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# Adventurers



Winnifred and Joshua Haldeman



Errol, Maye, Elon, Tosca, and Kimbal Musk



Cora and Walter Musk

## *Joshua and Winnifred Haldeman*

Elon Musk's attraction to risk was a family trait. In that regard, he took after his maternal grandfather, Joshua Haldeman, a daredevil adventurer with strongly held opinions who was raised on a farm on the barren plains of central Canada. He studied chiropractic techniques in Iowa, then returned to his hometown near Moose Jaw, where he broke in horses and gave chiropractic adjustments in exchange for food and lodging.

He was eventually able to buy his own farm, but he lost it during the depression of the 1930s. For the next few years, he worked as a cowboy, rodeo performer, and construction hand. His one constant was a love for adventure. He married and divorced, traveled as a hobo on freight trains, and was a stowaway on an oceangoing ship.

The loss of his farm instilled in him a populism, and he became active in a movement known as the Social Credit Party, which advocated giving citizens free credit notes they could use like currency. The movement had a conservative fundamentalist streak tinged with anti-Semitism. Its first leader in Canada decried a "perversion of cultural ideals" because "a disproportionate number of

Jews occupy positions of control.” Haldeman rose to become chair of the party’s national council.

He also enlisted in a movement called Technocracy, which believed that government should be run by technocrats rather than politicians. It was temporarily outlawed in Canada because of its opposition to the country’s entry into World War II. Haldeman defied the ban by taking out a newspaper ad supporting the movement.

At one point he wanted to learn ballroom dancing, which is how he met Winnifred Fletcher, whose adventurous streak was equal to his. As a sixteen-year-old, she got a job at the Moose Jaw *Times Herald*, but she dreamed of being a dancer and actress. So she lit out by train to Chicago and then New York City. Upon her return, she opened a dance school in Moose Jaw, which is where Haldeman showed up for lessons. When he asked her to dinner, she replied, “I don’t date my clients.” So he quit the class and asked her out again. A few months later, he asked, “When will you marry me?” She responded, “Tomorrow.”

They had four children, including twin girls, Maye and Kaye, born in 1948. One day on a trip he spotted a For Sale sign on a single-engine Luscombe airplane sitting in a farmer’s field. He had no cash, but he convinced the

farmer to take his car in exchange. It was rather impetuous, since Haldeman did not know how to fly. He hired someone to fly him home and teach him how to pilot the plane.

The family came to be known as The Flying Haldemans, and he was described by a chiropractic trade journal as “perhaps the most remarkable figure in the history of flying chiropractors,” a rather narrow, albeit accurate, accolade. They bought a larger single-engine plane, a Bellanca, when Maye and Kaye were three months old, and the toddlers became known as “the flying twins.”

With his quirky conservative populist views, Haldeman came to believe that the Canadian government was usurping too much control over the lives of individuals and that the country had gone soft. So in 1950, he decided to move to South Africa, which was still ruled by a white apartheid regime. They took apart the Bellanca, crated it, and boarded a freighter for Cape Town. Haldeman decided he wanted to live inland, so they took off toward Johannesburg, where most of the white citizens spoke English rather than Afrikaans. But as they flew over nearby Pretoria, the lavender jacaranda flowers were in bloom, and Haldeman announced, “This is where we’ll stay.”

When Joshua and Winnifred were young, a charlatan named William Hunt, known (at least to himself) as “the Great Farini,” came to Moose Jaw and told tales of an ancient “lost city” he had seen when crossing the Kalahari Desert in South Africa. “This fabulist showed my grandfather pictures that were obviously fake, but he became a believer and decided it was his mission to rediscover it,” Musk says. Once in Africa, the Haldemans made a monthlong trek into the Kalahari every year to search for this legendary city. They hunted for their own food and slept with their guns so they could fend off lions.

The family adopted a motto: “Live dangerously—carefully.” They embarked on long-distance flights to places such as Norway, tied for first place in the twelve-thousand-mile Cape Town-to-Algiers motor rally, and became the first to fly a single-engine plane from Africa to Australia. “They had to remove the back seats to put in gas tanks,” Maye later recalled.

Joshua Haldeman’s risk-taking eventually caught up with him. He was killed when a person he was teaching to fly hit a power line, causing the plane to flip and crash. His grandson Elon was three at the time. “He knew that real adventures involve risk,” he says. “Risk energized him.”

Haldeman imprinted that spirit onto one of his twin girls, Elon's mother, Maye. "I know that I can take a risk as long as I'm prepared," she says. As a young student, she did well in science and math. She was also strikingly good-looking. Tall and blue-eyed, with high cheekbones and sculpted chin, she began working at age fifteen as a model, doing department store runway shows on Saturday mornings.

Around that time, she met a boy in her neighborhood who was also strikingly good-looking, albeit in a smooth and caddish way.

### *Errol Musk*

Errol Musk was an adventurer and wheeler-dealer, always on the lookout for the next opportunity. His mother, Cora, was from England, where she finished school at fourteen, worked at a factory making skins for fighter-bombers, then took a refugee ship to South Africa. There she met Walter Musk, a cryptographer and military intelligence officer who worked in Egypt on schemes to fool the Germans by deploying fake weapons and searchlights. After the war, he did little other than sit silently in an armchair, drink, and use his cryptology skills on crossword puzzles. So Cora left him, went back to



England with their two sons, bought a Buick, and then returned to Pretoria. “She was the strongest person I ever met,” Errol says.

Errol earned a degree in engineering and worked on building hotels, shopping centers, and factories. On the side, he liked restoring old cars and planes. He also dabbled in politics, defeating an Afrikaner member of the pro-apartheid National Party to become one of the few English-speaking members of the Pretoria City Council. The *Pretoria News* for March 9, 1972, reported the election under the headline “Reaction against the Establishment.”

Like the Haldemans, he loved flying. He bought a twin-engine Cessna Golden Eagle, which he used to ferry television crews to a lodge he had built in the bush. On one trip in 1986, when he was looking to sell the plane, he landed at an airstrip in Zambia where a Panamanian-Italian entrepreneur offered to buy it. They agreed on a price, and instead of taking a payment in cash, Errol was given a portion of the emeralds produced at three small mines that the entrepreneur owned in Zambia.

Zambia then had a postcolonial Black government, but there was no functioning bureaucracy, so the mine was not registered. “If you registered it, you would wind up with nothing, because the Blacks would take

everything from you,” Errol says. He criticizes Maye’s family for being racist, which he insists he is not. “I don’t have anything against the Blacks, but they are just different from what I am,” he says in a rambling phone discourse.

Errol, who never had an ownership stake in the mine, expanded his trade by importing raw emeralds and having them cut in Johannesburg. “Many people came to me with stolen parcels,” he says. “On trips overseas I would sell emeralds to jewelers. It was a cloak-and-dagger thing, because none of it was legal.” After producing profits of roughly \$210,000, his emerald business collapsed in the 1980s when the Russians created an artificial emerald in the lab. He lost all of his emerald earnings.

### *Their marriage*

Errol Musk and Maye Haldeman began dating when they were young teenagers. From the start, their relationship was filled with drama. He repeatedly proposed to her, but she didn’t trust him. When she discovered he was cheating on her, she became so upset that she cried for a week and couldn’t eat. “Because of grief, I dropped ten pounds,” she recalls; it helped her win a local beauty

contest. She got \$150 in cash plus ten tickets to a bowling alley and became a finalist in the Miss South Africa contest.

When Maye graduated from college, she moved to Cape Town to give talks about nutrition. Errol came to visit, brought an engagement ring, and proposed. He promised he would change his ways and be faithful once they were married. Maye had just broken off a relationship with another unfaithful boyfriend, gained a lot of weight, and begun to fear that she would never get married, so she agreed.

The night of the wedding, Errol and Maye took an inexpensive flight to Europe for their honeymoon. In France, he bought copies of *Playboy*, which was banned in South Africa, and lay on the small hotel bed looking at them, much to Maye's annoyance. Their fights turned bitter. When they got back to Pretoria, she thought of trying to get out of the marriage. But she soon became nauseated from morning sickness. She had become pregnant on the second night of their honeymoon, in the town of Nice. "It was clear that marrying him had been a mistake," she recalls, "but now it was impossible to undo."