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“CALL ME POP”

BY DOROTHY O'LEARY

Jeffrey Hunter couldn't be with his son until Chris was 5 months old. Now he's making up for lost time



**The Hunters make a handsome family.
Mom is actress Barbara Rush**

Father's Day is once again upon us and nominations for Dad of the Year have been popping up in towns all over the nation. In Hollywood, recognition usually goes to the chaps with the big families, like Steve McNally with his six sprouts, or Art Linkletter with five, or Bing Crosby or Bob Hope, or Roy Rogers with their quartets.

Add our nominee, Jeffrey Hunter, a young father who has only one son. It goes to him not only because of the great pride he has in the child but the quiet dignity he maintains about it. It goes to him because he had the same experience shared by so many young fathers in military service – not having a chance to be with his son, Chris, until the baby was nearly 5 months old.

It wasn't military duty which kept Jeff from seeing his baby; he had his hitch in the Navy several years ago between high school and college. In his case it was a job, but it was tough just the same. Chris was born on last August 29. Mother – lovely and talented young actress Barbara Rush – and son did so well that they were home in the Hunter apartment in Westwood on September 4. Jeff saw his son for exactly one day, because on September 5 he left for England to make Sailor of the King. He could not return until the middle of January.

During Jeff's absence Barbara sent her husband constant, lengthy letters about Chris's progress, plus an amazing number of pictures. But, according to Michael Rennie and other members of the Sailor cast, Jeff never bored them with news or pictures of his baby.



Jeff and Barbara both play piano and hope Chris will too

“Jeff was so modest about his son that we developed a running gag. I kept asking him advice on how to handle a baby, since I was to be a father soon myself,” says Rennie. “He quoted me authorities!”

Jeff still is restrained on the subject of Chris. He’s as proud as any young father, and in his own quiet way he has probably done more planning for his young son’s future than most pops, but he doesn’t brag or go on and on about it to his friends, or anyone else for that matter.

He carries pictures of Chris in his wallet but he must be *asked* to show them. He did *not* enroll his son, on the day of his birth, in his own Alma Mater in the manner of the Old School Tie boys, nor did he rush out and buy a rifle or set of trains to celebrate. Although you know he thinks so, he doesn’t say that Chris is the best or most remarkable baby in the world. In other words, he isn’t “taking it big.”

Knowing Jeff makes this more understandable. He’s an unusually well-rounded, well-integrated young man. He’s that rare combination of scholar and athlete; an actor who started training as a child and continued all through school, with professional stock company experience during vacations, but who also managed sports and scholastic pursuits with distinction. He’s a fine pianist, a talented artist, and in contrast a great skier, swimmer and skin diver. He’ll have plenty to share with Chris as the boy grows up, and that’s exactly what he’s planning.

“Of course now I’m glad our first child is a boy, but Barbara and I were very open-minded about it,” says Jeff. “We both would like to have three children and think it would be fine if next we had a girl, but only time will tell. I was an only child and often found it lonely. I hope Chris won’t be.”

So far, naturally, the baby’s life consists mainly of eating, sleeping and being changed, but as soon as Jeff came home he started giving Chris his bottles

and taking care of the diaper department – to get the “feel” of having a son.



Pop admits he was scared the first time he held his son, by third time he was expert

“The first time I picked him up I had the horrible feeling that he might break, but by the third time I had a good grip and I didn’t worry any more. I understand all fathers go through that. The first time I lifted him I was also afraid he might cry because I was a stranger, after all. He didn’t. He looked puzzled for a half-moment and I thought, ‘He looks like a worrier,’ but that passed, too.

“He’s been a wonderfully healthy baby, so he hasn’t been fretful. The only time he cries is when he needs changing. I didn’t have any trouble learning how to handle a diaper. A few times when he has been a bit fussy we turned on one of his music boxes and that calmed him down.

“It’s a bit early to hazard a guess but I wouldn’t be surprised if Chris turned out to be a musician. He already responds to music,” says Jeff with a grin. “Barbara and I both play the piano; we’ve both played for Chris and he really perks up and pays attention!”

Photography is one of Jeff’s hobbies

and he's already using Chris as a model. "He was a bit startled by the first flash picture I took but he wasn't upset and didn't cry," says Pop. "I'll try to shoot pictures every month while he's very young and then catalogue them. We'll have a whole picture story on Chris." Jeff also has a tape recorder which he uses in studying roles and dialects and he plans to record Chris's early gurgling and cooing, maybe even a cry or two. Later there will be those exciting first words!



A healthy baby, young Chris looks forward to meal time. So does Jeff

The young Hunters' next project is to start looking for a house, for their apartment has been outgrown. Chris's nursery was the spare bedroom in which Jeff housed all his photographic equipment. With a house, there also will be the opportunity to have the dog Jeff wants for Chris a little later.

"I had a succession of dogs as a kid and I want Chris to have them too. One of my favorites was a dachshund named Poochie. Another was a fox terrier named Buddy that we had for twelve years. I remember my father and I were both almost literally heartbroken when Buddy

was run over by a neighbor's car a few years ago."

In Jeff's childhood his father, Henry H. McKinnies (Jeff's legal name is Henry H. McKinnies, Jr.), was out of town much of the time because of his business as a sales engineer, but Jeff recalls that when his father was home they had a great time together, playing ball or working on electric trains. When Jeff was a bit older there were fishing trips to the Wisconsin lakes and one time up to Lake of the Woods in Canada.

"I remember one time Dad and I fished for fourteen hours straight without getting a single bite, but we still had a swell time together. Those are things I want to share with Chris, too, seeing this great country of ours, fishing, swimming, playing tennis," says Jeff.

"I hope he'll be interested in sports as I always have been. I have a hunch he will because Barbara and I expect him to be a big fellow. I'm a little over 6 feet tall and Barbara is 5'7". He went from 6 to 16 pounds in his first four months, which is an indication, too. Anthropologists say that at the age of 2 children have reached a definite percentage of their height. I'll have to check that, so we'll have a better idea when Chris is 2," says Jeff, who with Barbara has been reading all the best books on child care.

Football was a big thing in Jeff's life from the age of 11 when he won a state-wide contest held by the Milwaukee Journal for passing, drop kicking, punting and place kicking in the juvenile football division. In high school he became co-captain of a championship team. When he went to Northwestern University he couldn't play college ball because of a broken arch-bone suffered in a late high school game, so he switched his interest to skiing, tennis, swimming and archery. In California he picked up skin diving and at home indulges in this rather hazardous sport at Palos Verdes; he also did a great deal at Malta while Sailor of the King was on location there.



Jeff has no trouble with the diaper department and takes full charge of his son while Mom is working in *It Came From Outer Space*



Looking way in the future for his son with the dark blue eyes and light hair, Jeff says he wants Chris to make up his own mind about his profession.

“I was interested in acting, in radio and stage work since I was a kid. I really worked to get practical experience along with educational training. After I had my A.B. degree from Northwestern I came to

UCLA to study for my master's degree in educational radio and was doing a little theater work, too, when I was given my screen test. I love acting, but I won't lead Chris into the ways of acting. If he discovers it for himself, that will be fine with me.

"I wouldn't think of selecting a college for him until he knows what he wants to study, because I'll want him to choose the one which offers the best course in whatever he wants to pursue.

"I believe the best that parents can give a child is a solid background, an unprejudiced look at things. Barbara and I hope to give Chris – and other children we hope to have – the advantages that make for sound health and good education, with understanding. We know we must make ourselves responsible for Chris's behavior. We believe in 'common sense discipline,' not uncurbed self-expression. And we know we'll share disciplinary problems so that neither of us will be the 'heavy.' But the script isn't written on that chapter yet, so we won't have to worry about it for a while," adds Jeff.

And if ever you meet Jeff, call him "Pop" Hunter. He might not bust his buttons with pride, but he'll love it!

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