

Charles F. Curtis II

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Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Charles Curtis was born January 7, 1922 in Clinton, Iowa. His grandfather, Frank G. Jones, lived in one of Belleair's 13 homes. During the Depression, Curtis's family spent winters with his grandfather, Belleair's second mayor, because "our family couldn't afford to heat the house in Clinton, Iowa," he said. Hauling trunks strapped down to a trailer hitched to a 1928 four-door Lincoln, the trip took about 4 to 5 days, Curtis estimated. Once they hit a cow in Florida, though Curtis didn't recall where. The cow lived and they replaced the headlight at a garage on Fort Harrison Avenue.

Curtis's grandfather's two-story home on 9 acres at 851 Indian Rocks Road (it's still there) had chickens, pigs, horses, cows, vegetables and citrus trees. The house was built with heart yellow pine at the same time as part of the Belleview Biltmore, said Curtis. Curtis also recalled a caretaker's cottage and a two-car garage with two or three bedrooms above for workers.

Curtis recalled many adventures from his Florida childhood: boating and fishing; roller skating on pink green and yellow sidewalks at the Belleview Biltmore, where he also won swimming competitions; going to a baseball game with family friend and baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis; and hunting with his best friend. Sometimes they hunted from the back of the Belleair night watchman's truck while the watchman made his rounds: "As we'd spot a rabbit, the one that had the .22 (rifle) would shoot first and if he missed then we'd shoot with the shotgun and usually get our prey, because we got tired of taking peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch (to school) everyday," Curtis recalled. Curtis was about 12 at the time.

Curtis also recalled a neighbor shooting a "Florida Lion," (another name for a Florida Panther). "That was the biggest thrill of my life to see that big thing," Curtis said. "There were plenty of them around then. They used to raid the garbage cans up on Gulf to Bay . . . I was a young boy, it looked like it was six feet long, but it was probably only about four or five," feet long.

While in Belleair, Curtis attended elementary school, paying his teacher \$1 a week every Monday. He would later attend Clearwater Junior High School, then prep school in Connecticut. After prep school Curtis went to college until World War II broke out. He became a bombardier in the Air Force stationed at Drew Field, among other bases. In September 1944 he headed to Europe, stationed at a base southeast of London. From there he took part in bombings of Berlin and Hamburg, among other sites. But on his 18th mission, his crew was shot down. Parachuting to the ground, Curtis ended up in a German family's back yard. A group approached him, among them a Boy Scout who Curtis recalled saying: "For you, the war is over."

Curtis was taken to a local jail and eventually transported to a prisoner camp northeast of Berlin where he stayed for six months until being freed by Russian troops in June. Curtis

described life day-to-day at the prison camp: in the morning they stood at attention to be counted, then were free to walk around; they read books; played cards; and kept diaries. Curtis began smoking a pipe, collecting tobacco from discarded cigarette butts. He would smoke for about twenty years.

Curtis and his fellow prisoners tracked the war's progress listening to BBC on a hidden radio put together and dismantled daily and passed throughout the barracks. They also typed up reports to circulate among prisoners. The radio was acquired from a German guard in exchange for food. Curtis explained that prisoners who were intelligence officers and spoke German traded food with German soldiers; that winter was among Germany's worst and the guards suffered food shortages. Curtis recalled some items in the Red Cross parcels prisoners received: powdered milk, butter, SPAM, raisins, prunes, salt and pepper. But the January preceding their release, Hitler halted food supplies for prisoners, Curtis recalled, and they ate only rutabagas. He dropped to 60 pounds by the time he was released.

When Curtis and his fellow prisoners were freed, they flew to Camp Lucky Strike in Le Havre France, where they were among about 100,000 other men awaiting rides home. While at Lucky Strike, Curtis learned he was the father of twin sons; his family had learned during the war that he was a prisoner of war rather than missing in action. Learning about his sons, Curtis said he decided to work rather than return to college.

In October, he was released from active duty, but would remain in the reserves until 1955. After the war, Curtis worked for Curtis Company, his family's millwork, in Clinton, Iowa. By about the mid-1950s, the family business had slowed, so Curtis resigned to become a home builder in Florida. He moved to Clearwater.

During the next 15-20 years, Curtis constructed more than 100 houses (made of cement block, barrel tile roof, and pressure-treated lumber as needed) built or remodeled several radio stations, built dental offices and the Kapok Tree, and built pools throughout central and southwest Florida, including Daytona Beach and Naples. He also helped develop the subdivision Sunnybrook Farms. However, in the early 1970s Curtis decided to exclusively build pools when unexpected construction costs on several two-story homes nearly broke his business. For 40 years he was chairman of Pinellas County's swimming pool advisory board.