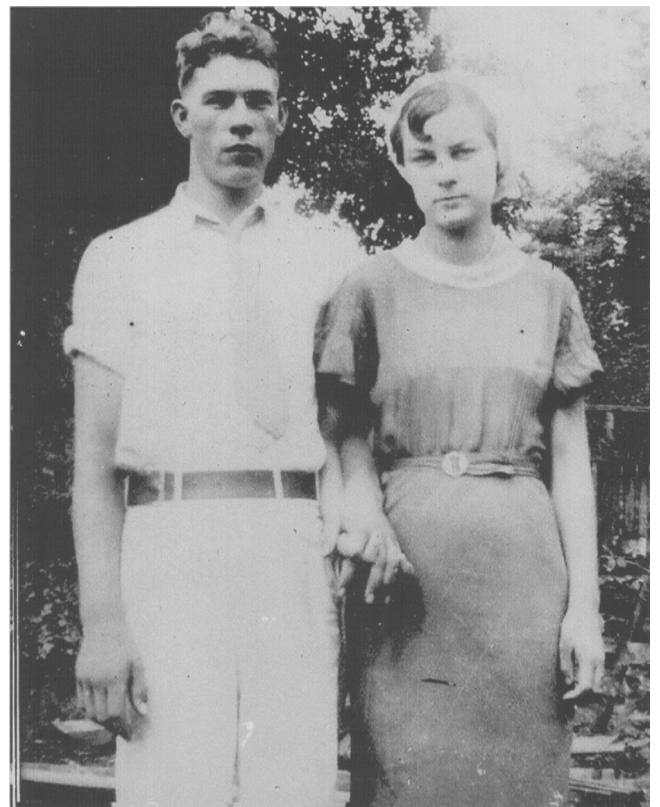
Those hills of Tennessee, lifelong friends, loving family members and just plain homesickness beckoned for the two families to come home. The children especially

missed their homes back on the mountain. Hershel left his job on good terms; he had learned so much about being a good sawyer. He and Rod loaded up their families and came home. When he got home, he set up a sawmill out toward Foster Falls, and eventually moved it to his present home near Tracy City. After several years of operating from that site, he sold his little mill this past year, but that hasn't slowed him down one bit. On the Fourth of July in Tracy City, one can see large flags waving with the breezes on each telephone pole. Hershel was responsible for the idea, the collecting of contributions and the care of the flags. They are now in the hands of the town of Tracy City.

This remarkable man is as gentle as one needs to be to hold a small wild bird on his finger and feed it, and as strong as one needed to be to walk behind two stubborn mules to plow fields all day long as a young boy or walk across France and Germany to let "Freedom Ring" in this country. The next time you see those dancing flags, give thanks to the ninety-two-year old, dancing, WWII veteran who put them there and fought for the right to have them there.



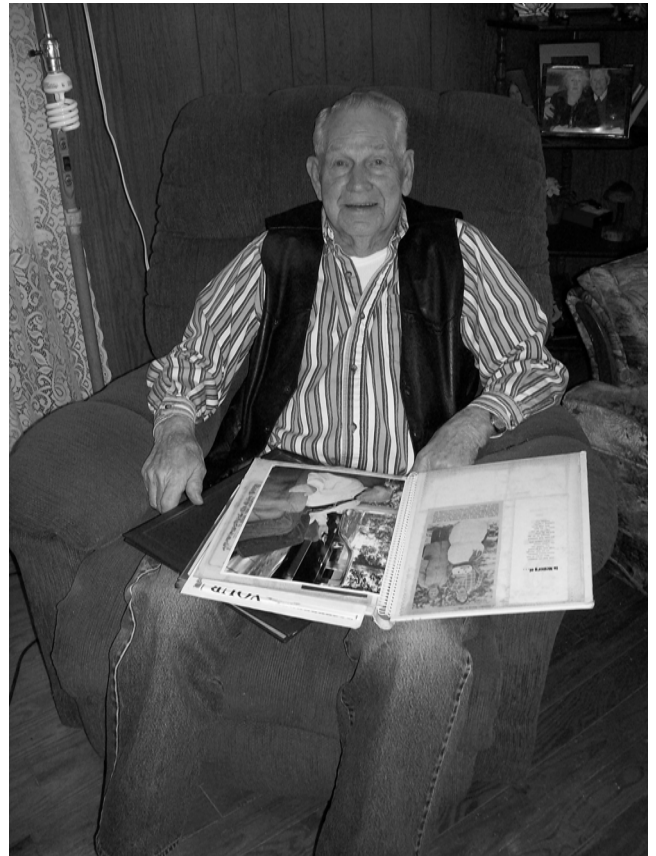
Hershel Dewitt Curtis (ca. 1919)



Hershel and first wife Louise (ca. 1935)



Hershel Dewitt Curtis (WWII—1944)



Hershel Dewitt Curtis (2009)