

## “Tossing a Good Salisbury Steak” ..... Chapter 4

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

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.

Growing up, I remember going places with my family, but the travels were disrupted by my older sister, Nancy, who was afraid of bridges. She seemed okay with cement bridges but wooden or steel-framed bridges made Nancy have my father stop the car so she could get out. I can remember Dad doing a slow-burn as we would drive across the offending bridge then stop and wait for Nancy to walk across and join us. To me, the thought of walking across the bridge was much more frightening, especially if it was over water. Of course, my balance and propensity to fall probably explains it.

Whether it was my being thrown in the pool experience at Warm Springs or my mother’s fear of water, I have had a fear of falling in the water for as long as I can remember.

The town of Victoria had a reservoir that had been built for the railroad, and it had a picnic area and a small sand beach. The parking area was littered with rocks, not pebbles or gravel, but three to five inch pointed rocks which made walking nearly impossible for me.

One summer my family went to the town reservoir for a picnic when I was four or five. Everyone was swimming, it seemed, so Dad took me to the car, changed me into a swimsuit and removed my braces. He then walked me over to the beach and sat me in the water up to my chest. Sitting there, watching others wade and swim, I could move my arms but nothing else. I don’t remember being scared but I do remember being bored. I also remember my mother not being happy with Dad for putting me in the water. I never went back in the water there.

Tommy Wright was one of my father’s best friends and his son, Thomas and I were the same age and friends going to school and church together. Mr. Wright and Thomas would go fishing, and sometimes be kind and take me along. Most often, we went to the “Old Booth Place”, as Mr. Wright called it which happened to be owned by my future in-laws.

Because of my braces, I had to fish off the road or the small beach, using a cane pole and a worm. Thomas could go into the overgrown areas around the pond, and always caught more fish – holding them up for us to see.

One day, fishing off the road, I caught a small five-inch fish (actually 4 inch but all fishermen exaggerate) and held it up for Thomas to see. As I was getting ready to take it off the hook and back in the pond, Mr. Wright suggested I just slip him in the water still hooked. I let the fish run out a ways, then pulled him back in, and held him up for Thomas to see at the other end of the pond.

Over the next half hour, I held up that poor tired little fish about five or six times. On the way home, I was so pleased that Thomas thought I had finally caught more than he did. I don’t think he ever figured it out.

My last water-related memory growing up was when I was eleven or twelve and was baptized.

Over the years, the braces that I wore went from being heavy steel to being lighter aluminum alloys, thank heavens.

My friends and I took the pre-baptismal classes, and on the important day I wore old clothes. After the regular sermon the doors behind the altar were opened. There was the small pool about five foot by eight foot and maybe four feet deep.

One at a time each of us walked out, stepped down into the pool, joining the minister. He then said a few words, put a handkerchief over your mouth and nose, and lowered you backward into the water. After a moment he helped you rise, back to a standing position.

I was nervous, but never anticipated what would happen. As I descended into the pool, my left leg began to float. As odd as it sounds, I still remember standing knee deep in the water on the steps, and seeing my left leg floating in front of me. It would not stay down so I could not take another step forward or backward. After a moment, the minister stepped forward, and I put my hand on his shoulder. Somehow he held me so I could be baptized but, not used to having my head under water, I choked a bit and coughed a lot. I was embarrassed, but it was over.

Something similar happened about the same time. My Aunt Pearl called just as one of the occasional hurricanes was beginning to blow. She asked my father to come get her and my Uncle Marvin so they could stay with us during the storm. I walked out to go with Dad, and as I got to the front porch, the wind blew my left leg backwards, and I could not set it down. Standing on my right leg, I yelled for Dad, and he helped me indoors. It felt so strange not to have gravity help me walk.

Another challenge in life was tall sets of stairs. My kindergarten class met in the basement of a neighbor's home, accessed through a steep set of stairs from her backyard. The teacher told me to go slowly up and down using both hands on the rails.

One day, one of the girls brought in a pale blue robin's egg to show around. Somehow I ended up with it when we had to come in from the backyard. Holding it in my left hand, I started down the tall stairs, only to fall and roll all the way down. I still remember opening my hand to find a gooey mess, and the girl crying that I had broken her egg. My glasses were broken but fortunately nothing else.

Falling is a bit of an art. Preferably, you should try to fall back and land on your bottom, then slide down the remainder of the stairs. The worst is to fall forward, head first, trying to catch yourself with your arms, then bumping down on your nose. Since my left leg cannot be controlled, sometimes the left leg goes one way and the right goes another, doing a very painful split.

The worst stairs for me were in my church from the sanctuary down to the Sunday school area. After several tumbles, I was instructed to always walk around the church outdoors.

Another couple of challenging stairs were at school. In elementary school, the powers that be were kind enough to keep both my first and second grade classrooms on the first floor to avoid me going up the stairs. Carrying this a step farther, I was told to use the teachers' lounge and restroom, also on the first floor, rather than go to

the basement level for the regular toilets. This made me feel special and strange at the same time. Sharing a toilet with lady teachers? Not fun. Another modification was that whenever we had a fire drill, the principal, Mr. Blanton, would run in, pick me up and carry me out. Again, I was different from the other kids – and being carried made me feel like a baby.

Rainy days were a challenge, but ice and snow were impossible, especially without crutches. Using crutches helped a little, but, rubber crutch tips on wet surfaces are an invitation to an accident. Also, with your arms locked into the crutches, you have no way to catch yourself.

When I started going to our school cafeteria, I unfortunately created my own food fights. Sometimes, the glossy slick floors were enough. If they had recently been cleaned with soapy water, falling was inevitable. Spilled food in the line or around the tables, unseen because I was carrying a tray full of food, allowed more creative falls. My food trays were always full.

Falling forward usually just got my clothes messy and was embarrassing. The most entertaining was a fall backward, with my legs shooting forward. That backward fall made me toss the tray of food into the air. A really good tumble could get the food and drinks to go twenty to thirty feet, raining on whoever was in its path. Salisbury steak in gravy flew really well, while hot dogs did almost no damage, except for the mustard.

In my youngest days, I would carry a sandwich and go straight to a table or sometimes just stay in the classroom like I did most recesses. There wasn't much I could do on the playground. Besides, at my pace, by the time I got out there, it was time to return.

As I got older, I wanted to eat with friends so I ventured into the cafeteria, often walking in baby steps because of the danger of slipping.

In perhaps the eighth grade, I had several Olympic-quality tray tosses, one hitting several teachers. Soon, when I was carrying a tray of food, people would watch me, carefully, ready to run if I fell. One friend suggested that I do the falls deliberately to hit certain unfriendly targets, usually upper classmen or teachers.

Of course I was teased and when I fell, the shouts of "incoming" would be heard. I laughed it off but it added to my self-consciousness.

After a number of falls, the usual solution each year was for me to catch one of the cafeteria ladies' eyes, and they would bring a tray out to me. About one in three meals would never get to me as they got busy or forgot. Maybe that is why I am fat today, subconsciously afraid of not getting a meal.

The slick floors were an equal opportunity hazard, and I was not the only one falling. I just fell more than others. By the way, the falls occurred whether I was carrying a tray or not, but the falls with a tray were more exciting. Later in life, I learned to fall and throw books, papers, soft drinks, briefcases and other colorful and potentially dangerous missiles.

