

(The following is the first chapter of Jerry Epperson's account of his life with polio. His family asked him to write a memoir for them. I am pleased to print this first installment and am looking forward to future chapters. The Editor)

"Limping Through Life in Crippling Detail"

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.

Chapter 1

At age 63, having lived with polio since 1950, you would think that I would have seen all there is to see; but the surprises continue. Here's some personal history.

I grew up in Victoria, Virginia, a town of 1,500 with one stoplight about seventy miles south of Richmond. When I was two, my mother took me to a clinic at the hospital in Farmville, forty miles away, for an ear infection. Two weeks later, my parents received a letter from the clinic saying a child being treated there the same day had been diagnosed with polio and they should watch me carefully. Within a month, I was with other polio-related cases quarantined at MCV.

My mother also had a mild case of polio in her neck, but recovered fully. My left leg ended up paralyzed, my right leg has some problems in the foot and ankle, as does my left arm. My spine is anything but straight. Even so, I was blessed in so many ways compared to others.

As I grew up, I always disliked nurses, but I never knew why until I mentioned it to my mother many years later.

She explained that while at MCV, somehow I misbehaved (I was 2 or 3) and a nurse punished me by putting me in a closet. She then forgot about me. The next day, seeing my empty bed, the assumption was that I had been released. When my parents came, everyone then thought I was dead. The nurse, coming back a day later, was told I had passed away, and then she remembered me in the closet. I was found, evidently very scared, and the nurse was reprimanded.

To this day, I will reach into a closet, but I don't like going in there. And guess who married a nurse?

By the way, I learned many, many years later that they would not let my 8 year old sister go to school for months, because she had been around me.

My first leg braces were made in Roanoke and weighed a ton. Learning to walk is a chore if you cannot lift your legs. Then we started to go to Pollard's in Richmond. Getting there was a thrill. Pollard's was on Broad Street half way down the steep hill beside MCV, where Interstate 95 is today.

It was way too steep for me to walk to in braces with crutches so my parents pushed me in my wheelchair. Going up and down that hill, knowing you were only one "oops" from careening helplessly down to the railroad tracks, was not pleasant. Add some snow and it was a white knuckle, tooth gritting event.

At Pollard's we were taken care of by one of the great people in my life, Tommy Powell, who later bought Mr. Pollard's business. Thankfully, he moved it to level ground.

Herb Park was my polio doctor and I always enjoyed visiting him. When I was about five or six, he suggested I go to Warm Springs, Georgia. Every summer for the next ten years, my parents would drive me to southwestern Georgia. This was in the late 1950's and there were no interstate highways, and the motels were, for lack of a better word, rustic.

The doctors at Warm Springs would always want to make me a different style brace; then Dr. Park would send me to Tommy Powell to either replace it or change it back. Breaking in a new brace is always a painful challenge for a few weeks, so I always dreaded these disagreements among the doctors. Blisters and ripped skin heals slowly when you use the brace every day.

When I was 9 in 1957, I was sent to Warm Springs for a multiple operation to do tendon transplants and to straighten my spine. I was in a plaster cast from my arm pits to my toes for seven months, with only the area around my privates cut out. I had large metal pins through the bones just below my knees to hold my legs steady in the cast, and they stuck out on either side. Even today, I still have small dimples on either side of my calves from these pins.

Every week the cast had a wedge removed in my lower back and I was bent to stretch my spine. Soon, only my shoulders and heels touched the mattress, and eventually I could drive a Tonka metal truck under my back from side to side. Every once and a while, they would flip me over and I could rock with just my lower belly touching the bed.

Most of my memories of Warm Springs are positive. I remember it being large and spread out. The sidewalks among the various buildings had some banking in a couple of turns so the orderlies pushing us in wheelchairs or on the gurneys could speed us along. Some would get a running start and hop on the back of the gurneys and ride with us. We had movies and other entertainment, and the food was good.

My mother stayed in Warm Springs with me and worked as a nurse's aide while I was there. My father stayed home to work and take care of my sister. Not many kids had their mothers with them. On special occasions, Mom would bring me gum or Hostess "snowballs".

Dad worked on the railroad (the Virginian which became the Norfolk & Western) and my family was active in the Victoria Christian Church. Dad was a deacon and my mother was in the choir and taught Sunday school.

I had been in Warm Springs since August, and when Christmas approached, presents began to arrive. Amazingly, I received 677 presents from friends, neighbors, church members and my father's co-workers in Victoria. Remember, the town had 1,500 residents. It was overwhelming. That is the good news.

Remembering that I was 9, and Victoria was a very small town with one small department store and two small drug stores, I got many of the same items, like 40+ identical fire trucks. The net result was that the generosity of Victoria was a benefit to all 30 of my fellow patients that shared our ward at Warm Springs.

The ward had a very definite seniority system. New boys went to the beds at the back of the room, a huge ward with 15 beds on each side. Whenever someone left, everyone would move up one bed towards the double doors that opened into the hall.

Those closer to the door got bathed first, dressed first and fed first. If you had the bed closest to the front, you could reach your clothes and not have to wait for the nurses. You were in control.

By the time I had my long cast removed, I was in the best bed. That meant I could also choose first from the fleet of the old-style wooden wheelchairs. Of course, I chose the fastest one.

Recovery, finally out of the cast, was great but you had hours of therapy. The massage therapists had large washing-machine sized tubs of hot melted paraffin wax, with steam rising, and you had to slowly ease your limbs into the molten goo to loosen up your muscles for the therapy. That wax was hot.

We had to relearn how to walk with braces and crutches, often between two handrails, stumbling along. I was fortunate that my bills were covered by a polio insurance policy my Dad had bought (thank heavens). The March of Dimes or Easter Seals kids were often filmed learning to walk, usually in their underwear so you could see their braces. These films were taken back to their communities to use in help raising money for these charities at schools, PTA or church meetings. Many of the kids were mortified knowing their friends at home would see them this way.

Most of us were friends and about the same age, typically 8 to about 14. We would race our wheelchairs, have accidents, steal desserts, and get yelled at by the nurses.

Some of us were paired with a "twin", another polio patient with identical problems. This way they could try different treatments and see how we compared in our recoveries. My "twin" came from Arkansas and was told as a teenager to aggressively exercise, including lifting weights. In contrast, I was told to live normally, but not exercise just to exercise. He did not fare well, and in his forties he lost the use of both legs, and his arms were very weak. I am fat as a dirigible but 3 of my 4 limbs still work at age 63. Again, I am blessed.

One new kid who came into the ward was a loud, arrogant know-it-all, and was not liked by the rest of us. I think he was a Yankee, too. Everything of his was better, and he was smarter, according to him. My best friend in the ward and I decided he needed to be taught a lesson.

Given our ages, we were beginning to discover girls. Most of us were fans of the Mickey Mouse Club, and I had a crush on Annette Funicello (who didn't?).

At the other end of our hall was the girl's ward with 30 girls in a room just like ours. Looking out our doors, we could see the double doors of their ward maybe 120 feet away, and the only things between us were some treatment rooms and the nurses' station on the sides.

My best friend and I plotted against the new kid, and began to invite him to join us in our travels and at meals. The three of us decided we would break into the girls' ward early one morning and see our "girlfriends". None of us had actually spoken to these girls but we had seen them. Mine even looked like Annette, sort of, from a distance.

Early one morning when the nurses and orderlies were bathing and dressing us (and the girls at the other end of the hall), I got dressed and took clothes to my friend and the new kid. Once dressed, we got the fastest wheelchairs and rode into the hall.

With the new kid in the middle we raced towards the swinging doors of the girls' ward, zooming past the nurses' station, and pushing the wheelchairs as fast as our arms could.

At the last minute, I jammed my right handbrake, stopping my right wheel, and turning me sharply into a hall to the right. My best friend did the same, turning sharply to the left. The new kid, between us, crashed through the doors into the girls' ward, smashed into the head nurse, and all we heard was the girls screaming and the nurses yelling.

My best friend and I circled around the building, returned to our ward, and got back in our beds. All the nurses had rushed to the girls' ward. If I remember correctly, we were reading comic books when the nurses came to see if anyone was missing and had been involved in the mischief.

What were they talking about? We surely did not know.

We didn't see the new kid much after that, and in a few weeks I was allowed to return home.

I have two memories about going home after 9 months. First, living with the 29+ guys, I had learned some new words that I had not heard before. When I first used some of my new words in the car going home, my father hit the brakes and we slid to the shoulder of the road. He seriously discouraged me from ever using those words again.

Second, I was really upset over missing the entire third grade so one of my teachers, Mrs. Thweatt, came by my home every day for a couple of weeks and I got to go straight into fourth grade. Thank you, Mrs. Thweatt.

I have a couple of concluding points on Warm Springs:

- When my father passed away in 1986, we went through his belongings. He still had an old, lined piece of paper that had evidently been tacked to a bulletin board at the railroad yard office, asking for donations to "help Wallace's son in Warm Springs, Georgia". On the page were about 50 names I recognized from Dad's work, with donations of up to \$10, a lot of money in 1957. This is very humbling; and
- My wife and I went to a convention in Calloway Gardens in Georgia about a decade ago and decided to drive to nearby Warm Springs. It is still there as a children's hospital but it seemed small, not the huge campus I remember. To my great surprise, I suddenly felt very depressed and uncomfortable remembering the trips, the various treatments and surgeries, but also remembering all those challenged kids years ago. Compared to most, I am so very blessed. It took a while to get over that visit, by the way.

