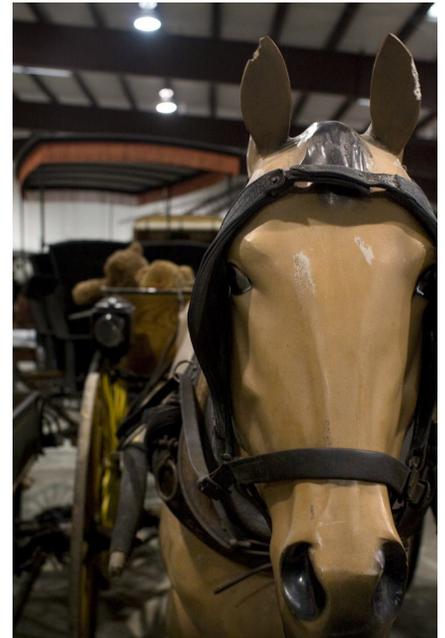




A milk wagon, made by the Winkler Bros. in 1915, would have sold for an average price of seventy-five dollars back in the day. It is part of the Curtis family collection of horse-drawn carriages.



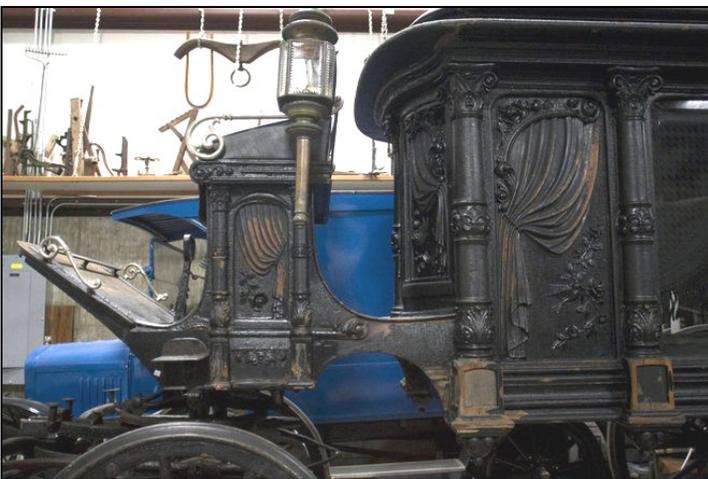
This "Express" wagon, from about 1905, featured a rear entry with a folding step and hand brakes. Platform springs on front and rear made for a smoother, more desirable ride.



A life-size model of a horse is used to demonstrate how the carriages and other vehicles, part of the Curtis family's collection, were used.

# a haven of horse-drawn history

By Tom Hallman Jr., *The Oregonian* July 15, 2010  
All Photographs by Faith Cathcart, *The Oregonian*



This ornately carved section is on a horse-drawn hearse that carried the body of Myron Curtis Sr. when he was buried at Willamette National Cemetery.



This mail wagon, made by Studebaker Bros. in South Bend, Ind., in about 1903; was used in rural areas where residents may not have any mailboxes.

## THE 150 VEHICLES OF PORTLAND'S CURTIS COLLECTION ARE A TESTAMENT TO EARLIER TRANSPORTATION

'It was always a labor of love for the parents'

The treasures have attracted the interest of collectors and historians from across the United States, but most people in the metro area have no idea what's hidden in a nondescript Southeast Portland warehouse.

"People learn about this place through word of mouth," says Cammy Pierson, the daughter of Myron and Betty Lou Curtis, who started all this on a whim more than 45 years ago. With that introduction, she pulls open a metal door, hits the light switch and steps into the past. Pierson, after getting her bearings in the warehouse during a recent visit, starts down an aisle, stopping in front of one vehicle and then another to reminisce.

"Here they are," she says, sweeping her hand toward what's known as the Curtis Collection, an eclectic group of 150 horse-drawn vehicles.



The Curtis family cares for a collection of horse drawn carriages that their father assembled over the years. It's housed in Southeast Portland.

Beautifully displayed throughout the warehouse are hearses, wagons, carriages and nearly every conceivable vehicle once pulled by horses, or, if none was available, donkeys or cows. Some have placards explaining the vehicle's history. Many, including a working 1904 fire pumper, have been meticulously restored. Others look as though they were just rescued from an old barn.

A few carriages have been used in movies and television commercials.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., Pierson says, is interested in a rare carved wooden hearse that last August carried her father -- the founder of Curtis Trailers Inc., which sells recreational vehicles in

Portland and Beaverton -- to Willamette National Cemetery. One day, she says, the hearse will be donated to the institution in her father's memory.

Betty Lou Curtis died in 1999. After news of Myron Curtis' death spread, Pierson received constant calls from dealers and collectors who wanted to know what will become of the collection.

"I still get calls," says Pierson, 59. "I get them all the time. They want me to notify them if we're going to sell anything. Right now we have no plans to do anything. But who knows about down the road."

Kenneth Wheeling, who has studied carriages for 50 years, traveled from Vermont a couple of years ago to take a look. Wheeling, 72, is a lifetime member of the Carriage Association of America and an associate editor of the group's magazine.

"This is quite a good collection," he says. "It's a comprehensive collection. Some of the vehicles are unusual and some are spectacular."

In May, Pierson led Earl Leggett, 71, of Woodburn through the warehouse. Leggett, a horse-drawn carriage aficionado, spent six months in 1993 driving a horse-drawn wagon from Independence, Mo., to Independence, Ore., to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail.

"It's comparable to any museum you'd find on the East Coast," Leggett says. "If you're interested in history, you have to get into the warehouse."

"I can't come in here without thinking about my parents," she says. "They're both gone now. They didn't start this collection to make money. It was always a labor of love."



Siblings Myron Curtis Jr., from left, Cammy Pierson, Carley Schriever, and Mylo Curtis pose with the Santa Fe trailer and toy car that they used to ride in a variety of parades when they were growing up. Their father, former owner of Curtis trailers, assembled a huge collection of horse drawn carriages before his death.

Her father was delivered by a midwife and brought home to the family farm near Karnak, N.D., in a horse-drawn sleigh. As a boy, he had a small horse-drawn carriage to go to school or to town for supplies. He was 12 when the Great Depression hit and the family had to sell everything.

"My dad's horse brought \$5 in an auction," Pierson says. "He never forgot that horse and carriage."

After serving in World War II, Curtis moved with his wife to Portland, where they started a trailer company in the 1950s. Curtis loved to regale his wife and four children with stories of the North Dakota carriage, reminding them that townspeople all used carriages and wagons.

In 1965, Curtis and his wife were driving through the Nevada desert when Betty Lou spotted a carriage in a ravine. They stopped, checked for an owner and learned that it had been abandoned. On the spot, they decided to bring it back to Portland.

"We've never done one thing to that carriage," Pierson says. "Most people would think it's dilapidated, but we love it just the way it is. It's beautiful because it's what started everything."

Wheeling says Curtis' love for anything horse-drawn allowed him to build a general collection instead of specializing.

"That's the beauty of this collection," he says. "There's a bit of everything."

He says one rare and "complex vehicle" is an immigrant wagon, the kind people used when they moved west to settle distant sections of the United States.

"There are very few examples of that vehicle," he says. "The wagons that went west were cannibalized for their parts when they reached their destination. That wagon's a nice piece of history."

"People forget how important horse-drawn vehicles were before 1900.", he says.

"Everything that has a motor was once a horse-drawn vehicle," he says. "The growth of the United States depended on wagons. Our country was built on the backs of animals. What's in that warehouse tells the story of our country."

Myron Curtis Jr., 61, says his mother caught the carriage bug, too, primarily because she liked to travel. The couple visited auction houses or tracked down trailers for sale. His father, he says, believed it was important to hang onto a bit of Americana before it was lost.

Carley Curtis, 56, sister of Myron Jr. and Pierson, says the warehouse brings back memories of her parents and her childhood.

"After their family," she says, "this was their life."

In the early days, the carriages were stored in a barn. At one time, Myron Curtis Sr. had a restoration shop where he paid employees to work on vehicles. Curtis would refer to history books, reference manuals and museums to make sure the work was accurate. When he couldn't find original pieces, he'd have them fabricated. In 1995, the collection outgrew the barn and was moved to the warehouse.

Pierson says her parents' dream was to open a museum, particularly for children, but constructing a building was too expensive.

Now, when she comes to the warehouse, she's reminded not only of her parents but also of all the people who came before her.

"This immigrant wagon," she says, "is what you would have found on the Oregon Trail. An entire family used this wagon."

She steps back to look at the wagon, about the size of a small office cubicle. "It's mind-boggling," she says. "I look at the wagon, and I think about the adversity those people faced."

She steps across the aisle to an ornate wicker carriage used to take upper-class women on shopping trips.

"Over there we have a family barely making it and heading somewhere in the hopes of a better life," Pierson says. "On this side, we see an elegant lifestyle."

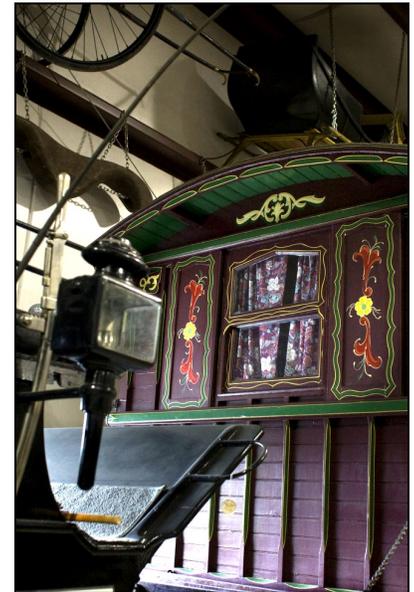
She says her parents tried to get as much information about each vehicle. "What was it used for?" she says. "Who used it? Every vehicle has a story."

One carriage, an 1883 Brewster Brougham, features rich upholstery, a cigar case and places for calling cards. The coach has room for a driver and footman. When Pierson's daughter, Koren, married in 1993, she rode in the carriage with her grandfather driving and her father serving as the footman.

One of the more unusual pieces, Pierson says, is a 15-foot-high 1865 Gypsy Wagon.

"It's a living quarters on wheels for a nomadic people," she says. "The use of space inside is ingenious with hidden compartments."

Also rare is an all-white hearse that would have been pulled by a white horse to carry the casket of a wom-



This Vardo Romani "gypsy" wagon, circa 1885, is Eastern European in origin. It was purchased in Canada and is part of the Curtis family collection of horse-drawn carriages.



Cammy Pierson, (front left) takes Joanna Klick, Patsy Edwards and her husband Bob Edwards, from the David Douglas Historical Society, on a personal tour through the collection of horse-drawn carriages that her father assembled before his death.

partments."

an or child. An 1890 carriage with velvet curtains, Pierson says, was used as a limousine of sorts for women. The large interior, which featured bench seats, made it easy for women to ride in long skirts.

Her parents, Pierson says, rarely sold a piece. "Only when they came across a similar piece in better condition," she says. "Or when they ran out of room and had to downsize."

Pierson says she and her siblings may ultimately sell parts of the collection. If they do, she wants to do it carefully.

"It's important we do the right thing," she says. "It's not just property."

Joanna Klick, a retired teacher and president of Portland's David Douglas Historical Society, has visited the warehouse three times and wants to include photos of the carriages in a book on the community's history.

"It's a gem of a place," Klick says. "What's also wonderful is that this is a family museum. Their heart is in this place."

[This additional picture was found with the archived text and other photographs on Oregonlive.com.]



Water pails hang beneath an American LaFrance fire ladder wagon, circa 1880. It is part of the Curtis family collection of horse-drawn carriages.

*Post Script By Jim Bull, Curtis Chronicle Editor*

*This discovery of the previous article was initiated by learning about a biennial Northwest Curtis Family Reunion when Jennie B. Curtis, former daughter-in-law to a Vance Curtis, came to the 76th Curtis-s Family Reunion in The Dalles, OR, in 2015. When I attended the NW Curtis reunion at Wallowa Lake in Aug., 2016, Vance Curtis showed me a often folded copy of a portion of the article that I subsequently was able to download from the Oregonian files.*

*Myron Henry's obituary is in the CFS Database and was published in the Oregonian on 20 August 2009:*

Curtis, Myron Henry 86 12/13/1922 8/22/2009 On Aug. 22, 2009, Myron Henry Curtis quietly and peacefully slipped from the hands of his loved ones to the arms of his Lord. After 86 years of a blessed life on earth, he is now with his beloved wife, Betty Lou, in heaven. Myron was born Dec. 13, 1922, to Harriet and Edgar T Curtis. He was raised with his two sisters, Violet and Betty, on the family farm until the great drought and depression forced the family to move to Eugene where Myron began selling newspapers on street corners. Myron had a love for woodworking and in high school began building furniture and a boat which was used by the Curtis family for a number of years. In 1943, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Eventually his dreams of flight were grounded due to high blood pressure, but they were soon replaced with dreams of a

special girl he met while training at the University of Nevada. Betty Lou knew just when and where he would be and "just happened" to be there at the same time. "I chased him until he caught me" she would recall. Myron and Betty Lou were married in 1946 and moved to Portland, where Myron began working for General Electric. They purchased a parcel of property on 101st and Southeast Powell Boulevard, and lived in a small trailer on the property. Soon thereafter, Myron purchased an old army surplus trailer which he repaired, painted and sold. He then purchased two more. Eventually he had six rental trailers, and purchased property on the north side of Powell where the family business exists today. Over the years Myron worked hard at building his business, but not at the expense of family or others.

Myron and Betty Lou had four children who grew up in and around the trailer business. The family loved to travel and Myron and Betty Lou always found the time to do so. His love of woodworking grew into larger projects, as Myron eventually built two homes and a beach house for the family. Myron will long be remembered by his kind, gentle and generous nature. He lived simply and honestly with family and faith as his priorities in life. Over the years, Myron received numerous awards and honors. For many years he was actively involved in the community, the Lions Club, and served on the David Douglas School Board. In 1998, he was honored by the National RV Dealers Association with his induction into their hall of fame. Although he was always appreciative of any recognition he received, it was never done for glory; Myron preferred to work in the background, deflecting the praise he received to others. For over 30 years, Myron and Betty Lou traveled throughout the United States and Canada, collecting horse-drawn vehicles, one of which will carry him to his final resting place. Myron is survived by his children, Myron Jr; Cammy; Mylo and his wife, Marlene; and Carley and her husband, Bob. Eight grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren will also miss the love of their special grandpa. A memorial will be held to celebrate the life Myron lived and the footprint that he left. All are welcome to celebrate with the family at 2 p.m. Wednesday, Sept 2, 2009, in Abundant Life Church, 17241 S.E. Hemrick Rd, Happy Valley.

*Although I found the above obituary in the CFS Database, in tracing the line back it does not appear to be tied with Curtis line that attended the biennial NW Curtis Family reunion at Wallowa Lake in Aug., 2016—but I may be missing a connection somewhere. Myron Henry Curtis appears to descend from a William Curtis who married a Jane Love on 16 May 1807 (see below) and not William Curtis who married Sarah Ellsworth 13 Nov 1817 in Champaign, OH.*

**Line of William Curtis b. 7 Jun 1794 in VA**

**Curtis Trailer Family Line**

William Curtis<sup>1</sup>  
 m. Sarah Ellsworth 13 Nov 1817,  
 Champaign Co., OH  
 Cicero Curtis<sup>2</sup>  
 m. Lydia Newberry abt. 1854  
 Jacob Curtis<sup>3</sup>  
 m. Mary Elizabeth Huffman ca 1885  
 Riley Francis Curtis<sup>4</sup>  
 m. Iva O. Schmadeka 3 Nov. 1918,  
 Grangeville, ID  
 Vance Curtis<sup>5</sup>  
 m. (I lost her name-sorry. JB)

William Curtis<sup>1</sup>  
 m. Jane Love 16 May 1807  
 John L. Curtis<sup>2</sup>  
 m. Elizabeth Spencer ca. 1848, Ontario, CA  
 Henry Curtis<sup>3</sup>  
 m. Christine G. Stewart 23 May, 1894,  
 Riverside, ND  
 Edgar Thomas Curtis<sup>4</sup>  
 m. Harriet Lokhorst 30 Jun 1920  
 St. Croix, WI  
 Myron Henry Curtis<sup>5</sup>  
 m. Elizabeth Louise Kirkley (Betty Lou)  
 2 Jun 1946, Reno, NV

