

A Freedom Driver.....Chapter 7

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

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.
Chapter 7

I have never considered myself a studmiffin, as hard as that is to believe.

Like many, I have had problems with self-esteem. Because of my limp, scars and weight, on a scale of 1 to 10 (like Bo Derek when she was a "10"), my body image is a 1.0 or lower.

I am no high intellect either, but when I apply myself, I think my intelligence would qualify for a 7.0 to 7.5. This is offset, however, by sub-average common sense. I am too willing to accept what I am told is the truth and I am gullible in believing others' sob stories. I would put my common sense at a 4.0.

Growing up, I always had a girlfriend. Unfortunately, they never knew they were my girlfriends.

My first crush was on Nancy Rist, a tall lovely girl in my class. In the second grade, I found a plastic ring in a box of Cracker Jacks with a red cut "stone". It looked good to a seven year old. It took all my gumption to give the ring to her. It was a big deal in my mind. I have no idea if she kept it or threw it away.

If you cannot be outstanding in sports, a policeman, fireman or some other brave person, you have to have other hero fantasies. I remember

imagining saving Nancy Rist from her house on fire, because my braced leg would help me walk through fire to save her.

Of course, all the boys liked Nancy and I realized we were never going to be a couple. Besides, I knew that I would end up marrying Anne, the girl that I grew up with next door, then across the street after we moved.

In grade school, I was told I was off-key in a class song, so I never sang again. For more obvious reasons, I never danced, knowing I would look pathetic. This added to my feeling like less than a great catch for the local girls.

Before I got my driver's license, my older sister would allow me to occasionally take a "date" with her to the movies, usually Elvis flicks like Blue Hawaii or G.I. Blues. I took Nancy Rist a couple of times, although I don't know how I got the nerve to ask her. I think I held her hand.

In grade school, we had dances, but my role was playing records. I had a decent record collection and enjoyed being there. Truthfully, I still have a decent record collection (but no one plays records any more).

When in high school, my friends and I would go to dances in South Hill, Blackstone and at the Old Mill in Farmville. Away from Victoria, I occasionally told the girls my bad leg was a Vietnam War wound. I could pull it off if they were not very bright, partly because I always looked older. When I was thirteen, I was already shaving and some friends would have me go into stores in Crewe and Blackstone to buy beer. I did not drink, but I almost always bought the

beer. One told me it was because I looked 18 or 21, but another told me the store clerk would never think a crippled kid would lie about his age.

Getting my driver's license at 15 was a true rite of passage, allowing me freedom. In the first week, I was in an accident. I was turning left and a school teacher, Mrs. Hart, was pulling out of a gas station diagonally across the street. She was looking back down the lane she was pulling into, and I was looking up the street where I was going. We hit head-on at low speed. Mrs. Hart hit her head on the rear view mirror and was bleeding. I was fine but shocked. It had happened so quickly.

My father and the town police arrived. The policeman said that neither of us broke the law and both had used turn signals. He called it "equal fault" with no tickets necessary.

I was upset, and just wanted to go home. Dad made me drive, and even made me drive the next night to a dance in South Hill. It was my first time to drive others anywhere, and can still remember how the right headlights were pointing up because of the accident. It was strange.

Dad told me that he had been taught if you were thrown off a horse, you had to get right back on, or you would be scared to ride. That's why he made me drive. Thank heavens he did.

Unfortunately, when I was added to my family's auto insurance I was arbitrarily put on the extremely expensive "assigned risk" coverage, perhaps four times the cost of regular insurance, which was already high for a teenage male.

We learned this was because I had a "restricted" license requiring me to drive only vehicles with an automatic transmission for obvious reasons.

Dad spoke to our local agent, and he rode with us to Richmond to see if they would allow me regular insurance. The agent in Richmond saw my grades, had me walk, discuss my disability, and drive a short way. I was very nervous but, thankfully, he agreed and I was given regular insurance. We probably could not afford the assigned risk rate, so my freedom was at risk.

I still remember the trip more for an accident we saw first hand. Going north on Route 360 just before the Appomattox River bridge (where Amelia and Chesterfield Counties meet), we were behind a station wagon when a fast moving truck passed on the left.

The station wagon drifted towards the left lane and the truck blasted his horn. The driver over-reacted and the wagon swerved right, then left, and then drove off the right shoulder just before the bridge. The drop was probably twenty feet, with mud and water at the bottom. The station wagon ended on its right side well off the road.

Dad pulled over and he and the local agent, Mr. Gallion, ran down to help. Others stopped as well and soon the state troopers and ambulances were all around us. I felt helpless because there was no way I could climb down the steep hill to the wreck.

The wagon had six elderly nuns going to Richmond, and they were all hurt to some degree. All were brought up on stretchers but were alive.

To me, the suddenness of the accident was a real lesson, and it made me a better driver. That, plus not drinking and driving my parents very slow four-door Chevy kept me from racing like some others my age.

My first dates driving were double dates, often with Eddie DuPriest from across the street who was a year younger. I cannot explain why, but my earliest dates were girls one or two years older than me. Somehow I was more comfortable with them.

Later, I dated an assortment of girls from my school but I never felt any romantic attraction. Some were very attractive and even cheerleaders or majorettes, but not special to me. Most of these were one or two years younger.

I met a girl from Kenbridge who played basketball, and we dated once. It was a disaster. We had absolutely nothing in common, had a bad dinner at a restaurant in Blackstone, and I was stopped by a town policeman for going 45 in a 35 mph zone. I didn't get a ticket but I was mortified. Even the movie was so bad we left early. That date set a standard (for her and me) that no future date could ever fail to exceed.

At a dance in Blackstone, I met an attractive, talkative girl and dated her several times, including taking her to my prom. Although very pretty, I sensed she did not date often and she appreciated my attention. We became good friends but nothing romantic. Of course, being a guy, I had to tell my friends what a great date she was. We did kiss but there was no spark.

To be as honest as possible, I was scared of all of these girls, afraid I would embarrass myself, and confident that they could not have any interest in a crippled kid.

All of this re-enforced my belief that I had to get away from Victoria to create a new identity with more confidence. It wasn't Victoria's fault, I just wanted a new universe to explore. Plus, Victoria had few employment opportunities. Actually, no employment opportunities for me.

The few kids from Victoria to go to college usually went to VPI. Ever since going to Charlottesville for eye surgery, I wanted to go to UVA. Few had gone there from Victoria, and even fewer had graduated. Monty Ingram, who was a year ahead of me at Victoria High School also planned to go to UVA so we started wearing ties to class, just like the UVA students did. Trust me, no one else wore ties in our high school in 1964-1966.

Even as a junior in high school, I felt plans to go to UVA made me different and gave me a bit more confidence. It also gave me yet another incentive to get better grades.

Dad had told me often that I could not work on the railroad, or in tobacco, or in the factories like others. I had to have a good education. Thank heavens he drilled that into me.