

Earl Eugene Blackford – Family History

September 29, 2025

Earl Eugene Blackford was born on October 22, 1939, in Fairfield, Illinois, the first child of Harry Arnold Blackford and Neva Louise Crackel. His family roots ran deep in southern Illinois farm country, shaped by hard work and perseverance.

Harry Arnold Blackford was born on December 21, 1914, in Illinois to George Hunsinger Blackford and Stella May Potter. George was 42 and Stella 34 at the time. On September 25, 1937, Harry married Neva Louise Crackel, who was born September 26, 1915, in Edwards County, Illinois, to John Thomas Crackel and Myrtle Luezetta Wood. Neva's childhood was marked by tragedy — in October 1918, both her parents died within 24 hours of each other during the Spanish Influenza epidemic. They were buried together in Browns, Illinois, and Neva was raised by extended family.

After the death of Neva's parents from influenza, she was raised by her grandparents Owen and Nellie Wood. Her uncle, Earl Wood, was much like an older brother to Neva, and she named her first child, Earl Blackford, after him. Also, Earl had an older brother that died at birth. In those days, mothers delivered at home (and Earl was delivered at home as well). No one knows if there were complications at birth, but it seems the doctor may have crushed the baby's head with forceps during delivery. Earl wishes his older brother would have lived so he would have had companionship and help with the many chores on the farm.

Harry worked hard as a sharecropper, tending hundreds of acres in Wayne County, but never owning any land of his own. He had to give away a quarter to a third of his crop yield to the landowner each year. Later, he also worked at Airtex before starting farming. Newspaper articles of the day captured his focus on crop rotation, soil conservation, and diversified production. Neva was equally industrious — tending a large garden, experimenting with vegetables like okra, broccoli, and eggplant, selling produce to local stores, and winning multiple blue ribbons at the Wayne County Fair for her angel food cakes, gingerbread, and cookies.

Earl's earliest years were spent in a small, rundown house near Barnhill, Illinois, next to a tiny general store and post office run by the town's only two residents. When he was about five, the family moved to a larger farmhouse on the 240-acre Lewis Keith farm in Big Mound Township, about five miles southwest of Fairfield. Earl remembers the excitement of discovering a small fish pond near the pump house and a windmill to fill the horse trough — excitement that quickly faded when he began doing farm chores. The address of this farmhouse was RR 4, Fairfield, IL 62837.

The farmhouse had no electricity for the first several years; the family used kerosene lamps for light until Earl was about seven. Running water arrived when he was eight, and the pantry was converted into a bathroom shortly after. Earl recalled winters so cold that a thin layer of ice formed on the water glass beside his bed and summers so hot he woke drenched

in sweat. Trash was burned because there was no other disposal method. Drinking water was pumped from the well, though sometimes his father had to fetch water from town when the well ran low. He fondly remembered the rare treat of an ice-cold Coca-Cola from a service station vending machine and, later, store-bought ice cream — small luxuries in an otherwise frugal life.

Entertainment was equally scarce. Before electricity, there was no radio; afterward, the family began to “watch the radio,” as Earl jokingly described it. The Lone Ranger was the only program he distinctly remembered. They later subscribed to the Wayne County Press twice a week, and Sunday baseball games on the radio became a favorite pastime until Earl began playing Legion ball himself and could no longer listen.

Earl and his parents, Harry and Neva, were not particularly religious during these years. By first grade, he was gathering eggs each evening; in fourth grade, he was feeding pigs, cows, and horses before and after school; and before long, he was milking two or three cows twice a day. “These,” he later joked, “are wonderful memories of things I hated.” In addition to these chores, Earl recalls having two riding horses at different times, and his father kept a team of draft horses, which only his father drove. Around age 13, Earl began driving tractors around the farm to get them to the fields. A couple of years later, he began doing field work himself, and he also drove the truck to the fields at planting time with fertilizer and seed. Although his father did not use horses to plow the fields on the main farm, he did use a horse to plow their gardens for several years.

Medical care in those days was limited. Doctor and dentist visits were rare — only when absolutely necessary. Earl remembered visiting a dentist only once, calling it a painful experience that stayed with him. Around age 13, he contracted hepatitis (type unspecified). He was not hospitalized but did see a doctor, experiencing weeks of abdominal pain while following a strict diet that avoided greasy foods.

Earl attended a one-room schoolhouse about a mile and a quarter away, walking part of the way alone and meeting two neighbor boys along the route. With 25–30 students and all eight grades taught by a single teacher, Earl heard every lesson multiple times. The building had no electricity, no plumbing, and no phone. Heat came from a coal stove that left the back of the room sweltering and the front chilly. Even before plumbing and electricity, the farmhouse had a phone, although it was a party line shared by the local neighbors.

It was during these early years that a tornado struck the farm. Earl, about seven at the time, remembered vividly how the storm hit just after his parents had gone to the brooder house to check on a new supply of chicks. Earl and Glen Dale were playing outside, while baby Janice was asleep in a crib in the downstairs bedroom. Harry spotted the storm, shouted for Neva and Earl to run to the house, grabbed Glen Dale, and rushed inside. Once in the house, he quickly lifted Janice from her crib and pulled her away from the window. Moments later, a large branch from a nearby tree crashed through the glass, smashing the crib where she had been lying. At the same time, the brooder house was picked up by the tornado and carried about 30 yards into a nearby field before being set down unharmed — with all the

chicks inside still safe. No other buildings, animals, or crops were damaged, but the terrifying experience left a lifelong impression on the family. Earl later noted that Glen Dale seemed to carry a lasting fear of tornadoes from that day forward, often panicking whenever sirens sounded in later years, even covering himself and his children in a bathtub under a mattress for protection.

After five years at the one-room schoolhouse, Earl transferred to New Hope School, a new consolidated brick school with four classrooms and a lunchroom in the basement where his mother worked as head cook. The larger school had a softball field, and it was there Earl began playing ball. He discovered a strong and accurate left arm in early pickup games with church teams. Baseball became a passion, and in May 1957, at age 17, he was invited to a three-day tryout with the St. Louis Cardinals at Old Sportsman's Park in St. Louis. Though he was not signed, the scouts told him they would be following his progress.

After graduating from Fairfield Community High School in 1957, Earl considered joining the U.S. Army, but Harry encouraged him instead to take advantage of a new Army Reserve program. By enlisting before he turned 17½, Earl would only need to serve three years, including six weeks of basic training, six months of active duty, and the remainder in monthly meetings and annual summer camps. He accepted this path and completed his active duty at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and later in San Antonio, Texas. While in San Antonio, the baseball coach at Southern Illinois University wrote inviting him to campus. Discharged early so he could be home for Christmas, Earl arrived at SIU in January 1959. An injury on his first day of practice ended his collegiate baseball hopes, but he stayed at SIU, pitched batting practice, and later decided to focus on his education. He graduated with a degree in Business Administration.

In the spring before graduation, Earl took a few graduate-level courses and applied for a teaching assistant position to help pay his way. About a month later, he received the welcome news that he had been accepted. Earl and Peggy found a small one-bedroom apartment on the edge of campus, so their son Curtis had to sleep in his crib in the living room. Somehow, Peggy managed to stretch a small student loan and the meager salary from Earl's teaching job enough to keep them going.

For that year, Earl taught two business school courses three days a week. During the summer before classes began, he worked the 4 p.m. to midnight shift at Airtex, came home for a few hours of sleep, then helped Harry on the farm for about five hours before heading back to work at the water pump factory. It was exhausting, but they made it work.

On November 3, 1962, 23-year-old Earl married 19-year-old Margaret "Peggy" Louise Steele at the First Methodist Church in Jackson, Missouri. They were young and soon found themselves with big responsibilities. Their first son, Curtis Scott Blackford, was born September 5, 1963, followed quickly by their second son, Michael Bret Blackford, on July 16, 1964. With "Irish twins" just over 10 months apart, Earl and Peggy "had to grow up fast." Their daughter Kimberly Rene Blackford ("Kim" or "Berly") was born July 9, 1967, and their youngest child, Sheri Lynn Blackford ("Booi"), was born March 1, 1971.

Earl began his professional career in August 1964 with the St. Louis Bank for Cooperatives, where he tracked monthly reports from farmer-owned cooperatives, visited them on-site, and inspected their assets when loans were sought. After about four years, he moved to the International Shoe Company, working in the tax department for two of its corporations and Central Hardware, a major regional firm. A better opportunity arose at Kellwood Company, offering higher pay and a shorter commute. There, Earl began in the tax department but was soon also managing the two-person payroll office. He was tasked with overseeing the company's pension plan managers, meeting with prospective managers, and making investment recommendations. When Kellwood acquired a Hong Kong company and its Chinese subsidiaries, Earl had to master the complexities of foreign taxation. Eventually, when his boss relocated to Hong Kong as CFO and Controller of Asian operations, Earl was promoted to Director of Corporate Taxes. In this role, he had three tax professionals reporting to him, continued to oversee payroll, and took on responsibility for tax accounting — a skill he had to learn on the job.

Harry and Neva lived to see their family grow. On September 27, 1987, they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at the Wayne County Bank Community Room. Just a few months later, on February 3, 1988, Neva Louise Blackford passed away at the age of 72. The cause of death was a pulmonary embolism. Harry lived another 13 years before passing away on February 4, 2001, at age 86.

Earl and Peggy's children went on to have families of their own:

- Curtis married Denise Kay Messman and they had one daughter, Lindsey Jneau Blackford (born March 18, 1986). He later married Melinda "Mindy" Gay Biberdorf, with whom he had three children: Curtis Brice "Brice" Blackford (born January 1, 1989), Michael Scott Blackford (born July 14, 1992), and Margaret Gay "Maggie" Blackford (born October 2, 1993). Curtis is currently married to Kimberly King Blackford, who has no children.
- Bret married Michelle Tucker on October 21, 1995. They have three children: Cora Rose Blackford (born July 31, 2002), Neva Jane Blackford (born September 14, 2003), and David Kim Blackford (born October 7, 2007).
- Kimberly married Gregory "Greg" Titone on October 10, 1990. They have three daughters: Brittany Ann Titone (born May 28, 1991), Stacy Marie Titone (born May 15, 1994), and Melanie Grace Titone (born November 13, 2022).
- Sheri married Lawrence Roy "Larry" Kleinkemper around 2007. They have no children.

Earl's life story reflects the heritage of his parents and grandparents: resilience through hardship, pride in work well done, and deep family roots in southern Illinois. From a boyhood of farm chores, one-room school lessons, and limited medical care, to a tryout with the Cardinals, Army Reserve service, higher education, a career in corporate finance and international taxation, and even surviving the fury of a tornado, his journey has been shaped by discipline, opportunity, and the enduring values of the family who came before him.