

The Curly Granberg story

By Sherry Stewart



He was born Harold Granberg in 1932, but as soon as he grew a head of hair he became 'Curly,' and he's been called Curly ever since. Far as I can tell, he is only known as Harold in the local telephone directory.

By the time Curly came along, Bertha and Ellis Granberg were living on the original Bill Holland homestead at the southwest end of Roe Lake. Hilda Larson



School boy Curly, 1939

was midwife for Curly's birth. Ellis and Bertha, Holland's daughter, had five children—but Curly and Olga were the only ones born in the cabin that Ellis built, overlooking the lake.

Now in his early seventies, Curly has lived at the place of his birth for most his life, tending the land, the cattle, caring for his family and his neighbours and proving through his living that, as his son Norman says, "As long as you have your mind, physical disabilities don't matter so much."

I first met Curly in 1968 when my husband and I bought the quarter section at the north end of Roe Lake. I knew Curly as a man of hard work, few words, great humour and as the keeper of some of the best yarns in the Cariboo. What I didn't even guess at, until I was told, was that this tough cowboy rancher with the quick grin and the twinkle in

his eyes was riding his big Cat and working his ranch on two artificial legs. He was, in fact, a triple amputee.

Just about everyone in the South Cariboo knows the story of Curly's sawmill accident. But just in case there is someone reading this issue of the Interlaker who hasn't heard the story, it must be included, because, as difficult as it is to recall, it certainly defines the man in one clear stroke. Especially when you consider that it happened almost 50 years ago.

The story starts at a portable sawmill owned by Benji McNeil and set up somewhere between Canim and Mahood Lakes. It was December 1957, just after Christmas, and the boys were glad to get some work. The carriage on the mill was slipping and they thought that they had corrected the problem, but suddenly Curly's pant leg became caught in the carriage. In an instant it had pulled him into the blades, severing his right leg high above the knee and his left leg just below the knee. Simultaneously he reached out with his right hand and lost four fingers.

Glenn Higgins was just 18, a young and inexperienced driver, but when the two World War II veterans working alongside Curly moved him into the back of Benji's shiny new '56 Ford, each holding an artery, young Glenn nervously took the steering wheel. Slipping and sliding, they made it precariously to the McNeil ranch. Mrs. McNeil applied black



Rancher Curly Granberg with two of his helpers

pepper and flour to the two gaping wounds and put flour sacks on what remained of Curly's two legs, while the two men held Curly's arteries closed and Curly kept pressure on his right hand. Glenn drove as far as Lone Butte where they met up with Benji and he took over. Then Benji drove like hell.

Had it been summertime, with rough, potholed roads, Curly wouldn't be here now. Because it was winter, the roads were in better shape, covered with hardpacked snow and much smoother. They arrived in Clinton needing gas. The Clinton



Still standing near Judson Road at Roe Lake, this is the cabin where Curly was born, built by Ellis Granberg

RCMP offered to give an escort, and Benji shouted, "Just stay out of my way!" The RCMP officers tried to follow Benji for 10 minutes and then gave up. In the 1950s the roads were curvy and snowbanks loomed everywhere. Worse, there was construction going on at the Savona Bridge. A one-lane Bailey Bridge with a stop/go light was the only way across, and



Curly and nurses in rehabilitation unit six months after the accident

the stop wait was six minutes. As Benji approached, the light turned red. "Hang on!" he yelled and they headed pell mell across the forbidden bridge in the darkness.

When Benji careened up to the Kamloops hospital doors, five and a half hours had transpired since the accident. Curly had not only stayed conscious throughout the trip, he reportedly kept stealing drags off the men's cigarettes with his good hand. But he was almost completely without blood. Ten more minutes would have been two minutes too late, they were told.

Curly was kept in the Kamloops hospital for ten days before being sent by train to Vancouver. During that time it is reported that his legendary humour never failed him. Apparently, the day after his arrival in Kamloops, close relatives hesitantly came to his room to visit. Curly just patted the end of his bed invitingly. "Come on in," he said. "Sit down, there's lots of room at the end of this bed."

During Curly's rehabilitation in Vancouver, a long three years spent learning how to walk again, the people at the Workers Compensation Board told him that he would now have to train for a job sitting down. They suggested that he consider becoming either a shoemaker or a bookkeeper. Curly's reply was that he was a rancher and always would be.

When he returned to Roe Lake in 1963, Curly set about reclaiming his life. He tied himself onto his horse repeatedly until he

was able to ride again with his two artificial legs. Driving heavy equipment is a challenge at the best of times. If he was to find work with his big Cat, Curly had to deal with the difficult problem of keeping the right pressure on the foot pedals.

Curly's life improved considerably when Gun came to help and stayed to become his wife. They were married in Golden on March 30, 1972, and after their honeymoon, which included Jasper and Edmonton, Gun settled into the role of ranch wife.

"It was a big change for me," Gun told me the other day. "I was working in a hospital in Sweden, and accustomed to a very urban way of life. I was used to going to the store every day for supper, instead of once a month. In the early days of our marriage we only had one vehicle. Curly was working every day doing jobs with his Cat, so he would take our truck and drive to work. If I wanted to visit a neighbour, I had to use the tractor for transportation. And I wasn't the only one. I remember Clara Buchanan coming over to make a phone call, because she had no phone, driving their tractor with a couple of kids riding along with her."

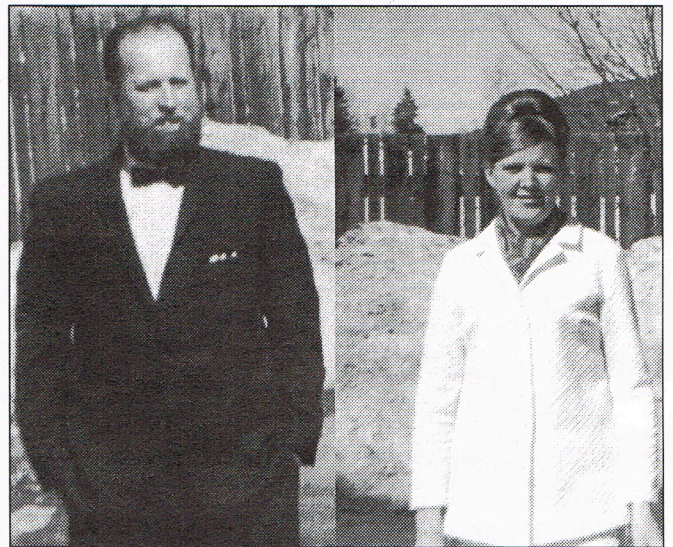
I asked about their cattle ranching and Gun told me, "We always had cattle, but Curly also worked with his Cat for more than 10 years before we decided to go full time into cattle. At one time we had a herd that could be described as 'too many to eat and not enough to ship,' but in the

beginning, when we started our married life, we only had four head of cattle," she paused and grinned, "but then we ate two."

Together Curly and Gun have raised four children: Michael, Vicki, Norman and Lars. Lars now lives in Calgary and the others are all part of the tight family unit at the home place, where the ranch is now a family operation.

The view of lush rolling hayfields and the serene lake beyond hasn't really changed much since Bill Holland homesteaded there in 1912. "This is God's country," Curly has been quoted as saying. "There is no other place on earth like it. But, if it wasn't for my family I couldn't have done any of this. There are three things you need in this life—a good woman, a good horse, and a good dog. I've got all three."

Nowadays Curly gets around most often on his ATV and modern prosthetics have improved some, but life is still pretty much the same. He is, simply, a Cariboo rancher. His renowned humour is firmly in place. His great courage and his indomitable spirit in the face of immense difficulty have inspired many—which *he* would



Wedding photos: Curly and Gun in Golden, March '72

probably dismiss as an unnecessarily dramatic overstatement.

Nonetheless, I am not the only one deeply grateful for Benji McNeil's expert driving skills and Curly's ability to simply get on with the business of living.