

# Jake Erlich: A Big Man in Many Ways

By Anielka Gamboa and Esijolomi Jean Etiwe

In August 2013, the popular host of the Dr. Oz television show interviewed a 33-year-old woman standing 7 feet tall and weighing 400 pounds. She suffered acromegaly, or “gigantism.” In this condition, the pituitary gland produces more of the growth hormone than normal and individuals grow rapidly and often suffer from some facial distortion. If a tumor is causing the gland to produce abnormal amounts of the hormone, surgery or radiation may help. Even in 2013, there was no “cure,” but there is medication to stop the growth and more information for the patient and the family as they try to adjust to society. One hundred years ago, an El Pasoan suffered from this same condition but rose above the difficulties and became a movie star, a circus performer, an artist, a poet and the tallest man in the world at one time. His name was Jacob, or Jake Erlich.

The story of Jake Erlich is inspirational. He was a man who managed to survive for a long time and live life fully. He did this by discovering hidden talents that eventually led him to have unique and successful experiences. Jake Erlich was timid as a child, but he was able to overcome his fears and doubts as he took chances and tried new things. He took advantage of his unique body, starring in silent films in Hollywood and becoming “the tallest man in the world” as part of the Ringling Brothers Circus. Jake Erlich not only left behind beautiful artwork, he also left an extraordinary reputation as a brilliant and unique citizen of El Paso.

Jacob Reuben Ehrlich, who would eventually weigh 370 pounds, ironically was born prematurely in Denver, Colo. on June 29, 1906, weighing 3 pounds and 11 ounces, according to the book *Incredible People: Five Stories of Incredible Lives* by Frederick Drimmer. For his first few years, Jacob seemed to always be shorter than the other kids, and his parents compared him to the other children of apparent “normal” height.

However, when Jacob was seven, the tables turned. Jacob shot up like a rocket and seemed to be growing an inch every month! Now his parents began to fear for his life. Doctors could not explain the sudden and continuous growth. By age 10, Jacob was more than six feet tall. Three years later, he was seven feet tall. Little did he know that his height would bring him success in the future.

Isadore Erlich and Dora (Slonimsky) Erlich were a Jewish couple from Poland who arrived in the U. S. on March 4, 1904. They had three sons: Benjamin, Jacob and Myer. Living briefly in New York City, they headed for Pueblo, Colo., where Isadore’s sister lived. Soon, Isadore saw a better opportunity in Denver and moved there, only to be disappointed. In 1912, Isadore decided it was time to move again because of the country’s poor economy.

In an obituary published in *The Texas Historical Society Newsletter*, Dr. Andrew Erlich, Jake Erlich’s nephew, explained that Isadore planned to travel to Los Angeles, Calif., to look for better opportunities. Because the railroad tracks in his route were washed out, the train he had boarded headed for Albuquerque, N.M., and eventually ended up here in El Paso.

Exhausted from such a long journey, Isadore decided to stay at the Orndorff Hotel, and he found a job as a watchmaker at Silverberg’s Jewelers. He was paid \$35 a week, good money for the time. The rest of the family followed along and established a residence in the Old San Francisco District on Missouri Street.

Being a sensitive child, Jacob had to learn to get used to the constant teasing. He was nicknamed “Ichabod Crane,” “Old High Pockets,” “Giraffe,” and many other cruel names, according to his friend Dean Jennings. Jake



Andrew Erlich, Jake Erlich’s nephew, stands by a life-size celebrity cutout of his uncle, once the tallest man in the world. (Photo courtesy of Andrew Erlich)

told a reporter for the *El Paso Herald* in 1930 that as a child, “Instead of going down the main streets, I would walk down alleys or side streets. I don’t believe anybody can understand the agony I went through.” Despite his shyness, Jake decided he would join the band and ROTC when he got to El Paso High School. He even started leading some of the parades held downtown.

Nevertheless, Jake had a hard time accepting his condition and did not welcome the attention of strangers. His parents noticed his bouts of hopelessness and always tried to reassure their unique son that things were going to be all right. Life not only turned out all right, it changed dramatically and wonderfully.

To cheer up his son, Isadore decided to take Jacob on a deep-sea fishing excursion to Santa Monica. During the train ride to California, people stared at the unusually tall boy. When father and son went to buy fishing tackle, people stared at him there as well. Drimmer wrote that after a long day fishing, father and son saw two men waiting for them as they pulled up to the dock: Zion Meyers and Jerry Ash of Century Studios.

Century Studios was a Hollywood movie company that had heard about Jacob and his incredible size. The men offered Jacob a contract to work as an actor in motion pictures. This turn of events was surreal: Jacob and his father could not believe what was happening. Jacob was enthusiastic. For the first time in his life, somebody admired his condition and would pay him for who he was.

For the first half of the 20th century, Hollywood studios changed the names of actors if they sounded

too ethnic. From then on, the young Erlich would be known as “Jack Earle.” (The young Jacob Erlich would be known as Jake Erlich by family and friends and Jack Earle professionally. This article will use Jake Erlich referring to Erlich’s “real” name and Jack Earle when referring to the professional known by this name.)

The people with whom Jack Earle worked at Century Studios admired him. They not only looked up to Jack physically, they respected him for who he was. His life had changed so rapidly, and even though Hollywood was not an easy place in which to live, he managed to adapt.

As Jack Earle, he had the opportunity to meet famous actors and even co-star with the lovely child actress Peggy Montgomery, also known as “Baby Peggy.” At age 16, Jack played the giant in *Jack in the Beanstalk* with Baby Peggy, according to Drimmer. A photograph in the *El Paso Times* titled “Young El Paso Giant a Movie Star” shows the two of them in their costumes in a scene from the film. All the films in which Jack starred were comedies. Some of the films include *Hansel and Gretel* (1923), *Sting’ Em Sweet* (1923), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1924), *Keep Going* (1924) and *Stop, Look and Listen* (1926). According to local historian Fred Morales, *Sting’ Em Sweet* was the only film that was shown at the El Paso Ellanay Theater.

In his four-year acting career, Jack completed 48 short films. At age 17, Jack was filming his 49th comedy when he fell, “standing atop of a lofty scaffolding when he felt it tremble,” wrote Drimmer. Jack had broken his nose and was sent to the hospital.

Little by little, he started to lose his eyesight. X-rays revealed an abnormal shape on his pituitary gland. Apparently, the cause of his blindness was a tumor on his pituitary gland. The tumor was creating pressure on his optic nerve, causing Jack to lose his vision.

At that time, many in the medical world did not know that the pituitary gland secreted the growth hormone and in Jack’s case, the tumor had increased production of the growth hormone, causing him to be a pathological giant.

Joe Nickell, the author of the book *Secrets of the Sideshows*, wrote that Jack received X-ray treatment, assisting in the reduction of the tumor. Fortunately, his vision was restored. What was not fortunate was that he was unemployed. At age 17, Jack Earle decided it was time to go back home and be Jake Erlich.

A few years later, in 1926, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus came to El Paso. This circus had originated in Wisconsin and had members with unique characteristics from all over the world. Jake attended a performance and noticed the tallest man of the circus, Jim Tarver, in fact was not as tall as he was. Management noticed this anomaly, too. The circus offered Jim Tarver’s job to Jake. Even though he was not thrilled with his new employment, he wanted and needed to make a living. By the age of 20, he had apparently stopped growing after attaining the height of 8 feet, 6 inches!\*

According to the book *Incredible People*, the Ringling Brothers Circus had its own train that carried its animals, workers and performers in special cars. Jake was in Car 96 along with others such as the little people, two fat ladies, an albino lady, two other albinos who were African American, a really thin man who looked skeletal, a woman covered in tattoos, a sword-swallower, a fire-eater, a bearded lady and some others. For hundreds of years, individuals with obvious physical differences or distortions were put on display in sideshows or freak shows, often in connection with the circus.

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In fall 1926, Jake would appear in his first show as a circus giant with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Baily Circus in Madison Square Garden in New York City. Advertisements would add almost a foot to Jake's actual height. And he often wore a 10-gallon hat and high-heeled cowboy boots, adding or exceeding the extra advertised height.

His first performance was intimidating. Jake was very nervous and started feeling uncomfortable at the stares, but he was rescued. Harry Doll, a little person also working for the circus, assured him everything was going to be okay. Soon Jake became close friends with Harry and with his three dwarf sisters — Daisy, Tiny and Grace. According to a website by James G. Mundie, the four siblings originally were from Germany, born to Gustav and Emma Schneider. They worked in circuses and sideshows from the 1920s through the late 1950s and appeared as Munchkins in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*.

When the siblings came to the U.S., they took the surname of their manager, Bert W. Earles, and after he died, they took the last name of Doll. That Jake's showbiz last name was Earle could not have been lost on them. Although he had many other friends, Jake's closest ones were always the little people. They visited Jake in El Paso, where his mother cooked for them and enjoyed their company.

Many photographs of Jake while he worked in the circus show him carrying a little person. Circus photographers loved the contrast: the giant carrying a dwarf in his hand. Photographs were taken of Jake with Harry Doll, with Major Mite, who was only 2 feet, 2 inches tall, and with Lia Graf, another attractive little person from Germany.

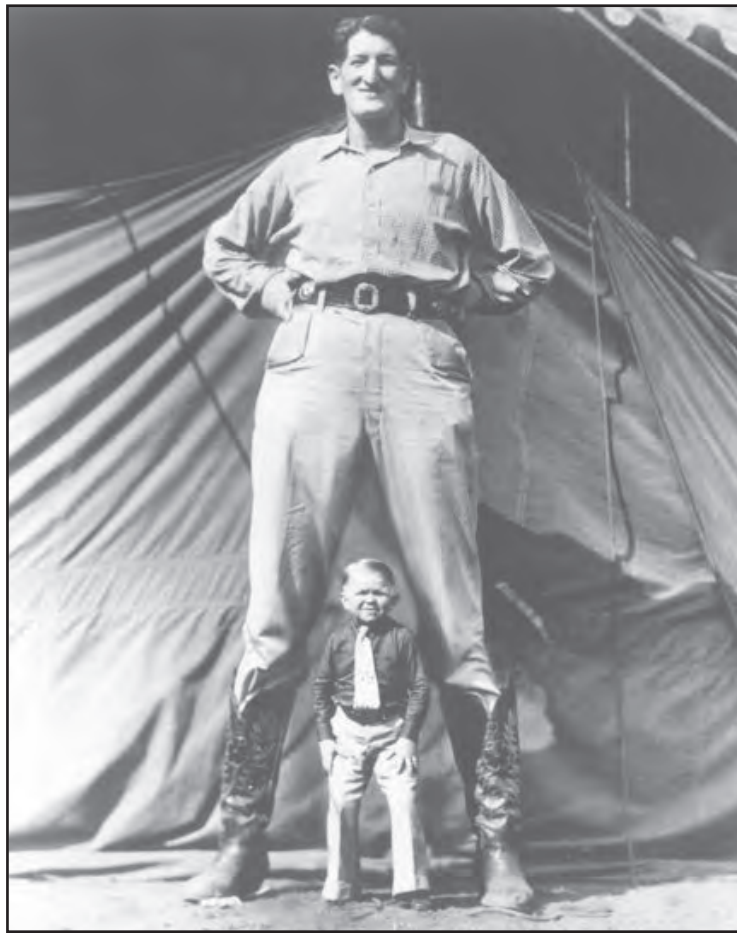
Lia Graf also became well known when a shot was taken of her with financier J. P. Morgan, according to Drimmer. Sometime later, Lia decided to go back home to Germany in 1933 and discovered that Hitler was in power. Although Hitler is known for exterminating millions of Jews, he also tried to rid Germany of human oddities, and Lia was both. In 1941, she and her parents perished in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. If Jake were to have been in Germany, he too would have been risking his life for being different and for being a Jew. Fortunately, he was safe from being hurt, at least physically.

Nonetheless, Jake was hurt emotionally on a daily basis. An article in the *El Paso Herald-Post* in 1952 revealed Jake's thoughts: "I hated the curious crowd that stared at me and asked: 'How's the weather up there?'" Another source revealed that Jake hated being asked this question all the time. People thought it was funny, but not Jake. "I used to swear I'd murder the next man who asked me that," he said.

Even though he hated being ridiculed in the circus, he made a living during the Great Depression, and that was one of the reasons he remained a performer. He also had the opportunity to travel across the world, meet different people and build great friendships. Jake even met Robert Wadlow from Alton, Ill., the only man who was taller than he was. Robert was 8 feet, 9.75 inches tall, according to a 1950 *El Paso Times* article. Some sources say he was as tall as 8 feet, 11 inches.

Now that he had met somebody taller than he was, Jake decided to ask Wadlow the same question about the weather that had always bothered him. Wadlow's answer changed Jake's perspective on his size. Wadlow said he was not bothered because he had learned to accept and love the way he was, something Jake would accomplish later.

With time and patience, Jake was able to get used to the stares and the questions. "What good would it do me to mind? They're going to stare, anyhow, so I might



**The tallest man in the circus, Jack Earle, (Jake Erlich's professional name) was often photographed with the smallest man, Major Mite. (Photo courtesy of Andrew Erlich)**

as well cash in and be a show ...," he stated in the *El Paso Herald* article, "Jake Erlich Fails to Find Many Advantages for Giants."

Drimmer also described in his book how Jake made extra money in the circus. He sold photographs of himself as well as copies of one of his personal rings. The rings he wore on his fingers were almost two inches in diameter and became very popular. Eventually, he began to have them manufactured and he sold many for 25 cents each. Jake said they were "lucky rings" and told those who bought them that if they did not have good luck, he would return their money. Most people rejected the offer even if the ring tarnished quickly; they simply loved the fact they were so big!

Accommodations were always an issue for Jake because of his height. When traveling, Jake found it difficult to find comfortable beds, baths, chairs or even food in sufficient portions because he was so large. Although life in the circus did not fully please him, Jake knew he had shelter, food and financial security. "He travelled the world and developed a keen sense of humor to counteract his sensitive feeling of being a 'sideshow freak,'" wrote Dorothea M. Fox in an *El Paso Times* article.

On one particular trip to New York City, Jake discovered yet another talent. Dr. Andrew Erlich explained in his book about his uncle, *The Long Shadows: The Story of Jake Erlich*, that one day an art student from New York University was working on a gorilla sculpture while visiting the circus backstage. Jake was intrigued by Valerie McPhearson's work and asked if he could use some clay. In a short time, Jake made a sculpture of a giraffe. Jake had found his artistic side.

In 1931, the Ringling Art School opened, offering a diversity of classes in Sarasota, Fla. John Ringling encouraged Jake to enroll at this art school. He did so and took sculpture classes. A photograph of Jake in one of his classes was published in the *Sarasota Herald* in 1932 with instructor Adrian C. Pillars. Even though Jake enjoyed sculpting, he discovered that painting — in both oil and watercolors — was his true passion.

The "tallest man in the world" had a way of combining the circus and his love of art. He explored a new way of expressing his thoughts and experiences by painting the different aspects of circus life. When on vacation or at the art school, he painted the vibrant life of the circus. "He painted circus scenes, moods, personalities — the elephants, the clowns, the midgets, the circus on the move," wrote Drimmer. In an *El Paso Herald-Post* article, Betty Luther said that Jake was so inspired by painting that he decided to transform one of the rooms in his parents' home into a special place to display his finished paintings. He did much of his painting in the winter when the circus was on hiatus and he would return to El Paso.

As Jake continued to study art, he met other artists. Cindy Graff Cohen in an article for *El Paso Inc.* wrote that he had two instructors: the Mexican artist Emilio Cahero, who worked with Diego Rivera, and El Paso Modernist Hari Kidd. Kidd persuaded Jake to discover and explore different techniques for his art, such as how to use the bold colors that are found in his circus paintings. In his short biography of Erlich, Fred Morales wrote that he had an exhibition of his paintings in El Paso at the Desert Art Shop in March 1936. Two months later, his first exhibit with other artists was in 1936 at the Delphic Studios in New York City. Some of the other artists included Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and Ansel Adams.

In a 1963 *El Paso Times* article, Dorothea M. Fox wrote that Jake's artwork was unique. His oil painting *End of the Magic* depicts "a striking night scene of four powerful white horses straining to pull out a huge red circus wagon from the mud. As the workman whirls his whip at the horses, the driver leans forward as he holds his reins from the high wagon top." Fox continued, "Vitality, humor, pathos, and all the movements of the circus were depicted with his skillful brush."

According to a 1936 *El Paso Herald-Post* article, Betty Luther wrote that Jake always tried "to express the moods of the circus in his pictures." Jake said to her, "I have so many ideas they are crowding in on my sleep at night." In *Incredible People*, Drimmer quoted Jake explaining how he was able to overcome his worries. Jake said, "When I feel low, I can go to my room and lock the door, and I can read, or paint, or write," something that many people are urged to do today to lessen stress.

Considering how shy he was as a child, Jake was living life without fear and certainly without shyness. But in spite of the wonders he had seen and lived in the circus over 14 years, Jake thought it was time to end this chapter of his life.

Dean Jennings in his *Reader's Digest* article "My Friend Jack—the Gentle Giant," said that Jake made the following statement: "Frankly, I wasn't afraid of death, but I didn't want to die in a tent."

Drimmer wrote that after Jake returned from a circus tour in Australia, he bumped into an old friend, Art Linkletter, the radio and later television personality. While catching up, Linkletter saw another friend and presented him to Jake. The man was the advertising manager for Roma Wine Company in California. The manager had heard of Robert Wadlow, the tallest man in the world, who promoted shoes for a company, and thought Jake might be able to help Roma Wines. Jake was hired for a "three-month tour calling on Roma's customers as a goodwill ambassador," according to *Incredible People*. Later on, Roma Wine Company made him a permanent salesman and promoter. They had a special sedan built to fit Jake because he could not fit behind the steering wheel of a regular car. He worked for Roma for 12 years.

At age 34, Jake, or Jack Earle, the name he was still using professionally, went from being the tallest man in

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the circus to “the world’s tallest traveling salesman.” In his new job, his height was a big plus. “No secretary ever tells me her boss isn’t in,” he said. Drimmer commented, “His customers never forgot his name.”

In his business travels, people did not see him as “freak”; he was just an extraordinarily tall salesperson. In a May 1950 interview with Hal Boyle of the *Evening Independent*, [St. Petersburg, Fla.], Jake said the principal difficulty in traveling was not in adjusting physically to his size. “It was psychological—getting other people to realize that, despite my size, I was just another man trying to earn a normal living in a normal manner.”

In an interview for the University of California at Berkeley Regional Oral History Office, John B. Cella II, whose family bought Roma Wines, commented on Jack Earle, who traveled all over the country for their wines: “He had a calling card that was six inches by 10 inches. ... he’d always come out [of a store] with an order. ... He was a very kind and gentle man, too.”

Jake was indeed extraordinary — he had so much compassion for others. One would think that after being the “giraffe” of the school or the tall “freak” of the circus, he might find it hard to show kindness towards others. However, Jake managed to accept people’s remarks and realize he was tall and nothing could be done to change that. The only thing he could do was live life as it came.

Jake dressed as Santa Claus during Christmas, visiting orphanages and pediatric wards of hospitals on the West Coast, according to Drimmer. There he

would tell the children stories and sing carols to them. On many other occasions, Jake loved “telling stories to children about the good giants who helped people and who loved boys and girls . . . to counteract the children’s fear of giants, and of him, as a person,” wrote Fox. Besides helping children, Jake helped sell thousands of dollars of war bonds during World War II.

Jake was a sensitive man who had many talents, including portrait photography, sculpting, painting and writing poetry. His poems were serious, at times even “brooding,” noted Drimmer. In 1950, Jake privately published a short book of poems called *Long Shadows*, which was written in free verse. His nephew Andrew would take this title for his novel based on his uncle’s life.


In January 1952, Jake decided it was time to go back home to El Paso. He had a house built for himself, with ceilings nine feet high and furniture that would sustain the weight of a 370-pound man. It was built at 817 College Avenue in El Paso, but he would never get to live in it.

In June of that year, Jake’s kidneys failed, and he was admitted to Hotel Dieu Hospital. He died on July 18, 1952, only 46 years old. However, the average life span for a pathological giant is short: the young woman mentioned in the opening paragraph died shortly after her appearance on television. She was 33. Most die at a very young age. Robert Wadlow was only 22 when he died. Jake was more than twice as old as Wadlow.

Although Jake suffered from a medical condition that held him back in many areas, he managed

to accomplish more than many “normal” human beings only dream of. He had wanted to be an actor when he was young and succeeded in becoming a Hollywood movie star as a teenager, working with famous actors and starring in almost 50 comedies. He became a world traveler while working in the circus for 14 years and produced breathtaking art. Then as a salesman, he helped make Roma Wines the largest wine company in America. Jake made his dreams come true.

Throughout the years, Jake Erlich has been remembered by newspaper articles, magazines, books and museum collections. Dr. Andrew Erlich, a clinical psychologist who celebrated his third birthday the day his uncle died, has dedicated much of his time researching Jake Erlich’s life and creating an intriguing novel about him. In June 2012, the El Paso Museum of Art exhibited Jake’s art.

What seemed destined to become a tale of tragedy in the beginning was transformed into an amazing, uplifting story of a life full of achievements. With the unconditional support of his family, Jake was able to overcome humiliation, blindness, accidents and depression. He made his distinctive height work for him. He was a man with great sensibility who took all of his possibilities and transformed them into a story of success. 

*\*Note: Drimmer and one Missouri doctor, who never met Jake, claimed Jake was only 7 feet, 7 ½ inches tall. Dozens of other sources agree that Jake was 8 feet, 6 ½ inches tall.*

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at the University of Texas at El Paso, Dr. Garry Hawkins and John Whitacre, inspected and analyzed the vapor system in the test car. Hawkins said that Ogle’s system was “sound and feasible,” according to a May 4, 1977 *Times* article by Jones.

The engineers made sure there were no hidden fuel compartments. Hawkins further said that Ogle’s fuel system, “has achieved what was intended for the internal combustion engine . . . to operate on fumes.” He added that problems with stalling-out could be fixed with “engineering refinement.” In response to the question why the system had not been developed before, Whitacre said, “Everybody’s been trying to make the carburetor work better.” A by-product of the system was clean emissions, an environmental concern that became important in the 1970s.

Jones wrote in the *Times* on Aug. 2, 1977, that Ogle had obtained a patent pending number on his system. While waiting for the patent, Ogle continued to refine the system and resumed independent testing. A computer test at Casa Ford showed that the device produced emissions cleaner than El Paso’s air, according to Jones. Ogle and Peck became partners and several other individuals, including two local automobile dealers, also provided funds for Ogle’s research and testing. Attorneys began work on an agreement between Ogle and his backers regarding possible royalties if the device were to reach the market.

The U.S. was in the middle of an energy crisis when the Oglemobile appeared, and many corporations, including at least one oil company and two car manufacturers, and even the U.S. Air Force expressed interest in buying Ogle’s device. On June 22, 1978, the *El Paso Herald-Post* announced “Ogle Sells Rights to a Gas-Saving Device.” According to the article, Advanced Fuel Systems Inc. (AFS), a company in Washington state, had bought the

manufacturing and marketing rights. The contract specified Ogle would receive an unspecified amount of advance money, 100,000 shares of AFS stock, six percent royalty on sales of each device, a monthly salary and the right to visit AFS, stated reporter Doug Lenzini.

About two months later, the Securities Exchange Commission filed a complaint against AFS as specified in the *Times* article “Complaint Surprises Ogle” also by Lenzini. The SEC charged that the Seattle company had violated provisions of the federal securities laws. Ogle and his backers became further entangled with legalities. Meanwhile, Ogle went ahead with plans to open a chain of computerized diagnostic centers and opened the first (and only) one in Northeast El Paso in April 1979. Before the end of the year, Ogle apparently had closed the site and the phone had been disconnected, according to a Feb. 24, 1980 *Times* article by Laura Hlavach. Ogle was hard to find.

In May 1980, the IRS came looking for Ogle, claiming that he owed more than \$20,000 in back taxes. Ogle apparently had begun living the high life soon after selling the rights to his invention, including riding around in a custom-made limousine with all the perks. In April 1981, news about Ogle began to surface once more. *Times* writers Laura Hlavach and Patricia Tatum reported that Ogle had suffered a gunshot wound in his stomach near a bar in Northeast El Paso. No one was ever charged in the shooting, but police for some reason had officers guarding his hospital room.

Hlavach and Tatum reported that in other incidents, Ogle was arrested for reckless driving and for having an illegal firearm. In addition, he had sued a man to whom Ogle said he had been forced to sign over 22% of his royalties in order to pay debts acquired in losing a string of pool games, according to a June 20, 1981

*Times* article by Jeannie Kever. Ogle’s lawyer, Bobby Perel, described his client as a “26-year-old kid, a free target for anybody. ... He’s scared of ... a whole group of gamblers and others, just fleecing Ogle, getting him drunk and taking advantage of him,” according to Kever.

On Aug. 19, 1981, the 26-year-old Tom Ogle died of what medical examiners said was an alcohol and drug overdose, citing large amounts of Darvon, a tranquilizer, in his body. He had been at a Northeast bar drinking and collapsed at a friend’s house. Pathologists were uncertain whether the death was accidental or suicide, but many people, including some of his backers, believed it was neither. Even though Ogle had legal and money problems, his friends and lawyer refused to believe that he would have deliberately taken 20 Darvon pills in addition to drinking heavily.

For years after his death, more than 50 supposed financial backers were still battling over money derived from Ogle’s device. Although Ogle did not leave a will, his wife Monika won the right to oversee his estate. His invention? Forgotten. Dead and buried, like its young, naïve inventor. But perhaps not totally.

In 2008, *Gashole*, a documentary about America’s dependence on fossil fuels highlighted Tom Ogle’s invention, along with several others intended to increase mileage in the nation’s cars, some of which the film accused big oil companies of buying and suppressing. The Internet also has various bloggers and journalists who ask the question, “Why are we still oil-dependent when the technology exists to free us from this tyranny?” Tom Ogle appeared to have solved the problem of gas guzzlers and going to war to protect our oil supplies, but it was not to be. However, the fact that intelligent thinkers are still asking questions and researching the subject gives one a little spark of hope. 