

(The following is the second 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 next installment and am looking forward to future chapters. The Editor)

## "Limping Through Life in Crippling Detail"

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.

### Chapter 2

Thoughts about Warm Springs continue to come up. Of course, the town became famous when President Franklin Roosevelt visited to use the heated pools that gave the town its name. His Georgia home, The Little White House, can still be visited.

Roosevelt developed polio as an adult which had to be a much worse challenge than I faced. I never remember walking without crutches, or braces, or having to use a wheelchair, so I don't miss normal physical activities like running or climbing. To lose those capabilities must have been devastating.

I doubt this is true with other disabled individuals, but I never had the urge to do athletic activities, largely because I thought I would look foolish or be pitied.

In my forties or fifties, this came up in a couple of ways. First, after the Atlanta Olympics, a well meaning friend offered me tickets to see the Special Olympics. He thought I would enjoy seeing other disabled individuals overcoming their physical challenges. He was surprised I had no interest and, as I explained, being there would probably make me uncomfortable. I cannot fully explain why.

Second, after giving a speech at a large convention, I was followed on the program by a recent author who wrote about his courageous climb up Mt. Everest, the first by a blind person. I left, having no interest in hearing him.

Later at a meal, someone brought the author to meet me explaining to him that I was a polio survivor. This thin muscular man then asked me if I had done anything to "distinguish" my life. I am seldom rude, but I came close this time. I told him that I had degrees from excellent schools, had a wonderful family with two outstanding children, and had been successful in business. More importantly, I had not gotten such an ego that I would risk others' lives just to be able to prove I was "normal" and to write an "inspirational" book to make money.

He and I do not exchange Christmas cards.

There are photographs of Roosevelt in the pools at Warm Springs, but I never remember going to any natural pools in my visits.

I have many memories of learning to walk after my surgery. Every day I had my legs stretched to keep them limber and straight, which was the purpose of the tendon transplants. Many older polio victims walked bent over because of these tendons tightening with age. I remember them well.

Many other patients had a very tough, painful operation called a spinal fusion to lock the spine as straight as they could make it. As an alternative, they stretched my curved spine using the full body cast, as described earlier.

Years later, the use of spinal fusions was greatly reduced because of severe complications that developed as the patients got older. I was lucky to escape that surgery.

Once you could walk in a straight line on a level floor without the handrails, you had to learn to walk uphill or down, first with crutches for balance, then a cane. Some never got past using those assistive devices.

For me, the biggest challenge was walking on a slant. Since my long leg fixed-knee brace was on my left leg, it was no problem if the high side was to my right – I could bend my right knee and walk level. If the high side was to my left, however, I was pitched to my right and balance was impossible. You learned to walk sideways if this could not be avoided, but it was still uncomfortable.

Going up and down stairs was a huge challenge – and it was as long as I could walk. As odd as it sounds, going up was easier than down stairs. You could use your hand on a rail to pull yourself up, but going down put all the work on one knee to let you down slowly, without falling.

I have fallen thousands of times. Some were due to losing my balance or when my brace broke, but most were from slick floors. Another challenge was uneven ground or on a surface like bricks. You quickly learn to ask for help, always difficult for a male.

By the way, whoever designs airport, restaurant and office restrooms and puts the towels on the opposite wall from the sinks are idiots. Dripping soapy water makes for a very slippery surface, and those floors are very hard.

At Warm Springs, we also were taught how to swim, but I never learned for some reason. It was mandatory, however, that we learn what to do if we fell into water. We were taught to hold our breath, remove our trousers, unstrap the heavy brace (otherwise known as an anchor) and float to the surface. Sounds easy, but it was impossible. Even sitting on a bench, dropping trousers and unbuckling six leather straps took a couple of minutes.

I remember vividly going to a class and being taken to the concrete swimming pool by two of the male teachers. They told me they wanted to give me confidence around water, so they took my crutches and tossed me into the pool. I sank to the bottom and could see them looking down into the water. I struggled to get out of my trousers without success. I don't remember being as much scared as angry at these people who asked the impossible. After what seemed like a long time I was pulled out of the pool – a very unhappy, angry, wet child. And the leather on my brace was wet and would take forever to dry.

Speaking of water, I have a policy about boats. If I can stand in one place and see both the bow and stern, the boat is too small for me. My balance and pitching decks might lead to a fat, bald man overboard.

My last memory of Warm Springs is difficult to describe. Everyone who came to my ward was scared, friendless, homesick, and anxious about their upcoming surgery. Remember we were all 8 to 14. You could hear them crying at night, and see them looking lost in the day. Some had family but most just had occasional visitors. I don't

remember any of us trying to comfort them because they were soon in surgery, then in bed for weeks.

The nurses and orderlies were all kind and helpful, as I remember. My friends and I observed that each of us had one nurse or orderly that seemed to treat us especially nice. I suspect this was on purpose.

By the time the new kids had recovered enough to get around, most were welcomed into our group. In some strange way, they had earned the right to be one of us. In my ward of thirty boys, a couple left and another couple came in every week. We all had lots of stories about our home towns and our friends back home. Some were from other countries, too. We knew this was temporary and we would be going home someday. Of course, some of us never got to go home – but just a few in my time there.

Looking back, I think my experience at Warm Springs taught me to have a protective shell around myself, not to get close to many others, and to recognize how many things are not in our control.

It also gave me exposure to many people unlike those in my small home town. The different accents, customs and attitudes were an education by itself. This has been helpful in my life.

By the way, I was never around the polio victims that had to be in iron lungs. They were in a different part of the hospital. That had to be tough.