

# The Iron Lung as History

## *a curator's thoughts*

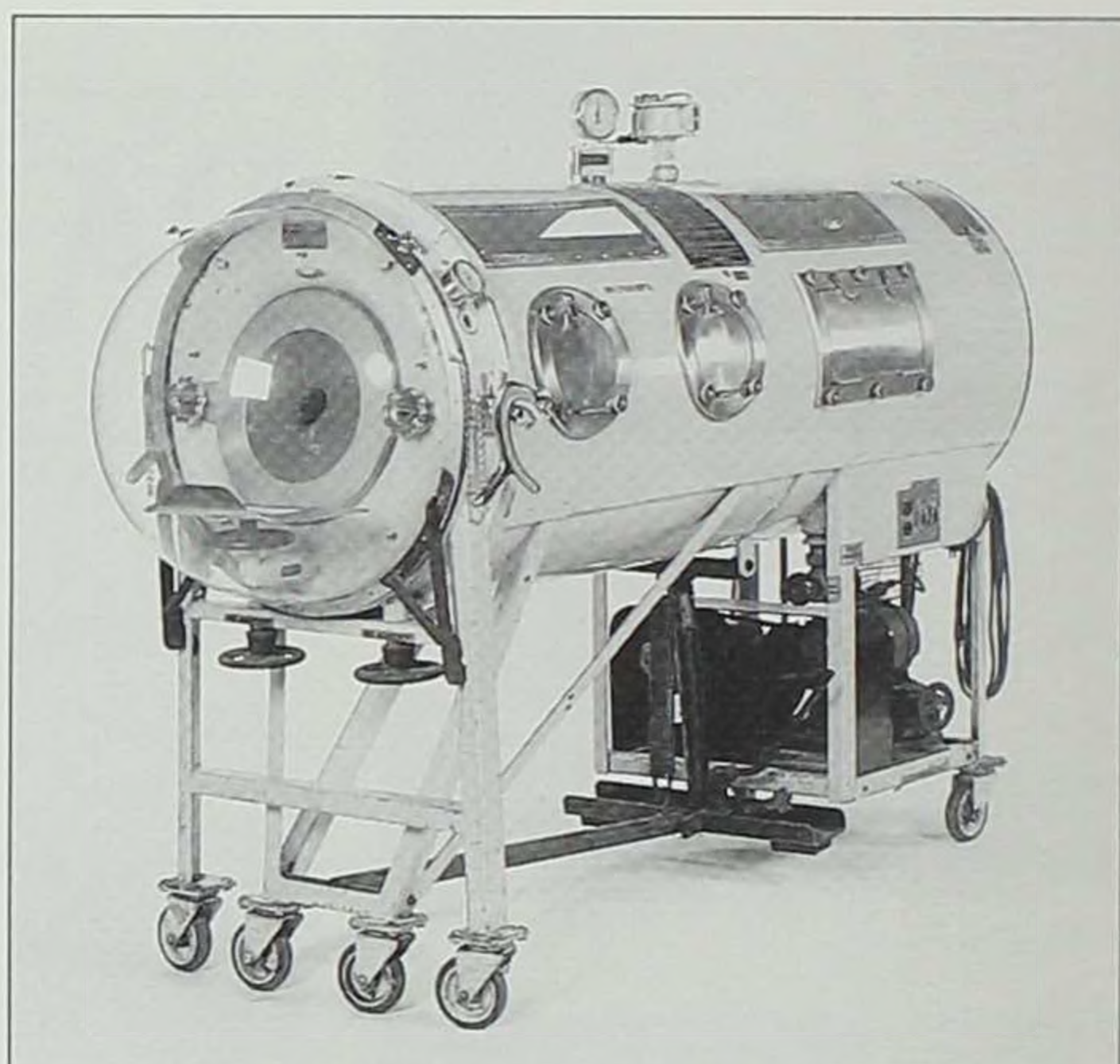
by Jack Lufkin

Note: Every year the State Historical Society adds hundreds of items to its historical collections to help document Iowa's past. One of these items evoked a particularly strong personal response in curator Jack Lufkin. Here he shares his thoughts with *Palimpsest* readers. —The editor

**MY** friend Don recently told me a childhood story from the 1950s in Iowa. One day Don felt ill. He collapsed, and his mother rushed him to a clinic. As the doctor examined the boy's legs, Don offered his own emotional diagnosis: "I've got polio." Luckily, Don was wrong. But it was not an unlikely thought to enter a boy's mind in the 1950s. The threat of polio was terrifying and real. And one treatment conjured up a frightening mental image. People whose breathing muscles were paralyzed by polio were sometimes placed in "iron lungs," large metal cylinders used for artificial respiration.

A few years ago, someone offered to donate an iron lung to the State Historical Society of Iowa for the museum collection. One hot summer afternoon, chief curator Michael O. Smith and I drove out of Des Moines to meet the potential donor and to look at the iron lung.

The iron lung rested quietly among other



This iron lung, used in Des Moines in the 1950s polio epidemic, was recently donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa by Gerald Angove.

miscellaneous stuff in a storage building. The donor offered to turn it on, and we found that it still worked. The machine hissed and puffed into life. I had never seen or heard one operating before. Its steady, somewhat ominous sound was unforgettable. At that moment the reality of Iowa's polio epidemics hit me full force—polio was one scary disease.

Poliomyelitis (or polio) is a viral disease that periodically surged through America during the early and mid-twentieth century. Although it is primarily a childhood disease (earning the name of infantile paralysis), it also affects adults. Franklin D. Roosevelt was diagnosed with polio when he was thirty-nine. The disease attacks the nervous system and impairs muscle groups (Roosevelt, for instance, lost mobility in his legs). Sometimes the breathing muscles are paralyzed, and without the help of a mechanical respirator (temporarily or for a lifetime), those with severe cases of polio may well die.

The iron lung was invented in 1928. By means of a bellows underneath the cylinder, the air pressure inside the cylinder compresses and expands the chest—in essence, pushing air out and pulling air into the lungs. The person's head rests on a flat surface outside of the cylinder. Mirrors help one see around the room. Iron lungs were used widely through the mid-



1950s. But they were often in short supply, and other, simpler methods were developed for helping patients to breathe. Yet as recently as 1985, at least three hundred iron lungs were still in use in America, mostly for individuals with postpolio disabilities.

The iron lung pictured here, now in the Society's collections, performed its life-saving work in the early 1950s at Iowa Lutheran Hospital in Des Moines, where the Kenny Clinic opened in 1942. The clinic was America's first private-hospital polio treatment clinic. It was named for an Australian nurse, Sister Elizabeth Kenny, an international pioneer in polio research and treatment.

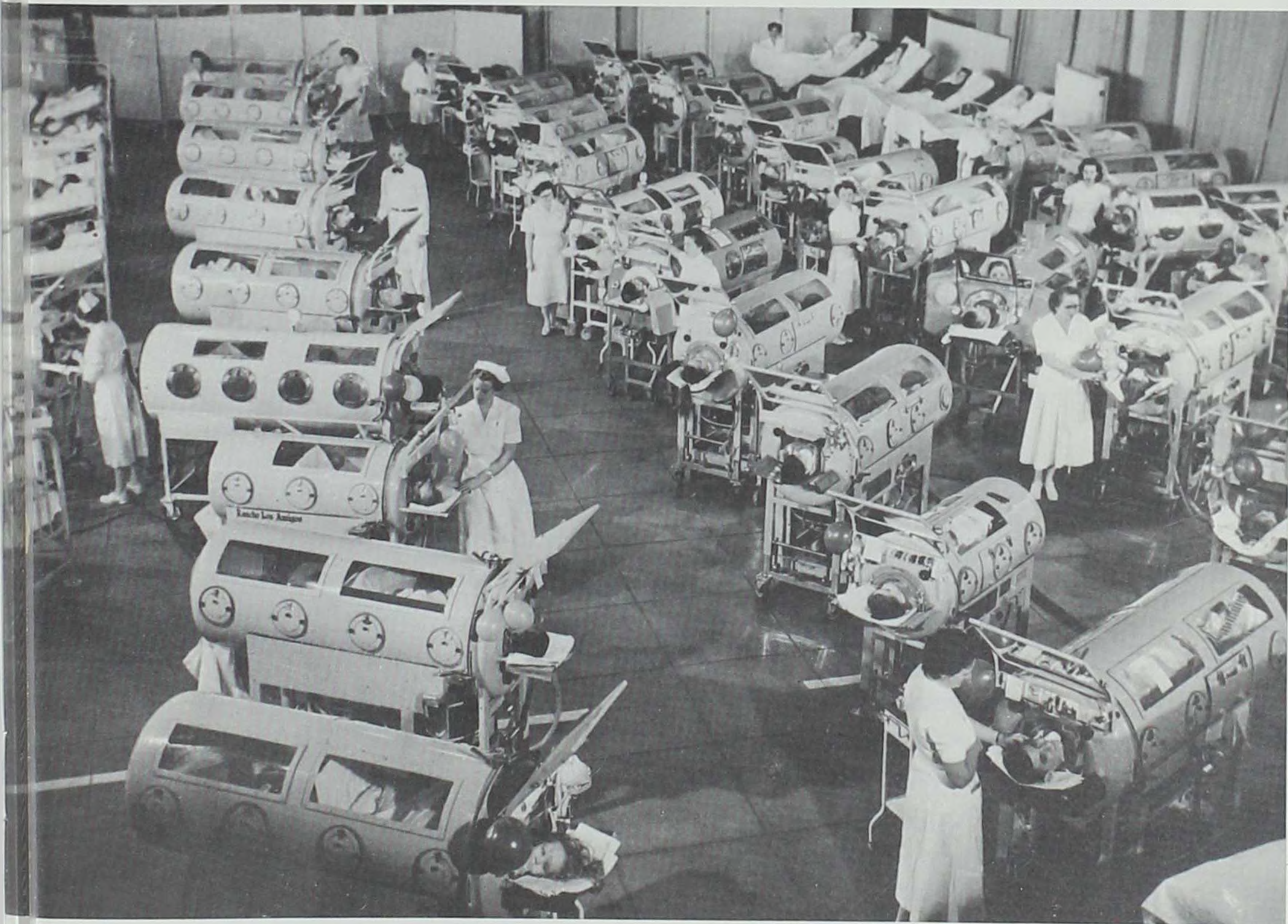
Like my friend Don, I also have childhood

memories related to polio. I remember lining up in a public school to be given a pink sugar cube treated with the oral vaccine. By the mid-1950s the Salk vaccine, and later the Sabin vaccine, would mean that the second half of the baby-boomer generation would largely escape the threat of polio. But for those born earlier, the iron lung remains a powerful reminder of Americans' fight against polio epidemics.

*For a close-up look at the iron lung, visit the Society's museum exhibit "We've Gotcha Covered: The Iowa Insurance Story," on the second floor of the State Historical Building in Des Moines. Iron lungs represent an early and costly treatment encountered by a young health-insurance industry.*

*(For more about polio, turn the page.)*

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Epidemic proportions of polio become clear in 1950s photo of the Los Angeles County Hospital. As in California, Iowa's need for iron lungs and other treatments rose in the late 1940s and early 1950s.