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The chair that doesn't sit still

Michigan native's elderly neighbor was a homebody, but the gift she gave has traveled far and wide

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Reader comments: "Your column about Michigan native Curtis Krueger, a photographer, and his elderly neighbor's chair is one of my favorites," wrote Janet Kurecka of Saginaw.

When his truck burst into a fireball on the road to Michigan last month, Curtis Krueger grabbed his wallet and his traveling companions: an old cat and a half-paralyzed dog.

He left behind to burn or melt or char his cell phone, his laptop, his computer's back-up disk, the booth he erects at art fairs, hundreds of matted and framed photographs he planned to sell in Michigan, four cameras, a new tripod and his blue kayak.

"It's only stuff," he told himself as he stood forlornly on the roadside in Virginia, his pets in his arms.

But one thing mattered. To the firefighters he shouted, "Pull out the chair! Please, pull out that chair!"

The wrought-iron garden chair survived, sooty but solid.

Has any chair ever meant so much or traveled so far?

For nine years Curtis has chauffeured it around the United States, photographing it in glorious spots in each of the 50 states.

It has defined Curtis' photography career. Half of the photos he sells include that chair. He takes it to every art show because people want to see it for themselves, to sit in it, to imagine where it's been, to imagine themselves in those places.

At 15 pounds, it is among his most prized possessions.

Yet it remains Mrs. Davis' chair.

Mrs. Leila Davis, his next-door neighbor in North Carolina, gave it to him after he snuck it from her yard and drove it to a nearby beach she loved in her youth. He photographed it there, at dawn, then framed and gave her the image for her 98th birthday.

He called it "Mrs. Davis' Chair Goes to the Beach."

Mrs. Davis, a housewife, went virtually nowhere in her long life, which ended in 1998. But her chair has been everywhere, by a crackling campfire in Wisconsin, perched on rocks overlooking vast Western vistas, wet in streams and marshes and rushing waterfalls.

Curtis, who is 48, is awed and grateful that it survived this last fiery challenge.

"Always in the back of my mind," says Curtis, "is how one thing, how one gift, how one act can affect your whole life."

Good neighbors

Curtis grew up in Milan, the son of schoolteachers. He studied fine arts at Eastern Michigan University but, after a Christmas trip to North Carolina on which he was able to play golf in shirtsleeves, he decided to move south.

With him to Wilmington, N.C., he took his degree, his teaching certificates and his cameras, from which he believed he could make a living.

He says now, "The arrogance of youth is a wonderful thing. You just don't think you can fail."

He has made a modest living selling images of nature and wildlife at art fairs around the country. His mother, Marylyn Krueger, says he began drawing at age 3, fell in love with nature as a child and since then "is always in the boondocks, searching for something to photograph."

He returns to Michigan three times a year, in spring, summer and fall, to work art fairs including Ann Arbor's, to visit his mother and to suck in the sensations of his home state.

In Wilmington, he bought a house on Grace Street. Next door lived Leila (LEE-luh) Davis, widowed for decades but spunky and independent like the camellias that bloomed in her yard.

He paid her regular visits, especially during his divorce, walking the 27 steps from his front door to hers. "She was very sympathetic, that here I was trying to make a living, and having to cook for myself, too.

"She was cantankerous. She was a hoot. She loved gossip and stories, and she would make me tomato soup for lunch, from scratch."

The chair?

He never saw her sit on it. But he watched it from his home. It was the only chair in her yard, all alone beside a small goldfish pond.

He told me he knew nothing of the chair's history.

All he knows is that his photo of her chair at the beach delighted Mrs. Davis. She gasped to see his proof sheets, with a hundred other similar images.

"Oh," she told him, "you obviously love my chair! Please take it. It's yours."

He says: "It was a casual kind of thing at first, because of the good little trick I pulled. I told her I'd leave it in her yard."

And there it sat, in the wind and the rain, until the day she died, three years later, at age 101. He had prayed with her earlier, at her bedside, holding her hand.

The chair changes hands

Finally, he remembers, "I carried the chair solemnly into my yard. I started crying, because I'm an artist, a sentimental fool."

A few weeks later, heading to visit his sister in New Mexico, he loaded the chair into his truck again.

"When you're on the road half the year, you bring the things that make you feel good. I was still kind of mourning my neighbor, and thought, hey, why not bring her chair for a ride?"

He photographed it at White Sands National Monument and titled it, "Mrs. Davis' Chair Goes to the Desert."

Now he has 150 images of the chair, including four from Michigan, one overlooking the Mackinac Bridge. In some images the chair is barely visible, a tiny thing in a grand landscape.

"As I've carried it to some extreme places," he says, "I could imagine Mrs. Davis' reaction: 'Boy, you are crazy,' or 'Isn't this purdy?' "

Leila Davis, homebody

Mrs. Davis' son, 88-year-old Charlie Davis, chuckles over the chair's travels because the old thing is a mystery to him, too.

"I know absolutely nothing about it," he told me by phone from his North Carolina home. "It wasn't there when I was growing up. Somebody probably gave it to her, getting rid of it, because I don't think she'd go out and buy it.

"She never bought anything. She was very frugal."

Charlie told me his mother and dad built the little house on Grace Street in 1927 when his dad was a journeyman plumber.

They never upgraded, except to screen in the front porch, from which Mrs. Davis liked to watch the neighbors.

Nor did they ever leave.

His father died in the house, his sister died in the house and decades later his mother died in the house. What's more, she rarely traveled from it, going a few times to visit a relative in Florida and once taking her 14-year-old granddaughter on a 10-day bus tour to Canada.

Her son says, "She never had any kind of money-making job, although she had a good sewing machine and made aprons to sell at church bazaars. Her main occupation was homebody."

Of Curtis he says: "My mother took Curtis under her wing, especially during his divorce. She took him over as another son.

"He's a remarkable fellow. You wouldn't think much of him just seeing him, but he's quite an artist with that camera."

Not quite the end

The first 30 of the 50 American states were easy for Curtis, states he'd drive through anyhow on his way to an art fair.

Then it got tough.

He loved camping and exploring, but visited some states specifically to photograph Mrs. Davis' chair.

He shipped it to the West Coast, flying in to meet it. He shipped it to Alaska and, finally, to Hawaii.

There he carried it under his arm for 11 miles, to a spectacular spot where he planned to end his project.

"It was an area I knew I had to go, that wonderful overlook of the Na Pali coast. My new wife was with me, so she helped carry my cameras and tripod up the cliffs.

"I knew these would be the last photos. I just needed to do it, suffer through it.

"But I was physically and emotionally exhausted. The easiest thing to do was to just leave the chair there.

"Then I realized, whoa, that's silly. Mrs. Davis' chair felt like a best friend, and you don't leave your best friend behind."

The last Hawaii photo, taken in 2005, is titled "Mrs. Davis' Chair at the End of Her Travels."

But, to his surprise, it's been hard to stop photographing Mrs. Davis' chair.

He has returned to states whose images didn't meet his standards. And he's taken a few suggestions from art-fair strangers, shooting Mrs. Davis' Chair, for example, in a meadow of Texas bluebonnets, the state flower.

Now, six weeks after the truck fire, Curtis has accepted that his insurance will cover only \$10,000 of what he estimates was \$65,000 of professional losses - camera equipment plus about \$30,000 worth of art.

He is printing more work from a back-up disk he kept at home. He is working on a book to be published in the spring titled "Mrs. Davis' Chair Crosses America."

And he's wondering what to do about the chair, now the only chair in his own backyard.

"Part of me thinks to clean it up, repaint it, return it to what it was," says Curtis.

"But part of me wants to leave it as an expression of what it's been through."

No matter how it looks.

Mrs. Davis' chair is sturdy and perhaps, like memory, immortal.