

The Silent Helpers

Remember several months ago when I mentioned my PT? Well, one day he was asking me about my polio during my late teens. I told him a group of doctors literally kept me walking and enabled me to go to college. Later in the day, I began to think of all the people, silent people, who helped me and my family to weather the storm that polio brought to our lives. So, in this article, I will share the story of some of my S.H. in the hope that it will remind you of the people who made your journey easier.

Many of my Silent Helpers made my first Polio Christmas special. I have vivid memories of that holiday so this seems appropriate for this issue of the newsletter.

First, we have to examine what it was like in September 1941. Medical personnel had been called into service in anticipation of the upcoming war. Metal was scarce. People's fear of "foreigners" was rampant. So, when I was stricken with polio, my older brother was off getting his wings in the Army Air Corps. The doctor, who came here from Canada to avoid the draft, sent me home to die. We were quarantined. However, my father was considered "essential personnel" and he did not return to the quarantined house. Can you imagine the burden on my mother as the only adult in a household with illness and small children? She had to deal with an ill 4 and a half-year-old, a 2-year-old little girl and a 6 year old 1st grader. There was no television to occupy the children. I could not speak, swallow, or move. How could my mother survive?

The first morning after the quarantine sign went up, my mother heard noise in the kitchen. She went in and there was our maid. My mother told her the house was quarantined and her response was that the sign was on the front door and she had to come in the back door. She said she was there for the duration.

When my mother had to take care of the other children, she would put the telephone to my ear and my aunt or grandmother would talk to me to distract me. The neighbors would leave cooked food on the porch. They would ring the doorbell and then run off the porch. When the quarantine was lifted, my older cousin visited and painted my toe and finger nails a bright red so that there would be some color to offset the stark white of the full-body cast. I loved that.

When I was better my parents had to find a way for me to have some kind of therapy. There were no PTs left as they had signed up for service. However, there was a wonderful German woman who massaged me. Those massages were wonderful. Alas, because she was German and had a short-wave radio going at all times, my mother was very suspicious of her. Although my mother never talked about it, I sensed her uneasiness. I was too young to understand,

but it seems a shame that something that felt so good had a suspicious air around it.

As Christmas approached, I wanted to be able to go downtown to see Santa and the windows. My mother and my aunt knew that it would not be wise to try and take me to see Santa. (The parents waiting with their children to see Santa would have been terrified that I was "catching".) I could not walk far so a wagon with the wooden sides was borrowed. I was taken to see the store windows after dinner when there would be few people present. I can still remember being in the wagon with lots of pillows and blankets and being pulled along Broad St. and Grace St. to see the wonders behind the glass. Christmas day I found a velocipede from Santa. My left leg could not reach the pedals and my Father built the left pedal up with big blocks and then tied my foot to the pedal. My right leg would push the right pedal down and I would wait for the pedal to come back up for another push. It was not easy but it was a fun way to have "homemade PT". Neighbors brought me presents. Even though I was young, it bothered me that I was receiving gifts when my brother and sister were not receiving them. (Was this the beginning of my "survivor guilt"?) I remember a wind-up Merry-Go-Round that would revolve. The horses were made of carved soaps. That started a life-long love for miniature Merry-Go-Rounds.

By late spring, I was able to play outside but I did fall frequently. One day I fell backwards and cut my head on the blades of a lawnmower. A few days later I tripped going into the house. I cut my forehead on the door. Both of these events required stitches. The doctor said to keep me in bed until both the back and front of my head were healed. I was devastated. It was like I was being punished. Then a neighbor came to visit me and brought me a scrapbook full of greeting cards collected over the years. I spent hours looking at the cards. (Don't forget there was no television or bedside radio.)

As I gained strength, I was encouraged to roller skate. Again, the right leg did all the work but sailing along certainly beat walking! Remember, when I described 1941, I said there was a shortage of metal. We are now well into 1942 and have been at war some months. Because my feet were misshapen and my toes turned up, I would cause the skates to bend and eventually brake. I needed a lot of roller skates but that was easier said than done. There were none available in the stores. Metal was used for war, not for play. Someone wrote an article about me for the local paper and I was sent old skates from garages, back porches, and basements. Those skates helped to keep me going.

Throughout the years, there were many helpers. However, I was older and could say thanks. Other than my family, I have no idea who these people were who brought "front porch food", helped my Mother care for us, gave me

Christmas gifts, scrapbook, skates, wagon, massages and encouragement. I may not remember who they were but I have never forgotten their kindness to me and I am grateful that they passed through my life.

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