

## Catching all the Breaks.....Chapter 3

*(The following is the third chapter of Jerry Epperson's account of his life with polio. Enjoy, The Editor)*

*By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.  
Chapter 3*

One of my earliest memories is being next door playing with Anne and Eddie DuPriest. Anne was my age, Eddie was a year younger. My parents, my sister and I lived in a small house, best remembered for a tall metal windmill in the backyard.

I was sitting on a log in their yard, about six years of age, when I tried to stand. The knee lock on my metal long-leg brace did not catch and as I stood, the brace bent, throwing me forward. As luck would have it, a rock hit the bone between the two metal sides of my brace, and broke my paralyzed leg just above the knee.

Polio attacks the spine and destroys the nerves that communicate with muscles. My left leg still has muscles and one can quiver in my inner thigh if I really concentrate. The rest cannot move at all, but trust me when I say the nerves remain that feel pain.

In 1954, I had my first broken bone, with many more to come. Between my broken bones and my various surgeries, if I had kept the casts, I could use them to add a room onto my home.

Since the broken leg was paralyzed, when our physician came over he had to stabilize the leg with a board, and I still remember Dr. LaPrade riding in the back seat of someone's car, holding my leg all the way to a Richmond hospital.

By the way, a miracle occurred when I was in Warm Springs. Our home was clearly too small for the four of us and with me in a wheelchair, there were accessibility problems to the bath and elsewhere.

The Lucy family across the street had a large two-story brick home on two large lots. Mr. Lucy had been the mayor of Victoria at one time.

While my mother and I were in Georgia for nine months, Mr. Lucy approached my father and somehow they swapped the Lucy's large home for our small one. Mr. Lucy and his wife retired to Florida, and his sister-in-law who lived with them got our small house. Miss Betsey, as she was known, had never married and quickly became the "neighborhood watch" for 13<sup>th</sup> Street. She never missed a thing. Trust me on that.

The new home had three bedrooms and a bath upstairs and two bedrooms, a den, dining room, living room, kitchen, pantry and bath down. They even left us most of the furniture which my mother loved.

About this same time, my grandfather passed away, and my grandmother, Julia Kelley, moved in with us. She was an R.N., too.

I have no idea how we would have gotten along without the help of the Lucy's.

The next broken bone needs an explanation. My father was tall, thin and athletic. He was a hard working railroad man, a conductor on freight trains for most of his career. Except for his Army service in the Pacific late in World War II, he worked on the railroad from high school to retirement. Dad could not consider going to college because he had to work to help support his parents. I think he could have been a great attorney.

Dad had loved sports in high school, and played football well, or so I heard. I always knew that when I had polio, he missed his chance to enjoy sports through me. Many of my friends were sons of my father's friends. Like their fathers, they played the usual sports.

In my heart, I knew I was a disappointment in this regard. He never said it but I knew.

When I was ten, my father wanted to teach me how to hit a baseball. Even if I couldn't run the bases, maybe I could hit and be on a team. The kids had a couple of fields where baseball was played, in addition to the school.

At this point, I need to digress. When I had polio at age two, between the initial quarantine and some related early surgeries, the crossed eyes that I had were not treated. At first, the doctors put an eye patch (actually a pair of glasses with black tape over one eye) on my strong eye to make my "lazy" eye stronger. Lots of my early photos show me wearing this patch, not exactly a main stream look, me hearties. Arg! Soon after my broken leg healed, I was taken to Charlottesville and Dr. Burton operated on my eyes to correct this condition. Finally, at age seven, my eyes looked normal, but that was not the case.

Because of the length of time spent with crossed eyes and the type of treatment I received with the eye patch, I have never been able to see through both eyes at one time. Further, one eye was farsighted and the other nearsighted so I read with the right eye and view distances with my left.

Most people would have no reason to think of this, but not being able to use both eyes at once means I could not triangulate distances, which also affected my already weak balance, especially on stairs.

The other factor was the ability to see something thrown at me. I would follow it with my left eye until it got about an arm's length away, and then my right eye would take over. By then, whatever had been thrown would have hit me, like a baseball.

Now, I'll go back to Dad and me in our backyard, with his tossing me a baseball to hit. All I could do was swing about where I thought the ball could be because I could not see it when it got close.

As you might guess, I did not hit much, and that got me very frustrated. After what seemed like forever without any success, I threw down the bat, and turned to walk away. Dad reached out to talk, grabbed my left arm and "snap", it broke several inches above the elbow.

What happened next confused me for years. Mom and Dad quickly explained that no one could know he broke my arm. I knew it was an innocent event with no malice, but I was told to tell everyone that I fell, which was accurate. I did fall after my arm broke. The good news was I got a great arm cast with a neat sling. I am right-handed so it didn't disrupt school, writing or eating, and if I remember correctly, I got a lot of new baseball cards, the joy of the time. I think I milked this for lots of candy, too.

The bad news is Dad seldom played with me again, probably never, thinking I was so fragile.

Looking back as an adult, I certainly understand why it would look horrible if anyone thought my father hurt his poor crippled son.

Another incident about this same time has made me feel guilty for years. After one of my regular doctors' or brace repair visits in Richmond, we stopped at Toy City at the shopping center at McGuire Circle (back when it was a circle). I had my allowance money and bought something, while my mother did some toy shopping for Christmas presents. I found this plastic model that I really wanted. Having already spent my money, I asked her to buy it, and she said no. I threw a fit, yelling and crying, and after a minute, the clerk said I could have it, and to consider it an early Christmas present. My mother brusquely said "we don't take charity" and she paid for it. She was as mad as I have ever seen her and she stayed that way for a while.

I didn't understand then, but I do now. Money was tight and I was a spoiled brat. Since I did not play sports or ride a bicycle, I had to entertain myself and that often involved television. My place at home was lying in front of our small black and white television so I could change the channels for Mom and Dad and keep them from having to get up. Dad was in his recliner, Mom in her rocker and I was on a homemade quilt on the floor in front of the television every night Dad was in town. Dad liked westerns and "HeeHaw", by the way, in addition to baseball and football.

The quilt, made by my grandmother Julia, also served another important purpose. I could fold it into different configurations to race my Matchbox cars, or I could ball it up and make a mountain to play with my plastic army men.

The television was important, as I found when I did not use my "Winky Dinks" clear plastic sheet on the television screen. It allowed kids to draw things on it like bridges or horses to save Winky Dink from trouble. I couldn't find it, and knowing Winky Dink needed my help, I drew directly on the television screen. Those marks never fully came off.

Dad came home from work one day and announced he had won a raffle for a new television at the railroad yard office. We were so excited. It turned out that one of his friends on the railroad had fixed an older television and raffled it off to get some cash. Still, it was better than our television so we used it. Nuts. I wanted a new television. Dad's Aunt Pearl (my underwear for every Christmas aunt) and her husband, Uncle Marvin (Douglas) didn't have a television so every Saturday night they visited. That was fine, but Uncle Marvin loved to watch the Gillette sponsored "Saturday night fights". He would sit directly in front of the small screen, swinging his arms and fists to help the fighters. Way too often, Uncle Marvin would hit the television cabinet and even the screen, scaring me that our dear television would be broken. It never broke, thank heavens.

Not wanting to sound like a total perv, but one benefit of being the official "remote control" for our television was getting to stay there when my sister Nancy had her friends over. Nancy was six years older and a cheerleader. More importantly, her girlfriends were gorgeous, and they hung out at our house a lot. One blonde, Hannah Rae, even looked like Marilyn Monroe. Nancy had a large upstairs bedroom so they had sleepovers, and often joined me in the den to watch television.

Listening to them talk (ignoring me on the floor) was an education all by itself (I should have written a book then).

Nancy was Homecoming Queen in 1959, and hosted lots of parties at our house. The best were the two prom intermission parties she hosted. All her friends were dressed in fancy formals. Wow. I remember going with Mom and Nancy to Richmond to shop for her prom dress and a "Mouton", which I think was some sort of fake fur. We either ate at Hot Shoppes across from Thalhimers or The Clover Room on West Broad Street, both worth the trip.

Through it all, I was lying on the floor, trying to avoid getting stepped on while they mingled and danced. I was hanging out with high school kids!

Wanting me to get out more, my mother would sometimes make Nancy take me with her on dates. That would result in a massive argument which I never understood.

With Nancy in the middle and her date driving, why did they mind me sitting beside them at the drive-in? I even paid for my ticket and food. They could still see the movie, and I did not see any problem going straight home after the movie because I could not stay out late. Wonder why she objected? And her dates didn't like it either.

By the way, I had friends that came to visit me just to see my pretty sister. That was fine with me.