

Iowans Remember the Polio Scare

"In 1926 when I was not yet a year old, my father contracted a paralysis, a mystery at first to the hometown physician in Tripoli, Iowa. . . . The [polio] ran its natural course and pain was relieved by massage. The outcome was a slow recovery in which my father's left arm and especially his thumb and forefinger no longer were very usable. He was unable to drive a team of horses, so necessary to farm operation in 1927-28. A man was hired to help but profits were not enough to keep him on past six months. A farm auction was scheduled and my parents and I moved to a bungalow in Tripoli. . . . Two years [later] I also contracted infantile paralysis. . . . In the 1930s University Hospitals had a statewide outreach program called State Services for Crippled Children in which physicians, nurses and therapists came to small rural hospitals. . . . In Oelwein I was seen by Dr. Steindler, the famous orthopedic physician who long operated out of Children's Hospital in Iowa City. He did recommend a surgery in which a triangular piece of instep bone would be removed to make my feet look better and to make shoe fitting easier. Unfortunately, the procedure would cost \$350 for each foot, money my parents just did not have. So the surgery was not done." —*Irma P. Johnson*

"The fear [of polio] was so intense, dogs were killed, they sprayed for mosquitoes, play grounds and swimming pools were empty. Some thought spiders from bananas, or the fuzz from peaches caused polio. Any large group gatherings were almost unheard of." —*Virginia Mickey*

"There were 32 cases of polio in my home town. I think I was the 27th to come down with it. In the fall of 1948. . . as we warmed up for the start of our 4th [high school football] game I experienced severe pain throughout my body. One of my teammates noticed I was having a problem and asked if he should tell the coach. I said no, I wanted to play in the game. . . . I had a fever for 7 days and was only in the hospital for a total of 10 days. . . . Our ward was in the basement with windows about the top three feet on one side of the room. That was our only contact with my parents, friends, and coaches. . . . My parents had the Ben Franklin store in Hawarden and since no one knew in what way polio was contagious or infectious they could spend their time

in Sioux City at the hospital because they certainly weren't needed at the store. There were no customers. I remember them saying that someone could shoot a cannon down the main street business section and not hit anything." —*Tom Tilgner*

"Late Saturday night my mother, my [14-year-old] sister Lorna, and I returned home from a trip to Colorado and Montana. It was 17 August 1940. The next night, Sunday, Lorna got sick. Thursday morning at 9:45 she died. . . . Funeral arrangements were made by telephone, as we were in quarantine. The casket was placed by the front window; my parents stood at one end of her casket, Bessie [Dvorak, our hired girl,] and I stood at the other end. We watched all the people come up on our porch and walk past the casket. They were nearly all adults; parents were too frightened to allow their children to come even that close to that horrible disease. The service was held at 2 p.m. on the front lawn." —*Charlene Nichols Hixon*

"My father contracted polio from one of his [dental] patients—one day he had a terrible headache and the next he was completely paralyzed and in a respirator. My first real memory is of my third birthday party, held in the hospital room next to the respirator. My dad had a slanted mirror over his head so he could see out into the room, and I remember the 'portholes' on the sides of the respirator, so that nurses could tend to him. . . . He was gradually weaned from the oxygen and flown back to Iowa City, where he underwent a year of physical therapy at the VA hospital. His therapist was an African American, James May, who essentially gave him his life back. Mr. May had to commute from Davenport for several years because his family could not find housing in Iowa City. . . . My father went back to graduate school and got his master's and Ph.D. in oral pathology. He dictated his thesis and dissertation into a Dictaphone. . . . There is now a scholarship in his name for dental students from Iowa. Thirty-two years after contracting polio my father succumbed to post-polio syndrome and died at the age of 62." —*Christine Tade*

"The accepted treatment to keep muscles stretched and limber was to wrap the arms

and legs with wet hot packs. . . . One day a nurse asked me if I was ready for physical therapy. . . . I was taken to a room with a huge tub of water, maybe something like a hot tub. I soaked in the water for awhile and then was taken to a bench where a therapist started exercising my limbs. . . . The hospital was so overwhelmed with polio patients that they allowed my parents to take me home. . . . We didn't have indoor plumbing or a bathtub. My parents borrowed a portable bathtub from our neighbors. It was made of canvas stretched over a frame. I think my mother spent much of each day heating water on the cook stove, putting me to soak in the tub, and then working with me on my exercises. . . . Mom was unrelenting; no amount of whining on my part got me out of doing my exercises. Sometimes we were both crying during our sessions but we kept going." —*Marilyn Bode*

"My second grade classmates and I were surprised to see that our new teacher wore heavy metal braces on her withered legs and used metal crutches to drag herself from place to place. It turned out that she had signed a contract before she got polio, and fulfilled it after her partial recovery with our class. . . . Our classroom was on the second floor, and there was, of course, no handicapped access. I remember the other teachers being irritated because she didn't have to [go] outside to do recess duty. Someone installed metal plumbing pipe bars on both walls of the last girls' bathroom stall so she could get up without help. Those bars stayed there for years after she left. She only taught for one year. I think it was just too hard." —*Katherine Howsare*

"My memory of the day [my aunt] went to the hospital was of men in white coats coming through the front door and asking her to allow them to assist her to the ambulance . . . but she refused and said she would walk out on her own. She lived less than 24 hours. . . . About six years later, I remember my mother standing in the doorway of our house and yelling out, 'They've found it! They have a vaccine for polio!' She was not a woman given to such outbursts and shortly after that, she took me, my sisters and brother to a doctor [and] we were given our first dose." —*Ann Fisher*

These vivid accounts are excerpted from longer personal stories now being collected as part of All Iowa Reads for 2007. For the complete stories, or to add your own, visit www.iowapoliostories.org. Join the rest of Iowa in discussing Splendid Solution: Jonas Salk and the Conquest of Polio. Find out how at www.iowacenterforthebook.org.