

## Chapter 11 – “Money, Money”

(The following are the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth chapters of Jerry Epperson’s account of his life with polio. Enjoy, the Editor)

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.

I have been very blessed when financially challenged.

Sometime before I had polio in 1950, my father bought a polio insurance policy. It paid \$50,000 per person or up to \$100,000 per family. This covered all of my various treatments and surgeries until I was in my early teens. Without it, I would have been a March of Dimes or Easter Seals-dependent patient. Would that have changed my treatments or results? I will never know but I always thought it helped me.

My mother had a mild case of polio when I did, and it affected her neck muscles and one leg. She was strong enough to overcome it with few after affects.

Later in life I was similarly fortunate. As I progressed through high school, we began to discuss possible colleges. I wanted to attend UVA, but I was aware I might not get in. Honestly, I had no idea what college cost, but I knew that private schools were more expensive than state supported ones.

Dad liked William & Mary because Dr. Davis Y. Paschall, its president, was from Lunenburg County and was the high school principal when Dad was there, if I remember correctly.

I knew little about scholarships or other financial aid. Our school guidance counselor, Mrs. McLaughlin, told me I could be anything we could afford. She suggested I become a physician and encouraged me to go to UVA where I would be challenged plus it had a medical school.

My high school English teacher was Mrs. Wellons and her husband, Harry, worked for the state education department. He became the mayor of Victoria for many years as well.

When I was a junior in high school, Mr. Wellons visited with my parents. He told them the Virginia legislature had passed a bill that would allow disabled Virginians to go to state-supported colleges, tuition free with a small allowance for books and fees. There would still be expenses for room and board, but the total cost would be greatly reduced. The legislature was reacting to the polio epidemic of 1949-1953 and wanted to keep these persons off future welfare roles.

What a blessing. Now UVA, VPI and W&M were real options for me – not just wishful thinking – if I could get in.

After I got my driver's license (on the day I turned 15 in 1963), I worked for several years part-time at the Victoria police department as a dispatcher. At the time, Victoria had two policemen and one police car but my job handled a lot more. It was not physically challenging and I got to sit all the time.

There were a series of phones on the desk and I had to learn to answer each for the Kenbridge police department (7 miles away), both the Victoria and

Kenbridge volunteer fire departments/rescue squads and the Lunenburg County sheriff's department. All shared two radio frequencies that I could call out on using a large microphone on the desk. Nearby were two red buttons on the wall that sounded the emergency siren in either Kenbridge or Victoria, alerting the local volunteer firemen to race to the firehouse.

The dispatcher's desk was under the firehouse, and there was a separate office for the town policemen. There was a small lobby, although visitors were discouraged, two vending machines and a very small, dark toilet. You had to learn to use the toilet with the door open, ready to sprint about 20 feet to the phones if they rang. Fortunately, I was alone 90% of the time, if this happened.

The vending machines had either cold drinks (Nehi grape, Pepsi, Coke and Tru-Ade orange) or snacks (moon pies, peanuts and various "Nabs", i.e., peanut butter crackers). Coins were unnecessary since I had keys to both machines so I could restock them. I kept my bag lunch cold in the drink machine. I learned to enjoy one of the police favorites, a bag of salted peanuts poured into a Coke or Pepsi. It is an interesting combination.

For my eight-hour shift, which sometimes became 16 because the other elderly dispatchers could not get in, I earned \$1.10 per hour giving me about \$20 to \$30 after taxes each week. For a 15 year old, it was a lot of responsibility but, in truth, it was mostly boring. You often went 8 hours with only one or two calls.

To pass the time, we had an ancient black and white television that got two of the three available channels, or you could listen on the radio to the interchanges among the police, including neighboring Nottoway and Mecklenburg Counties. Bad weather, especially snow, kept the place hopping with auto accidents and fires.

In the mid-1960's, the Klu Klux Klan had a much advertised rally on a large field south of Victoria going toward the county courthouse. The KKK had been mostly a rumor around town with no real substance that I was aware of as a teenager. Those were the days of civil rights marches and riots elsewhere but not in Victoria.

The KKK rally was advertised as a statewide event, and for the days just before the rally, we hired a couple of extra policemen from nearby towns. Soon we had offices full of state troopers and, to my shock, the FBI set up right next to my desk. They had men in suits and in body armor. It was so cool, and I was in the middle of it.

I got calls from television networks asking where Victoria was or if there were any hotels or motels in town. There weren't. Victoria made the news, not just in Virginia but nationally, unfortunately for a bad reason. We did not have the conflict in our county like they did in Prince Edward County about forty miles away. That county closed the Farmville public schools rather than integrate, and the locals there started a whites-only private academy.

I was asked to work extra hours during this week, and to help coordinate all the phone and radio traffic. Of course, during the big KKK rally, I was in the basement of the firehouse at "communication center". We even had Army troops standing by with helicopters, and the state troopers had a direct phone line to the governor.

The "Grand Wizard" drove in from the south on the Chase City road in a pickup truck, and met up with about a dozen men, none from our town. These allowed their faces to be seen.

Another group of about forty to fifty Klan members arrived in a group of cars with their faces hidden, and in the famous dunce-cap white uniforms. After two hours of speeches and shouting, a large cross was burned, then the crowd left. Around town, we had many protesters, a march by the black churches, and more media than one could imagine. These, plus the various local, state and national law enforcement outnumbered the KKK members at least ten to one.

During all this, I do not think any of the outsiders knew I was still in high school. Seeing me limp, one of the Feds asked "how were you wounded?".

While this was the largest event in my three year career as a dispatcher, a quieter event was more memorable for a teenage boy.

We got a radio call one evening that a citizen had reported a car full of naked girls was seen in Crewe. The Crewe police had not seen the car but it was reported to be headed toward Victoria. The Crewe officers were in pursuit but

called to alert us. Soon, the radio was alive with calls coming in from the police in Kenbridge and Chase City offering to help in the chase.

Fifteen minutes later, I got a radio call from our police that the vehicle had been caught, and was being brought to base – where I was. Normally, any arrests went directly to the jail at Lunenburg Courthouse. Our offices had no jail.

Soon, a new Ford Mustang pulled into our parking area followed by our police car. It was dark, but I could see people walking outside. The door opened and four young girls slumped in wrapped tightly in brownish-green blankets, and were directed into the office and the door was closed.

I was given the names, phone numbers and addresses of the four girls' parents and told to get them on the phone. It was after 11 p.m., and none of the parents were happy about getting a call so late. Once on the line a policeman came out and explained that the girls, all from Maryland, were doing a sorority pledge challenge to drive to a town in northern North Carolina and bring back a newspaper or some souvenir that they had been there. They had had their clothing taken, and were to drive the entire way undressed. I never could tell if they were nude, in underwear or what because of the blankets.

They had taken back roads because, at that time, Interstate 95 had several tollbooths where they knew they would be caught.

Later, I did get to take them drinks and snacks from our vending machines, but they were still in their blankets. Over the next twelve hours, four angry parents showed up and picked up their daughters. By the way, they were

not arrested or stopped for being undressed, but when stopped, they did not have their driver's licenses or any identification. Over the night, police from several neighboring towns just happened to drop by to make sure these dangerous villains had been dealt with safely.

I was always amazed at the speed and vigor of our volunteer firemen. They would drop everything to come to the firehouse and get their equipment, much of which was old but well maintained. Depending on the location of the fire, some would drive directly, while others would come to the firehouse to get the trucks. The red fire trucks were always clean and polished, but one truck was a relic of World War II. It was an old Army tanker with a diesel engine, and it was avoided as much as possible. Heavy, hard to start, hard to steer and shift, it had one other huge problem. The massive tank on the back of the truck did not have baffles, so the water could slosh and move the truck, especially on stops.

I was only in it once, and thought everyone was exaggerating but when it stopped at Victoria's only stoplight, the water sloshed in the tank and propelled the truck through the red light and a block past to the front of the Chevrolet dealer. Glad no one was coming the other way.

My years in the basement of the firehouse left me with a lot of empathy for law enforcement officers. They take so much grief, yet are so necessary.

The firemen – all voluntary – all deserve credit and praise.

Since I was precluded from being either, I think that increased my respect for them.

## **Chapter 12 – “Spirit of ‘66”**

In three ways, 1966 was one of my best. Early in the year, I applied to UVA, VPI, W & M and Duke. Why Duke? I have no idea. After applying, Duke requested additional information that I never supplied.

VPI admitted me quickly and needed a response by March first. I was getting nervous as the date approached since I had not heard from either of the other state schools. Just to be safe, I accepted at VPI and sent in the \$250 required fee. I was disappointed but at least I had gotten into a state college.

In mid-March, I was accepted by both UVA and W & M, but we had sent our money to VPI and \$250 was a lot back then. We talked about it, and my parents let me accept UVA, decline W & M, and I wrote to VPI explaining that I had changed my mind. Thankfully they returned the deposit.

I had interviewed in Charlottesville and Williamsburg, but not in Blacksburg for some reason. I could not have been happier with UVA although I had no idea what I was getting into.

Before going to UVA, there were some problems to be resolved. Because of my polio, I could not walk to my classes so I was given permission to have a car. None of the other 1,500 first year students could have a car in Albemarle County. Even with the car and a “special faculty” parking permit, finding parking



was a huge challenge every day, and once near the classroom buildings, there was still a lot of walking among the buildings.

Finding me a room without a lot of stairs was also a problem. The first year dorms did not have elevators so they used some basement rooms near the vending machines in LeFevre Hall with parking just outside, when parking was available.

I had only had tub baths because I could not stand in a shower. The only tubs UVA could find were in the nurses' dorms (women were not admitted to UVA in 1966 except in the nursing or graduate programs) or one tub in the old gymnasium. My father came up with a creative solution. He bought a metal folding chair and drilled holes in the seat. When no one else was in the showers, I would go in wearing a towel, sit in the chair and remove my brace and shoes. I would lean them nearby with my towel and turn on the shower, then wait - and wait - and wait until the cold water got warm. It was miserable. If any one else needed to shower, usually my brace and towel got wet, too. After showering, I could dry off and put the brace back on, still sitting in a wet chair in the shower. At best this was a thirty minute process.

Finally, I had to eat. My parents got me a dining pass at the school cafeteria. There was plenty of institutional quality food but when the cafeteria was open, parking was impossible, especially since it was next to the always busy Alderman Library. Once there, I was again walking carrying a tray full of food. Remember my high school tray-carrying experiences? It was a replay.

Of course, I was also happy to get out of Victoria High School. It was boring and I could not wait to get away. Most of my best friends had graduated the year before me, and I had taken all the classes available to me except home economics and shop. Just to fill hours, I took band and typing.

Typing might help me with my college projects, and the teacher understood I was not there to compete with the girls hoping to be secretaries. At 15 words per minute with 3 mistakes, I was at the bottom of my class but Mrs. Winn gave me an A so it would not impact my grade average.

I was equally bad in band. I never had a reason to learn to read music and my not very good drum skills were only adequate for bad rock and roll. The band teacher taught me to count – not read – music and gave me a snare drum. The rest of the band had done well in inter-school competitions but several times the snare drummer was singled out for his weak performance. Sorry.

The band had a number of kids that I did not know because they were not on the sports teams or in my other classes. After my lunches, I would go to Mrs. Jones' classroom. She was a good teacher and we got along well. Her daughter was friends with the lead clarinet player in the band who I noticed was very attractive. I had no idea if she was dating anyone, but one day in school my class president, Larry Roach, mentioned her as she was nearby and we agreed she was very pretty.

Several nights before my high school graduation, I called her home and her younger sister answered. I explained who I was and asked for Kathy. Her

sister asked, "You want to speak to my Kathy?" Kathy got on the phone and I was pleased she agreed to go out the night before graduation, if her parents gave their okay. Thankfully, they said yes.

The first date was uneventful, except I was surprised how comfortable I was with her. I wasn't self conscious, and we had a lot to talk about. I asked if I could see her the next night immediately after graduation, and we agreed to meet at the flagpole by the school. After graduation, I had photos, handshakes and one elderly lady who stopped to tell me I was being unfair to my parents going to UVA. Asked why, she said I could take the train to Blacksburg but not to Charlottesville. I was dumbfounded.

When I got to the flagpole, Kathy was not there. Disappointed, I went home and called her. She had waited but her parents would not leave her there alone. I went to her home and we were together again. There was a graduating class party that night, but I wanted to be with her. Again, we had a nice evening, and I felt so different with her than with any other girl. She had an innocence and none of the pretention I had sensed in other girls. She seemed to like me, too. I never thought she realized just how pretty she was. I could not wait to see her again.

The next day, three of my friends and I went to Virginia Beach for a week. My father had a friend while he was in the Army who lived in Virginia Beach on 51<sup>st</sup> Street, less than a block from the beach. When Dad got out of the Army, he received a service bonus of a few hundred dollars. On their way home from the

Pacific, his friend learned that his parents were going to lose their home because they had gotten behind in their mortgage. Dad lent his bonus to the friend to save the house, and the friend allowed us to use the nice apartment over his garage occasionally. (Sadly years later we learned Dad's friend sold the home, and never repaid the loan.)

Johnny, Chuck, Gerald and I enjoyed our time there, but I missed Kathy – much more than I would have expected. I called her, and near the day we were leaving for Victoria, I saw a large stuffed dog about three feet tall, and I spent all my vacation money on it (over \$60). Going home, it looked like a third person sitting in the back seat, and got lots of funny looks.

She was surprised by it, and we dated a few more nights before she went to a Presbyterian youth camp for a week or two. We wrote each other regularly, but she began to speak about her new friend from Japan, Kasu. It seemed she had a crush on him, and I was heartbroken.

Soon after she returned, she left for several weeks to work as a nurse's aid at the Farmville hospital. Yes, this was the same hospital where I caught polio. As often as her work there and my work at the police station would allow, I went to Farmville to see her. I had fallen for her in a big way, much to my surprise. I had never felt this way before. She liked me, but kept talking about Kasu, who had returned home.

As the summer passed, I was with her every chance I had. She would dine with us at my home, and I would eat at her home. Her family had a large

farm and raised tobacco, corn and other crops as well as livestock. They were hard workers, and all the children had jobs on the farm. Her father worked on the railroad, too, with my father.

I had been very excited about going to Charlottesville, but now I did not want to leave her. Now I dreaded leaving, but what could I do?

## **Chapter 13 – “First Year Man”**

Of 1,500 entering UVA in the late summer of 1966, no one was more clueless than I was. Sadly, I had no idea what I did not know.

I didn't read all the materials that had been sent, figuring everyone would be new and similarly lost. Mom and Dad drove with me to Charlottesville, and stayed in a motel. I thought I was excited until I got there. Suddenly, I was scared and very afraid of being alone, but the biggest challenge was being away from Kathy. I actually cried, and Dad thought I was homesick but really I just missed Kathy.

I bought a lot of new clothes because at UVA you wore a coat and tie to class. Dad had bought me a 1958 white Thunderbird – the first year of the 4-seat 'birds for \$600. Mr. McLaughlin who owned the local Pontiac dealership, had fixed the car up for his son, Scott, to take to college. Scott had gotten speeding tickets and his father took the car away and sold it to Dad. I felt bad for Scott, but it was a great sporty car for college. It was like new, fast, and

could pass anything but a gas station. Dad gave me his Esso credit card and we calculated it was averaging less than 10 miles per gallon of high test.

I couldn't tell my parents the real drawback to the car. It had sporty bucket seats with a large console in between. This ran almost to the backseat, which had a large upholstered center hump that created two bucket-like seats in the back. It was not good for dating – I'll leave it at that.

My roommate, Dexter, was a rock. He was stable, predictable and studious. I had never had to study, other than just reading, so I had never practiced for tests or even worried with the practice questions. Dexter was devoted to his girlfriend, Susan, and hoped going to UVA would impress her and bring them closer.

Dexter had a complex family history. His father, an officer in the Army, had married a lovely Italian countess at the end of World War II. She did not enjoy being a military wife in the U.S. so they divorced soon after Dexter was born in 1948. Since a baby Dexter had dual citizenship and because the divorce was done in the U.S., his father retained custody. As a now-single Army officer, Mr. Oliver asked his sister, Virginia Carlson and her husband, Johnny to raise Dexter in Crewe about 16 miles from Victoria. Later, the Carlson's had a daughter, who was like a sister to Dexter. Thus the lady he called his mother was his aunt and his sister was his cousin. He was probably his own grandfather, too.

Dexter and I did not know each other in high school, but our fathers decided we should room together in Charlottesville. They were concerned we might be assigned to room with a minority or worse yet, a Yankee.

Dexter and I met at a couple of UVA-related events (scholarship interviews, etc.) in 1966, but were really strangers moving into our small room in the basement of LeFevre Hall. Dexter was good for me. He was clean, unbelievably organized, quiet, deeply in love, and, to be blunt, more mature than I was. He was also thrifty to an extreme.

I brought a total lack of what to expect and a car. Having a car when no other first year student could have one, made me artificially popular to lots of guys who suddenly had no way to get to movies, dances, games or any event. Of greater importance, UVA was not coed, and would not go coed until after we graduated. The closest girls' colleges were at least fifty miles away and included Madison, Mary Washington, Longwood, Hollins, Randolph-Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, Sweetbriar and a few others. First year men learned to either find upperclassmen to befriend, learn to hitchhike, or get to know me. I will never be as popular as I was my first year at UVA.

My only interest in a dating sense was to go to Victoria to see Kathy, now a senior in high school. What I was really looking forward to were the "BIG" weekends at UVA with the dances, fraternity parties, and big-name bands like the Beach Boys. The concern here was if Kathy's parents would let their daughter go away for the weekend.

I did not see her father often because he worked on the railroad like my father, plus he worked his large farm. Her mother did not like me. Several times in our dating, Kathy had argued against family trips or vacations because they would keep us apart.

My first weeks at UVA were a disaster. First, we had to go to the old gym and stand in long lines to register for different classes. I was in the College of Arts and Sciences and required to take many courses including a science and foreign language. My high school science classes were sadly lacking. My chemistry teacher had been the home economics teacher, and was clueless in chemistry. Biology was worse, taught by one of the coaches. Physics was slightly better, taught by one of the visiting Muslims.

Mrs. McLaughlin, my high school guidance counselor, said I could be a physician so when asked, I told the advisors at UVA I was pre-med. Indeed, I was pre-med for at least a week once classes started.

I figured I would get chemistry out of the way so I then faced two lines, one for "college chem.", the other for "univ. chem.". I did not know the difference, but the line for "univ. chem." was a lot shorter and I was getting tired of standing. At the front, I asked the difference and was told that "univ. chem." was for engineers, pre-med and chemistry majors. Great! I was pre-med.

Next, I needed a foreign language. I had taken Latin in high school from perhaps the single weakest teacher I ever had. She was a nervous middle-aged old maid, easily flustered, and her classes were a joke. In the two years, we got



through one declension and two conjugations, or about ten percent of the textbook.

There were many language choices but I chose French. First, I thought it would be easy and second, Dexter was pretty good at French and might help me.

I know I took other classes my first year, but they were so overshadowed by chemistry and French that I have almost forgotten them.

The chemistry classroom was massive and there were well more than 100 students when Dr. Rousseau walked in and signed his name on the blackboard. At least 20% of the class left then.

Later, talking to Dexter, I learned his chemistry teacher had the nickname "Santa Clause" because of his easy grades. He had heard Rousseau was the toughest chemistry teacher so I tried to get out of the class, but I was too late. So many had transferred out of class that my only choice was to take a different science. I stayed in the class; after all, how hard could it be?

From the first class, I had no idea what he was saying, and the massive textbook may have well been written in Klingon. UVA had assumed its students had at least a basic chemistry background. Wrong. The only chemistry experiment we did in high school with the home economics teacher involved baking powder.

We were required to attend a chemistry lab one afternoon each week. Everyone had to have a partner and I did not know anyone. I was assigned to a

guy who went to a prep school up north somewhere. First, we had to make some of our own tools by bending glass and fitting tubes. He was making some progress but I wasn't. He was very arrogant and clearly did not want to work with me, and the feeling was mutual.

I have two clear memories of my lab classes. First, we had to do a delicate experiment that required a very precise amount of a chemical. Everyone had to share one atomic scale, so the line was very long to get just the right quantity. He was back in a couple of minutes. I asked how he got to the front of the line and he hadn't. He saw how much someone had on their plate who had measured it, and he put about that much on ours. Our experiment did not work – at all.

Second, as we lost patience with each other, he got bossy. Picking up the Bunsen burner for an experiment he gave me the hose and said "plug it in, --- hole". There were about five nozzles with levers attached so I put it on the closest one. He reached over, flipped on the lever and it wasn't gas – it was water. A fast, thin stream of water shot out of our Bunsen burner, hitting the ceiling and spraying the class. The force of the water caused the device to fall over spraying nearby workstations and breaking glass. He was trying to find the right lever to close as I picked up the burner and pointed the water stream out a nearby open window.

We were told to leave the lab.

I kept going to class in some hope that I would get some credit for attendance, but I was truly out of my league.

Dr. Rousseau was famous for his tests. If you answered a question correctly, you got +1 but if you guessed and got it incorrect, you got a -2. Leaving it blank got a 0. On a curve in grading, sometimes a 25 was an "A".

I showed up for my final exam knowing I had an "F", my first. Oddly enough, I was not at the bottom of my class thanks to his grading system.

He proceeded to call out our names and give us individualized final exams. Dr. Rousseau explained that if someone had proven their knowledge, they got a short exam, but if he needed us to prove our knowledge, our exam would be larger. Supposedly, this gave everyone a chance to pass. My personalized exam was an inch thick.

I signed the pledge on the front saying I had not cheated, and followed Dr. Rousseau back to his desk, laying the exam there. I received modest applause as I left.

Dr. Rousseau was a tall, graying gentleman with comically thick glasses. In class, he was made fun of a lot from some who assumed he could not see them. I never did. His class taught me that UVA was going to be a lot larger challenge than I was expecting, and that I was clearly not as smart as I thought I was.

My other disaster was an entirely different problem, and polio was a contributor.

How hard could French be? I showed up to my first French class only to find a sign that the class had been moved to another building. I was running late trying to find parking and then the correct classroom. Seeing the sign, I walked as fast as I could – not very fast especially with lots of stairs – to the other classroom. I did not bring a map with me so I had no clue where the other class building was. Neither did several others I asked. I then found the French Department offices, and they showed me where the class had been moved. When I got there, the class had finished. No one was there. Nuts. On top of missing my class, I did not know what books to purchase.

At the time of my second French class, I was early to where they had moved the class, and waited while no one else showed up. At the class time, I decided to go where the class was to have been and, when I got there, I was in time to watch the class leave.

I had now missed two classes and still did not have my books.

I was there for the third class and heard the teacher say that everyone had to answer in French, and everyone else did. After class, I explained my plight to a lovely 30-ish instructor who understood how I could have missed my first two classes. She gave me my book list, and I never caught up. Never.

With some hard work, I got a “D” in French, but the worst was yet to come. You were expected to take French 101-102 your first year, unless you had high school French, then you could take 103-104.

I learned later that most that had high school French still took 101-102, assuring themselves a good grade. If you received a "C" or better in 101-102, you went to 105-106. My "D" meant I had to take 102-103-104-105 and 106 to complete my level 106 language requirement. Six semesters of French. Sacre bleu!

I was not just clueless relative to my classes. When fraternity rush began, I was somewhat indifferent. I knew they were expensive but had better food and rooms than the dorms – plus they were where the fun was in college. There were two problems. One, I did not drink – a rarity for UVA and two, I did not know anyone at any of the fraternities. No one. I never pledged – or was invited to. In contrast, Dexter kept trying year after year.

One of the things you were taught early was to do something other than your classes. One afternoon, I went to the basketball offices and volunteered to be a manager. I was told I was welcome to be manager #11 on a ten manager team. The nice lady said that 75% of the managers drop out so I had a good chance of making a team. My ace was having a car. I attended most of the practices and ended up working with the first-year (JV) team, but occasionally with the varsity.

Yes, I was a gopher with one of the weakest teams in the ACC, but I got to travel some, and could read or study at most of the practices. It was the ACC, after all, the best conference in the country for basketball.

My only memorable event as a first year manager happened at VPI. I rode with the first year team to Blacksburg, and sat with one other manager behind the bench. I kept stats for the coach. It was a close game and had lots of fouls. We were ahead and the Tech fans were very upset. A technical was called on a Tech player and we called a time out.

I was standing beside the crouched players, listening to the coach, when the lights went out. I awoke lying on the court. Some idiot had thrown a full can of cola and it hit me above my right ear. My head hurt and I was dizzy but I got to my seat.

Other than my bad grades and getting knocked out at VPI, I had a great first year!