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Fame shone on Nebraska model rocket pioneer

Archived Media Articles by JERRY GUENTHER, North Platte Telegraph
FRIDAY, JULY 04, 2008

NORFOLK, Nebraska USA — The late Orville Carlisle will point out that he never sought the spotlight. Yet in the 1950s until his death in 1988, the Norfolkian couldn't help but be noticed around the world.

As a boy and young man, he was respected for his interest and knowledge in fireworks and model rocketry around Norfolk and Northeast Nebraska. But his name took off in 1954 when he devised a model rocket that took four years to get patented.



MORE ON THE STORY:
 • PDF version of the original North Platte Telegraph article

The rocket could be launched from 100 to 1,000 feet depending on the charge. Then once in air, there was a second explosion where a parachute emerged and the rocket would then drift safely back to earth where it could be retrieved and reused.

The concept was especially appreciated by children and hobbyists because it saved lots of money. Only the inner workings would have to be purchased to blast off the rocket again.

It was 50 years ago this week on July 1, 1958, that Carlisle received his patent for the Rock-A-Chute reusable system.

He had been making them in his basement to sell (before the patent), recalls his daughter, Margaret Carlisle of Norfolk.

It was an exciting time for model rocketry in the 1950s, she said. The Russians had launched Sputnik, the satellite that began the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

From Popular Mechanics to hobby magazines, Carlisle was featured in many articles. He was often contacted through letters or at conventions by people telling him how much they appreciated his patent.

"We'd get letters from people, kids especially, saying, 'You saved my life. My friend just killed himself trying to make a rocket with a drain pipe and gun powder,'" Carlisle said. "A lot of kids lost eyes or arms trying their own thing."

Carlisle said that even later in his life, her father was contacted by people who grew up in that era telling him how much they appreciated his discovery.

"It was always safety first with dad, she said. He was extremely safety conscious."

From toy shows to pyrotechnics conventions, Orville Carlisle was in demand.

Mary Carlisle, his widow, recalled in the late 1950s being at one of the toy shows with him in Chicago.

Although Carlisle was placed in the back corner of the show attended by thousands of people, he quickly became the focal point, with lines extending all over, waiting for a chance to visit with him, she said.

Mary Carlisle said he hardly ever let her shoot off any fireworks or rockets. Yet he often asked her with help figuring out formulas. He was no mathematician, she said.

But it wasn't just model rockets and fireworks enthusiasts who tapped into his knowledge. Margaret Carlisle and Mary Carlisle both can remember times when the FBI or officials from NASA contacted him to ask him about explosives and pyrotechnics.

There were times when, based on his knowledge of explosives, law enforcement officials were able to obtain information that led to an arrest of bombings, they said.

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About this capture

For someone who hated to leave town, he sure had a lot of friends, Margaret Carlisle said.

Mary Carlisle said her husband loved kids and they loved him. She said one time when she was canning pears, two boys came to the door and asked, "Can Orville come out and play?"

Carlisle also became a leading collector of fireworks from the back of the Carlisle shoe store on main street. Some of the labels dated back to the 1850s.

His favorite colors were anything as long as they were red, white and blue, Margaret Carlisle said. And the three things he liked to do best were shoot the breeze, shoot fireworks and shoot ducks. And it probably was in that order.

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