

Chapter 8 – “Not a Jock”

(The following are the eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters of Jerry Epperson’s account of his life with polio. Enjoy, the Editor)

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.

Sports were clearly not in my future but my father loved to play golf or watch it on television. Of course, those were the days when Arnold Palmer was the king, and everyone’s favorite.

My father told me there used to be a “Putt-Putt” like miniature golf course somewhere in Victoria but it closed years ago. Somehow he was able to get four or five of the very old wood-shafted clubs - all putters – and brought them home.

The home we moved into in the late 1950’s was on two large lots, both of which sloped down gradually from 13th Street to the alley. The Lucy’s, its former owners, had grown large 8-foot privacy hedges in the yard behind the house that also divided the lot next door in half side-to-side. In the front of the side yard was a massive hemlock tree, taller than the house, and a shorter, broad hemlock, about 10 feet high and thirty feet wide. Someone had cut out a cave-like area inside this lower hemlock.

In the side yard was a long clothes line with metal poles, and in the yard behind the house was a rock-lined cement gold fish pond about twelve feet by five feet, with several wooden boxes in the pond that grew lily pads and flowers. It was quite lovely. To the west side of it was my mother’s flower garden with roses and a seemingly endless supply of Japanese beetles.

When my father got the old golf clubs, several of us built a backyard golf course using clay flowerpots for the holes. Looking back, it was quite creative, using the hedges as both a boundary and also a vertical hazard requiring you to hit over them. The fishpond was also a great natural hazard as were the hemlocks. We had par 3, 4 and 5 holes.

Most of the time, we used plastic golf balls that would not go very far plus they would not break windows. On occasion, we would get a real golf ball or two that usually ended up getting hit into the neighbor’s yards. We never heard glass break, fortunately.

The golf course became popular with friends visiting regularly. Over time, we got some additional old clubs including a 9-iron to help get over the hedges, and more plastic golf balls because we were always losing them in the hedges or in others’ yards.

Playing backyard golf was probably the closest thing to exercise that I ever got as a pre-teen.

In the ninth grade, I began to manage the various high school sports teams, eventually including the football, basketball and track teams. The only

other sport was baseball in a small school like ours. Once I got my driver's license I could drive players to the games (when we didn't use a school bus) and some of the players home after school.

It was fun most of the time, but early in one basketball season, I followed a new coach to Bluestone High School in neighboring Mecklenburg County. There were three carloads of players and soon we were lost. Our short caravan pulled into a full parking lot next to a new school and its gymnasium. We were nearly late for the 8 p.m. game, so we rushed out of our cars, got the two large trunks that had our uniforms and supplies, and we ran into the front doors of the school gym.

The shouting and noise inside suddenly went silent, as we saw we had showed up at a black high school. Players on the court, cheerleaders and fans all stared at us and we stared back. The new coach ordered us back to our cars.

This was 1963 or 1964 before our schools integrated, and soon we were in our cars. A crowd had followed us outside and was laughing at us. We sat and waited for our coach who was getting instructions to Bluestone. I don't remember being scared, but we were very uncomfortable.

We got to our game on time but we were the source of jokes for quite a while.

I vaguely remember going to the local black school once for some sort of football practice. The Victoria High School football field was adequate with some red clay bald spots, but the black high school's field had large rocks in the field that you could trip over, or fall on and get hurt. Several black players watched us, and explained the rocks were a "home team advantage" because their players knew where the rocks were.

Managing the various teams allowed me to earn an athletic letter and join the "Monogram Club". I got a letter jacket in the school colors, maroon and gray, similar to the VPI colors. In fact, our cheerleaders used several of the VPI cheers, too, for some reason.

There was a required initiation to get into the Monogram Club that involved mud and verbal humiliation but some authority figure decided that I could not do the initiation. Why? I have no idea.

I also never took physical education. I understood why I could not run or do the exercises, but I did not take the classes, either. Why? Who knows? I always assumed it was the polio, for some reason.

Each of these made me feel both different and excluded, although I know it was well intended.

One last thought about my exposure to the black community. I had almost no exposure to any other ethnicities in Victoria. Our high school Spanish teacher was a lady a local farmer had met and married when overseas in World War II. I didn't take Spanish, but I guess she was our only "Hispanic".

On our four-block Main Street business district, one storefront had a "five and dime" store run by a Jewish man and his mother. I never went there and I never met them, but I remembered friends that went there for the penny candy.

In high school, we had two Muslim teachers (math and physics) who were teaching in our rural school while working on degrees at Arkansas State, I think. The men were cousins, and were married. Both were good teachers and had great senses of humor. To raise money one weekend, the two had a car wash. They washed Mom's car and offered to wax it, too. When I returned they had waxed it – including the windows – not knowing better. The windshield never was completely clear after that, as Dad noticed repeatedly. I wish I could remember where they were from.

As far back as I can remember, a wonderful black lady, Jeannette, was helping me with exercises, stretching and other polio-related things. She didn't live with us, but would be at my home many days helping me, Mom or babysitting me when Mom had to go somewhere. I remember seeing her downtown one-day, meeting her children and being surprised. Somehow I thought we were her family. As I got older, we saw her less often, and by the time I was in college, I saw her rarely. Whenever I saw her, even as an adult, we would hug and catch up. She was closer to me than most of my relatives.

Another memory growing up was "Uncle Charlie", an older black man that would always come to our back door. I never understood why. Even when you encouraged him to come into the den door like everyone did, he said "no sir". I wondered why he said "sir" to me, too.

No one came in through our front door, ever, which led into our seldom-used living room. It was the only door we ever locked for some reason.

Uncle Charlie would help Dad around the house with various work, although sometimes he just needed some cash and Dad always helped him, if he could. He was a warm, friendly man who showed me how to paint, drive a nail and use a drill. He must not have done a good job because I am horrible doing those things today.

Every summer, Dad and Uncle Charlie would repair and paint an old wooden bench in our backyard. Eventually it got so rickety that no one could sit on it. When Dad finally got rid of it was one of the rare times I saw him cry. Mom told me that Dad and his father (who died the year I was born) built that bench together and it was very special to him.

I remember going to see Uncle Charlie when he was sick, taking him food, and driving him to his doctor a couple of times. Dad and Uncle Charlie could talk for hours and were friends. I am pretty sure Uncle Charlie knew Dad's father, too.

In the mid-1960's in the middle of our schools being integrated, there were some protest marches at our county courthouse. In a photo in our local weekly newspaper, Uncle Charlie was on the front row of the protesters. Dad was upset, and surprised because he always treated Uncle Charlie like family.

I don't think I ever saw Uncle Charlie again. Until I saw that photo, I never knew Uncle Charlie's last name. It was Hatcher.

I miss Jeannette and Uncle Charlie. I'd love to see them again.

By the way, I only knew of one Catholic family in Victoria, the

O'Brien's. They had to drive to either Blackstone or Richmond to go to church, I remember. The O'Brien family was very well liked, and the son, Michael, was a year younger than me. I only have one memory of Mr. O'Brien. A carload of my guy friends and I somehow got to the county fair in Chase City, about 20 miles away. The Jaycees or some other men's club sponsored it, and it had lots of rides and games to win prizes. It also had a girly "Hoochie Koochie" show with the girls dancing outside in harem outfits between shows. The four or five of us watched from a distance and eventually got enough combined nerve to buy tickets to go in. We were all under age, but we thought it was worth it.

As the girls finished their brief dance to loud music on the stage, we got in line with many other men to pay our dollar to get in. We were about three or four back from the front of the line when the man selling tickets stood up, and Mr. O'Brien took his place. Oh no! What if he wouldn't let us in or, worse, told our parents?

The line kept moving and soon each of us sheepishly handed our dollar to Mr. O'Brien and went in the tent. We got to see women the age of our mothers and teachers undress. Yes, we enjoyed it and were the envy of our friends back in school. Mr. O'Brien never ratted us out, thank heavens.

Growing up in this small town, with minimal exposure to other ethnicities has been very useful to me, I think. I never experienced the negative influences that exist too often in larger communities. It has certainly helped as I have gotten to know so many others world wide in my work.

Chapter 9 – "The Power of Negative Thinking"

I have never been inclined to smoke or drink. My father did both.

Dad was a great guy, no doubt, for as long as I can remember he was elected to be the union representative handling all the local railroad men's union work. He spent hours pecking away on his old manual typewriter or on the phone arguing for other men's rights and claims. These were complex issues, complicated by the 1959 merger when the family-run Virginian Railway was acquired by the Norfolk & Western. The union agreements that resulted from the merger were unusual, since the same union represented both railroads and favored the surviving N & W to the detriment of the Virginian railroad men.

Dad smoked regularly, but dropped cigarettes for a pipe late in life.

Many of the railroad men drank regularly. Dad was also a veteran and active in the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), which also had a lot of drinkers. Simply, put my father could not hold his liquor. Not even just a little.

My mother was vigorously against his drinking and her compromise was to let Dad keep a bottle in the pantry off our kitchen. In the evenings, Dad would go into the pantry and stand and drink and he sometimes ended up drunk during the meal. Really drunk. Face in the dinner plate drunk.

I grew up with my sister, mother and I scared that we could not get Dad awake when the railroad gave him a "call", the one-hour notice to show up at the yard office. Missing a call could get you fired.

About every six or eight weeks, we would get a phone call and have to get Dad at the VFW Hall or elsewhere, because he was too drunk to drive home. We would have to get a neighbor to go get him because Dad had usually taken our car.

His drinking resulted in arguments with Mom getting upset and Dad saying he was not good enough for her. Sadly, I blamed Dad's drinking on my being such a disappointment to him. Today, I know that was not true, but to a child, it was very real.

Seeing him like this taught me not to drink. Not drinking in high school was unusual for a guy. At UVA it made you a very small minority.

I always told others that I didn't drink because of my balance, and that would have been a good reason. It just wasn't true.

I was always afraid that if I started drinking, I would not stop, and would be the same unpleasant drunk my father became. I didn't hate Dad for drinking; I just didn't want to be like him.

By the way, when Dad retired, he stopped drinking. Go figure.

Another negative influence that helped me was my high school principal, Mr. Thweatt. We never got along for some reason, even though his son was in my class and we got along fine.

Mr. Thweatt was a VPI grad and before becoming principal, he taught "shop", a course I did not take.

Every high school senior had a closed-door visit with Mr. Thweatt in the weeks before graduation. Mine did not go well. In blunt terms, he told me despite good grades and good SAT scores (the best in my small class of 51 students), I was foolish for going to UVA and I would end up embarrassing myself and flunking out. He told me there was no way I would graduate from UVA so I should change schools. He implied that my family background with no one going to college would show in my results.

I don't remember exactly how I responded but I was not very respectful, and I think I called him a glorified shop teacher.

Needless to say, he did not come to my graduation in Charlottesville four years later, although I should have thanked him for making me so angry that I did not want him to be proven correct. Was that his idea in saying what he did? No. I think he was just a jerk.

I saw him decades later at a restaurant. I spoke to his wonderful wife but was terse to him. He was not happy to see me, either.

Chapter 10 – "Trusting Parents"

My mother was the great stay-at-home Mom, so typical from the 1950's sit-coms on television. A former Miss Crewe (Virginia), her life was devoted to Dad, Nancy and me, and when my grandmother (Mom's mother) came to live with us, it seemed like Mom had trouble letting my grandmother do any chores

around the house. She did let her wash the dishes.

My grandmother, Julia Kelley, was an orphan. She and her brother, my uncle Harold Flanagan, were raised in an orphanage in South Carolina, just south of Gastonia, North Carolina.

She had a sister, Mabel, who was very strong willed and lived in Charlotte, North Carolina. Visits from Aunt Mabel were always traumatic – everyone was scared of her, and she was very critical of most things. Visits to Charlotte were always dreaded as well because Aunt Mabel would always show off the church she was active in and her perfect house. In college, for some reason Grandma, my girlfriend, Kathy, and I had a meal at Aunt Mabel's. She had fixed her specialty, squash casserole. I hate squash.

Aunt Mabel served each of our plates, giving generous helpings. The other food looked good. I decided to force down the squash so I could relax and enjoy the other dishes. Just as I finished the last bit of the horrible gruel, Aunt Mabel's face lit up and she said "I am so glad you love my special dish!" and she scooped an even larger serving onto my plate. I didn't dare look at Kathy – we would both crack up.

In Gastonia, Grandma had two elderly, "old maid" relatives that lived together. Both were delightful.

My grandmother was an RN and would be called on by family often to go for weeks at a time to take care of whoever needed care. I felt others took advantage of her because I never heard her decline anyone who called. Of course, her life was dedicated to others, and that also included me and I had my various polio-related surgeries – and other ailments from broken limbs to having my tonsils and appendix removed.

She was a tiny, soft -spoken lady who never learned how to drive or write a check. My grandfather, "Pop", always took care of her. Like my father, he was a railroad man who lived in Crewe, about 16 miles from Victoria, until he was transferred to Suffolk.

Pop always made a big fuss over me. I remember when a new town reservoir was being dug off the road to Burkeville. Pop drove my father and me out to the reservoir, still under construction, and he drove down onto the bottom. I thought it was so great to ride around what would be deep underwater in only hours.

For some reason, flashlights fascinated me as a child. Dad got upset with me more than once for borrowing his railroad lantern to play with. He had to have it with him at work, and hated to have to search for it. Seeing this once, on his next visit Pop brought me seven different flashlights, all different sizes and colors. I loved them.

Pop passed away when I was eight. To this day, I still feel like I am more like Pop than any other relative.

Many years after Pop died, my grandmother got an unexpected letter. It explained that because the taxes had not been paid on a building lot in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, it had been sold at auction, the taxes paid, and the

remainder was included in a modest check. Grandma never knew Pop had bought the property, probably to retire there.

Since she did not drive, when I got my license, I drove Grandma to visit relatives like Pop's sister-in-law, Olive, in Crewe or other relatives in Rice, Lynchburg, and North Carolina. I remember driving her somewhere in the rain, hitting the brakes too hard, skidding and sliding, ending up turned around facing the wrong way. Another passenger would have been scared but Grandma just said "Wheee! That was fun!".

Grandma spent her time in her room upstairs watching television – she liked some soap operas and "Guy Lombardo" music – or at the end of the kitchen table sipping coffee, or in our seldom used living room in her rocker looking out the picture window. Sometimes, she made quilts, often as gifts. She passed away in 1982, and is still missed.

Dad's work on the railroad required him to overnight in Norfolk or Roanoke, so when he got home, he wanted my mother's home cooking. Her barbeque chicken, pot roast, fried chicken, and other dishes were excellent, often served with a pear salad, homemade rolls, and desserts like a lop-sided chocolate cake, chocolate or coconut pie or my favorite, brown sugar chess. We also had home-churned ice cream in the summer. Mom's bread was even better when our neighbor, June Hazlewood, would give us some of her country butter that she made a couple times a year.

I never thought of us as rich or poor. Dad had a good job and seemed to do well. The only time I remember money worries were when either the railroad men or the coal miners went on strike. Both would close down the railroad, sometimes for weeks at a time. We were fortunate, because Dad had a dear friend, Billy Millican, who owned a regional refrigerated trucking line. Billy would always let Dad drive a truck if the railroad wasn't running.

When Dad was home, we could not have sandwiches, Italian food or anything canned or frozen like the often-advertised "TV dinners". Those were served when Dad was out and I still like Chef Boy-ar-Dee. Meals were always served in the kitchen unless we had "company", then we would use the dining room.

The dining room had an old chandelier that was at best dim in a dark room. It was one of several quirks about our old brick house. The tin roof always leaked, the furnace – once coal fired then converted to oil – always needed repair, and the front porch floor planks warped frequently. The plumbing made loud noises but as I heard frequently, "if you fix one thing, everything else breaks".

Until I was a teenager, I stayed downstairs in a small bedroom, behind my parent's bedroom. Going upstairs or into the basement was a challenge for me.

Most importantly, our home had lots of room, and all I needed was the first floor. We were blessed to have it.

When at home, Dad was a deacon in our church, loved to play golf at a 9-hole course that about 20 of the railroad men constructed themselves on a farm

just outside of town, or go hunting. My golf was horrible because of my balance, and Dad only took me hunting once in the woods off the Burkeville road. It was memorable because we ran into Roy Clark of "Hee Haw" fame on television, who grew up in nearby Meherrin. We sat, ate Vienna sausages from a can and crackers, and talked. We never fired a shot.

Dad loved country music – including "Hee Haw", the Grand Ole Opry, and occasionally we would travel to "Maggie Valley" in the mountains of North Carolina to listen to the music.

As a typical kid, I loved rock and roll, learning it from listening to my sister and her friends, and watching American Bandstand. I had a drum set, and while not very good, I did play briefly with a small band in Fredericksburg at a college hangout. At least I could sit while playing.

Unlike most of my friends whose parents were strict with their driving, I cannot remember my parents refusing me use of the family car. It was probably because of my polio, because they saw the car as giving me freedom.

Because of this and my not drinking, it seemed like I was always driving groups to events and dances. Carloads of us would go to carnivals and fairs, dances at South Hill, Farmville or Blackstone, or several times to see James Brown and his Fabulous Flames at the Richmond Mosque. What a great show.

There were the usual teenage adventures. One night at a dance in South Hill, one of my friends got drunk and passed out. Driving home, other friends stuck his head out the rear window trying to wake him, and somehow he slipped and nearly fell out the window at 50 mph. They desperately held on to his legs until I could stop the car. We went to the town reservoir, threw him in the water and he eventually woke up enough to go home.

Another July 4th, we had a dance at the Community Center in Victoria. One of my friends had a visiting cousin from New Jersey who had some "cherry bomb" firecrackers. Driving around he would light one, throw it out and watch the reaction of the car behind us when it exploded. Being nighttime, you could see the bright light as they exploded under the following car. It was a hoot until he was having trouble lighting one of the firecrackers and rolled up the window. He lit it, and forgetting the window was up, bounced it off the glass onto the floor of the back seat. I slammed on the brakes, slid to a stop and we all fell out of the car doors as the bomb exploded. Smoke and little pieces of black paper filled the car, as the car behind us drove by laughing.

The cousin continued to throw cherry bombs. Going up Main Street approaching the town's only stoplight, he tossed a cherry bomb under a parked car. Unfortunately, this idiot did not see it was a police car with Trooper Mac Edmundson in it.

We were stopped immediately and got a very strong lecture. I drove the New Jersey cousin home and never saw him again.

I was embarrassed one Sunday morning by a large red mark on my cheek that was difficult to explain. I dated a tall, nice girl a couple of times. Driving home one night from another date, I saw this girl walking beside the "gravel

piles" just outside of town. I stopped and she got in, crying and upset. She had been on a date with a friend of mine who had tried inappropriate things so she climbed out of the car and was walking home. Listening to her talk, I turned to say something and she slapped me harder I have ever been hit. She yelled, "How could you let me go out with him? I thought we were friends!" I was dumbfounded, and explained that I never dated him so I didn't know.

I loved to drive. I still do. In Victoria we had to go twenty to forty miles just to see a movie. I knew every car type, and made many plastic car models. When the new cars were introduced each fall, it was a huge deal and everyone went to see the new models. As small as Victoria was, it had Chevrolet, Ford, Pontiac and Plymouth dealerships.

One week before the new cars were in the dealer showrooms, Dad took me to Mr. Smithson's farm and hidden in his barn were four of the new 1957 Chevrolets. I got to see them before everyone else. The auto industry lost a lot when new car excitement disappeared.

In my opinion, being able to drive is a great equalizer to the disabled. We can at least drive anywhere we want even if we cannot walk there. Conversely, losing the ability to drive is a huge problem. My vehicle is so important to my sense of freedom that even when I traveled for work, I always rented a car. I needed access to that vehicle everywhere I went.