

## Personal Memories of Polio

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In the midst of the 1945 polio epidemic in Rockford, Illinois my mother wrote this in my baby book under illnesses. *Polio (abortive type) Aug. 14, 1945 was in bed for 1 week. Was pretty weak when she got up on her feet.*

Abortive Type meant that the central nervous system was not involved. Since I wasn't quite three I don't remember any of this. I was told that I wasn't tested but we were quarantined with a sign on our door. My dad could go to work so I guess it meant that no one could be near me.

Fast forward to September of 1953. We took a weekend trip to Springfield with my grandmother. After a day of sightseeing and visiting relatives, I began to feel sick. After a morning of playing with second cousins we started home. My memories of that trip was lying in the back seat with my head on my grandmother's lap and when I took a drink the water came out my nose. The next morning my mother took me to the ear, nose and throat doctor. (Probably because he had just operated on my eyes a few months earlier.) He swabbed my throat and said that it was just a very sore throat and to come back in three days if it wasn't better. On Tuesday night my mother met with some friends and was telling them my symptoms and how sick I was. One who was a nurse and had worked at the County Hospital during a polio epidemic said "I don't want to scare you but that sounds like polio." My mother didn't sleep that night and called the doctor first thing in the morning. He said that he didn't think that was true but she then called the family doctor. After a visit to his office I was sent to St. Anthony's hospital for a spinal tap and by that afternoon I was in the County Hospital.

The diagnosis was balbar type polio. My grandmother always insisted on calling it poliomyelitis because that was the proper name of the disease. This type invades and destroys nerves within the balbar region of the brain stem. It can cause difficulty in breathing, swallowing and tongue movement. My baby book states *Joanne was taken sick Sept. 27, 1953 in Springfield. Diagnose as Polio Sept 30, 1953. In the County Hospital from Sept 30<sup>th</sup> to Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>. In bed at home until Oct. 23<sup>d</sup>. Returned to school on Oct 26<sup>th</sup>.*

I have many memories from this time. The relatives in Springfield were notified and all my second cousins were advised to get gamma globulin to prevent them from getting sick with polio. I wonder why my classmates at school and neighbor children who I was with that

Friday weren't advised to do this also. I was on complete bed rest and my diet consisted mainly of jello. It was a long time before I ate jello again. I probably had soup also. There was a choke machine in the room but it was never used. There was also an iron lung nearby. I believe there were three other patients but I never saw them and I never left my room. Some of my relatives came to see me but they had to stand on a platform outside and talk through the window. There was no radio and very few people had a TV, before two stations went on the air in the spring of 1954, so there was very little entertainment. I do remember coloring and maybe doing some reading. I did have time to plan and came up with a great question for the doctor when he visited on October 2nd. This was my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday and since they weren't doing anything for me there why shouldn't I go home? He disagreed. I was crushed. However, my parents were allowed to put on gowns and come in the room that day. A priest from St. Peters also was allowed to come in that day. That was how I celebrated my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday. I don't think there was cake.

My memory of my time at home was lying in my parent's bedroom and my aunt coming to stay with me during the day because my mother had just started working at a nearby drug store. We did listen to the radio some and I especially remember Ma Perkins, a 15 minute soap opera at noon that my aunt liked. I know I did some school work but I also remember what I didn't do. The class was studying Greek and Roman history that month and had already taken a test on it before I returned. I never read the chapters. I did have it in high school and college but I still don't know much about that time in history, especially Greek history. I know I was able to get out of bed very little during that time and I do know that the sheets had to be changed when the doctor made a house call. At the time they thought I might need speech therapy but I guess everyone began to understand me without the lessons. I just found a paper that stated there were residual paresis of the right soft palate and a right face muscle. Both were minimal. You might notice that one side of my mouth doesn't go as high as the other when I smile. I was very lucky.

That spring I was asked to give blood for the processing of gamma globulin. They paid me and I used it to have a picture taken for my mother for Mother's Day. That was the only time I was asked to donate blood because in April of 1955 Jonas Salk announced that he had discovered a vaccine for polio. Researching gamma globulin I was surprised to find that it had only been discovered in 1950 by William Hammon. He found that components of blood plasma of polio survivors contain antibodies to the poliovirus. It was 80% effective in preventing the disease and reducing the severity of the disease. However, due to limited supply of the blood plasma it was deemed impractical for widespread use. I found these facts very interesting because as I am writing this in 2020 we are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Scientists are checking to see if the blood plasma from survivors of coronavirus aids in reducing the severity of the disease and they are working to develop a vaccine.

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