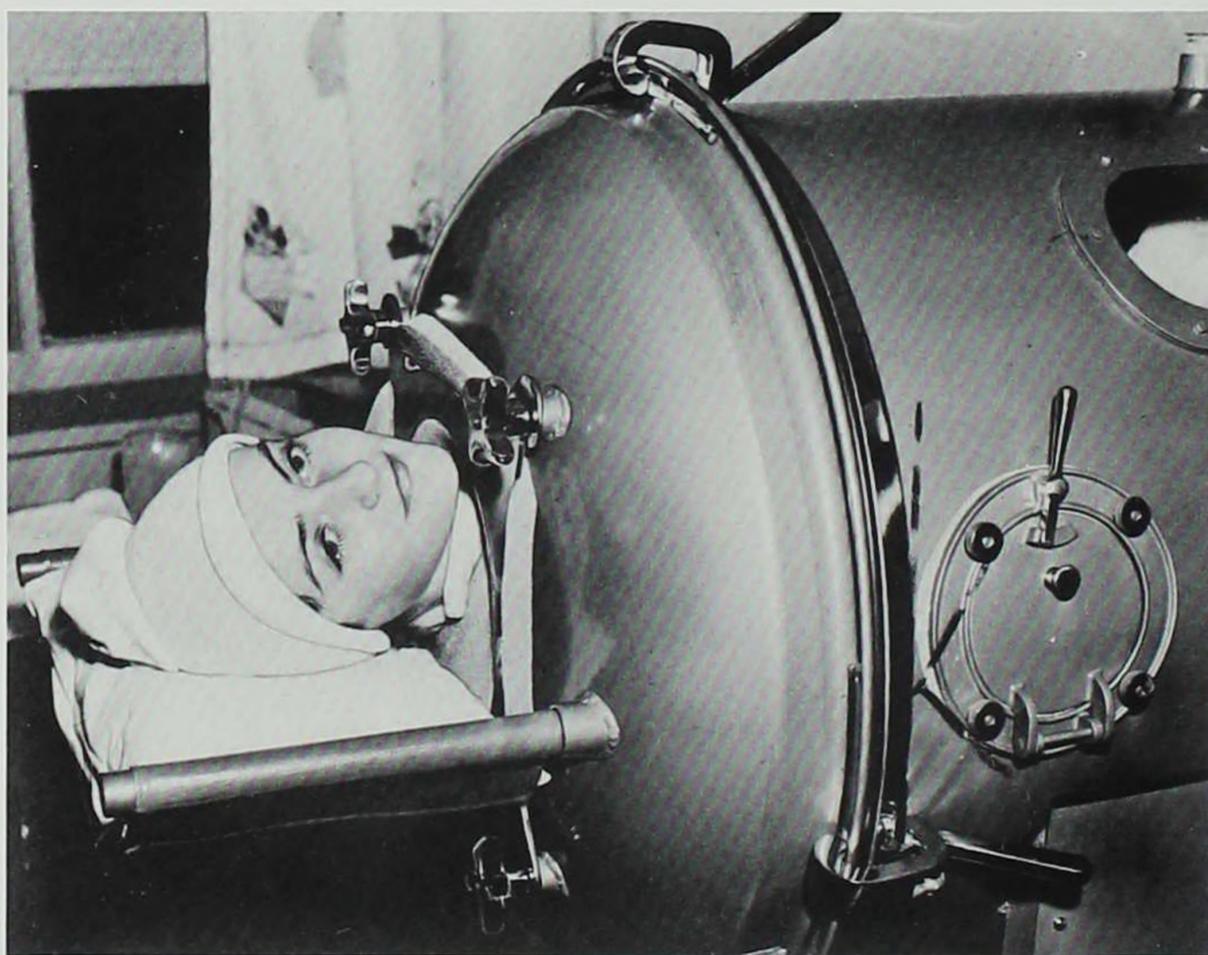


## **An Iowa Polio Portfolio, 1939 to 1959**

Polio was not new to Iowans of the 1950s. In 1910, Iowa had reported 565 cases—a hundred more than in 1951. Polio seemed to strike every few years in Iowa, with usually 170 to 220 cases. But by the 1940s the numbers began to climb dramatically.

While Iowa health department reports give us the statistical dimension of the epidemics, historical photographs provide the human dimension. The following photos from the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, 1939 through 1959, put a human face on the disease and reflect the nation's hope that polio would indeed be conquered, by medical treatment and by the human spirit.

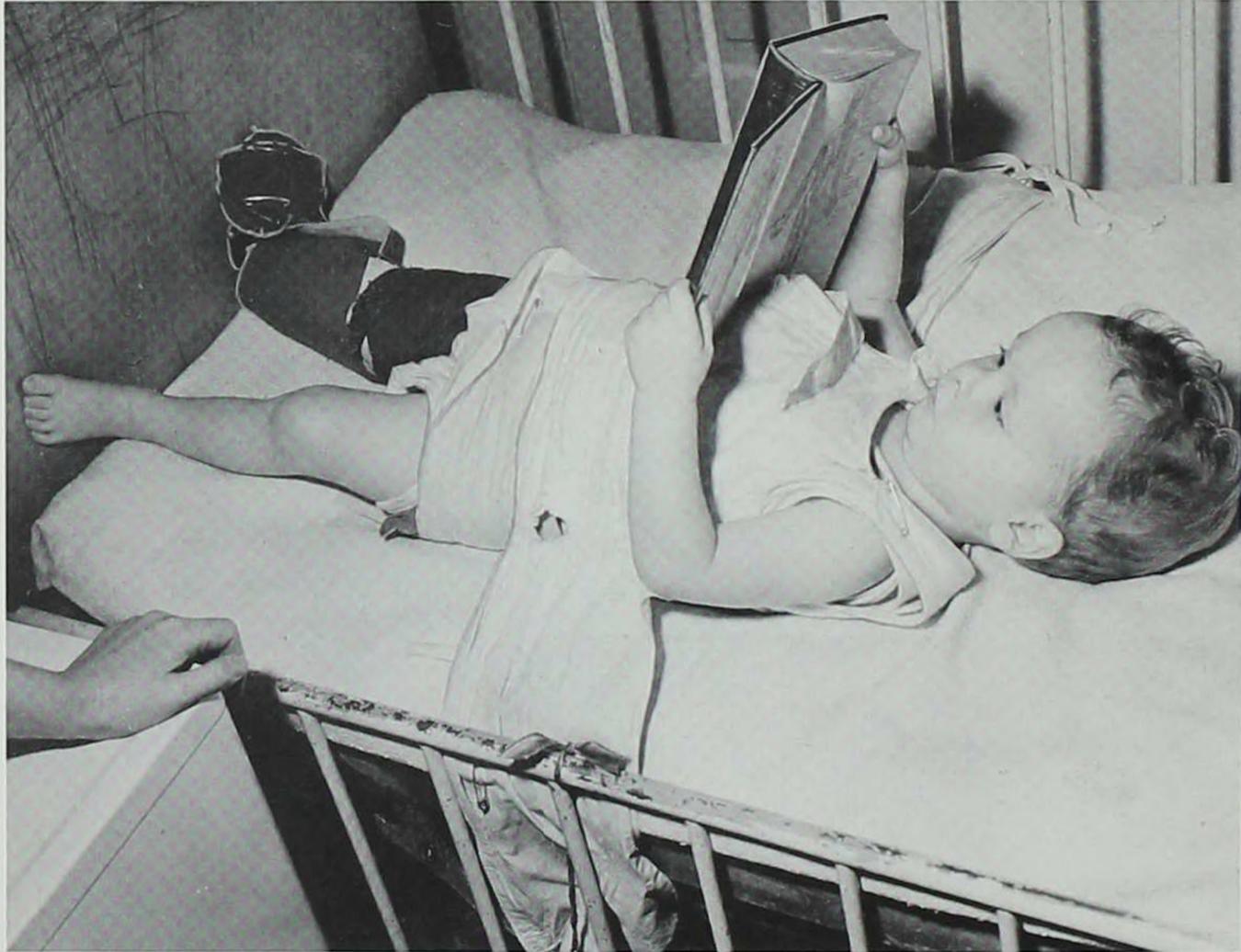
—The Editor



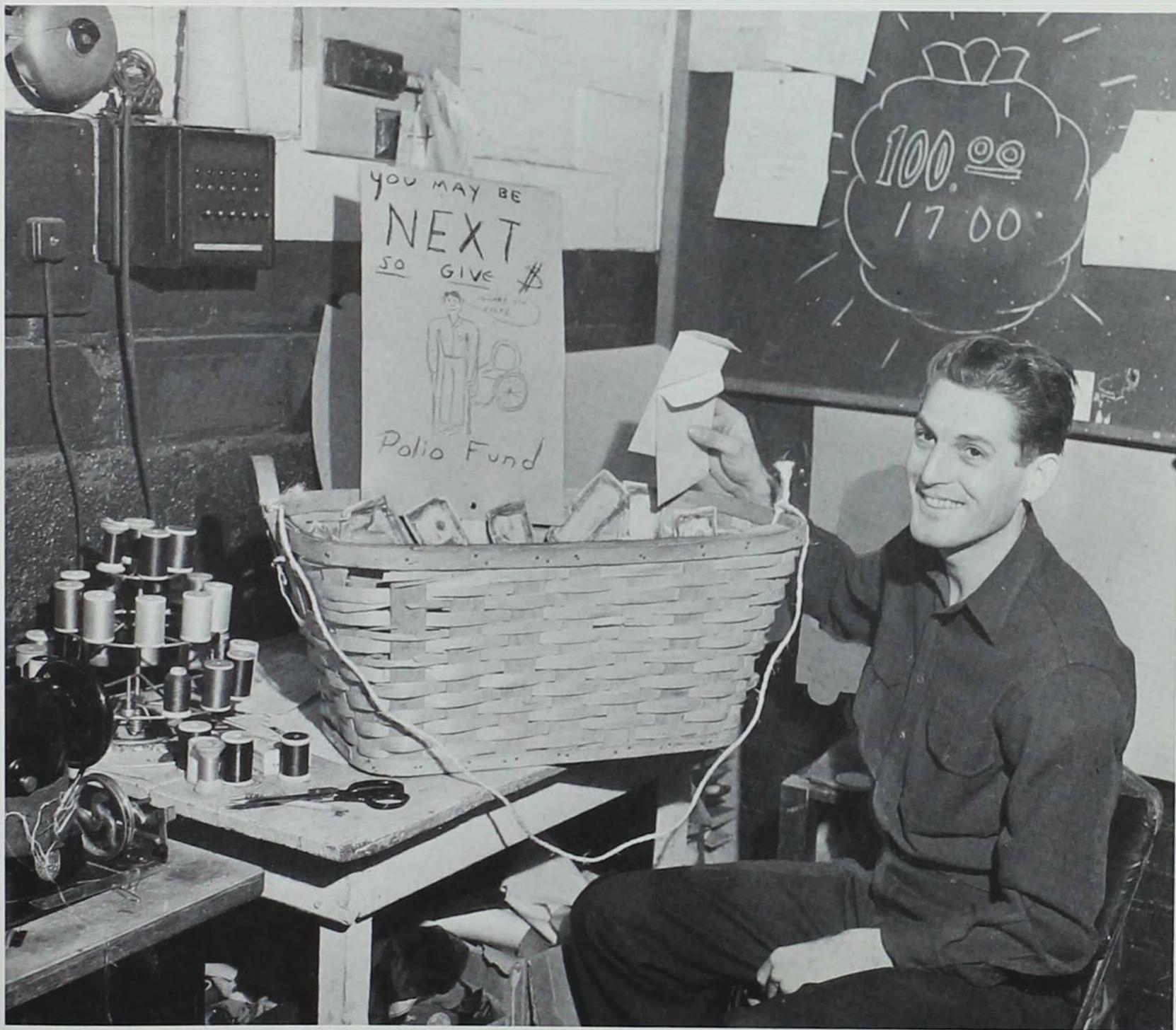
**November 1939:** One Friday, nineteen-year-old Florence Stumbo, a student nurse at Mercy Hospital in Des Moines, was diagnosed with polio. Typically, the symptoms progressed quickly: by Sunday she was in an iron lung. By Tuesday her condition was “much improved.” The city already had four iron lungs; this one, at Broadlawns Hospital, was bought by the Des Moines Business and Professional Women’s Club.



**September 1940:** Nurse Ruth Swanson and Dr. E. K. Vaubel take blood from Robert Harrell of Winterset. The blood, from donors who showed signs of paralysis from polio, would be used to make serum. Donors from Winterset, Indianola, Ames, Van Meter, Knoxville, and Des Moines gathered at a clinic set up in the Des Moines city hall. In 1940 the number of polio cases was a record high for Iowa—927. Sixty-four Iowans would die from polio that year.



**January 1943:** Two-year-old Michael R. Sullivan is distracted by a hefty book while receiving treatment to ease muscular pain. A moist, woolen hot pack was applied to his leg at the Kenny Clinic in Iowa Lutheran Hospital in Des Moines. Sullivan had had polio since he was six months old, and was now learning to walk without a leg brace.



**February 1947:** Albert Hook, an employee at Miller's Dry Cleaning Plant in Des Moines, adds to a polio fund basket started by co-worker Nick Critelli. The sign reads "YOU MAY BE NEXT SO GIVE \$." By 1947 the number of cases had dropped to 176, but the next three years would see an alarming rise—an average of 1,300 cases yearly.



**January 1948:** After nine months at the Kenny Clinic in Des Moines and a recent fitting for braces, Joanne Clark could now “walk a little.” Here she shows painted plastic birds she made at the clinic to Municipal Judge Ralph D. Moore. Moore brought good news for the seven patients at the cottage: his Moose lodge had already collected \$102 in its polio fund. Nationally, more good news would come next year: three doctors at Harvard Medical School would grow the polio virus in human and monkey tissue, work that would earn them the Nobel Prize in 1954.



**February 1951:** Five-year-old David Rathjen practices climbing with physical therapist Mrs. J. C. Sullivan. The Des Moines Railway Co. had donated the “bus steps” to Blank Memorial Hospital in Des Moines.



**June 1951:** A young girl at the Kenny Cottage receives a woolen hot pack. When the virus invaded the nervous system, it caused headaches, stiffness, and in severe cases, paralysis. Milder cases were marked by sore throat, low fevers, and gastrointestinal upset—symptoms common to many less worrisome diseases.



**August 1952:** Bernice Burris reaches into an iron lung in the polio ward at Broadlawns Hospital in Des Moines. Meanwhile, Sioux City had become one of the first national test sites for a gamma globulin vaccine. Twenty-one doctors and nurses arrived in July to begin inoculating 16,500 children in Woodbury County and neighboring Dakota County in Nebraska. Iron lungs were flown into Sioux City, and entertainer Bob Hope arrived for a benefit fund-raiser and visits to hospitals.

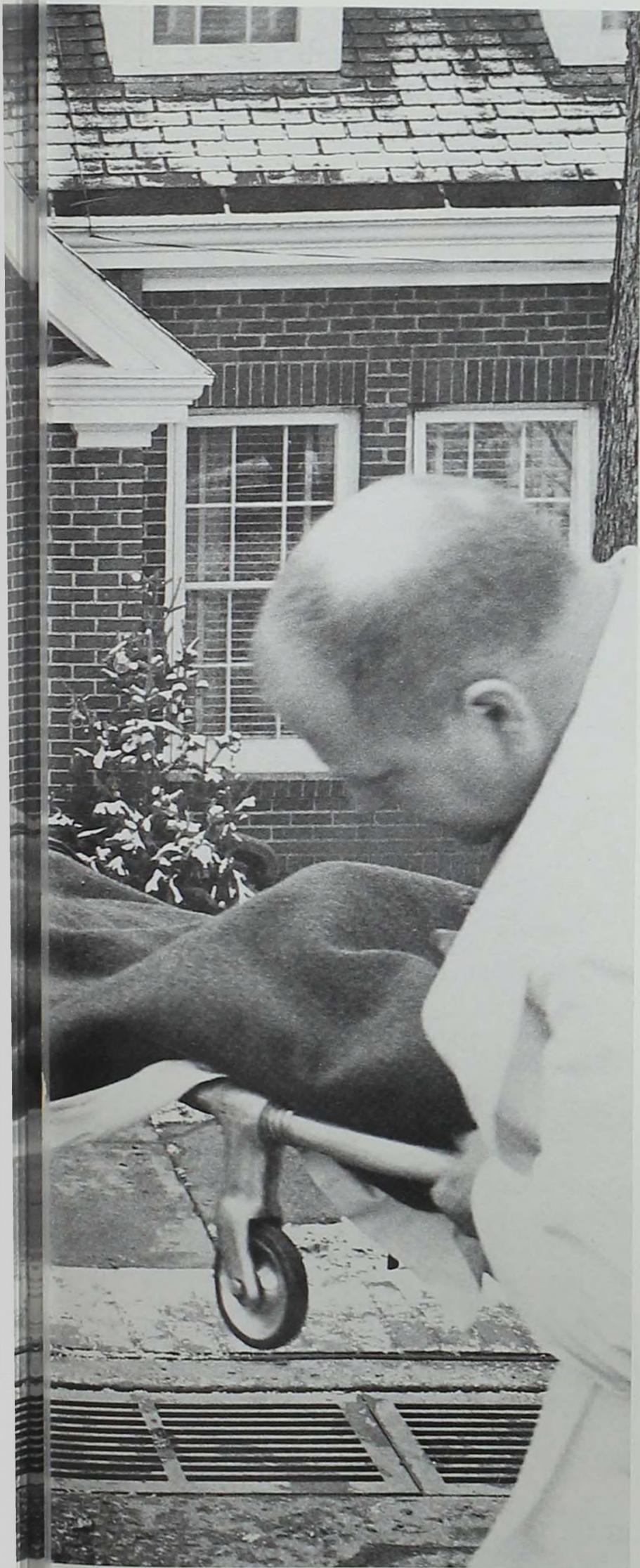


**November 1952:** Seven children with polio celebrate a birthday at Iowa Lutheran Hospital in Des Moines. Polio cases in Iowa would peak that year—at 3,564 cases reported, and 163 deaths. Sioux City alone had 923 cases. Parents kept their children away from swimming pools and other public places. Even sending one's child to school seemed risky.

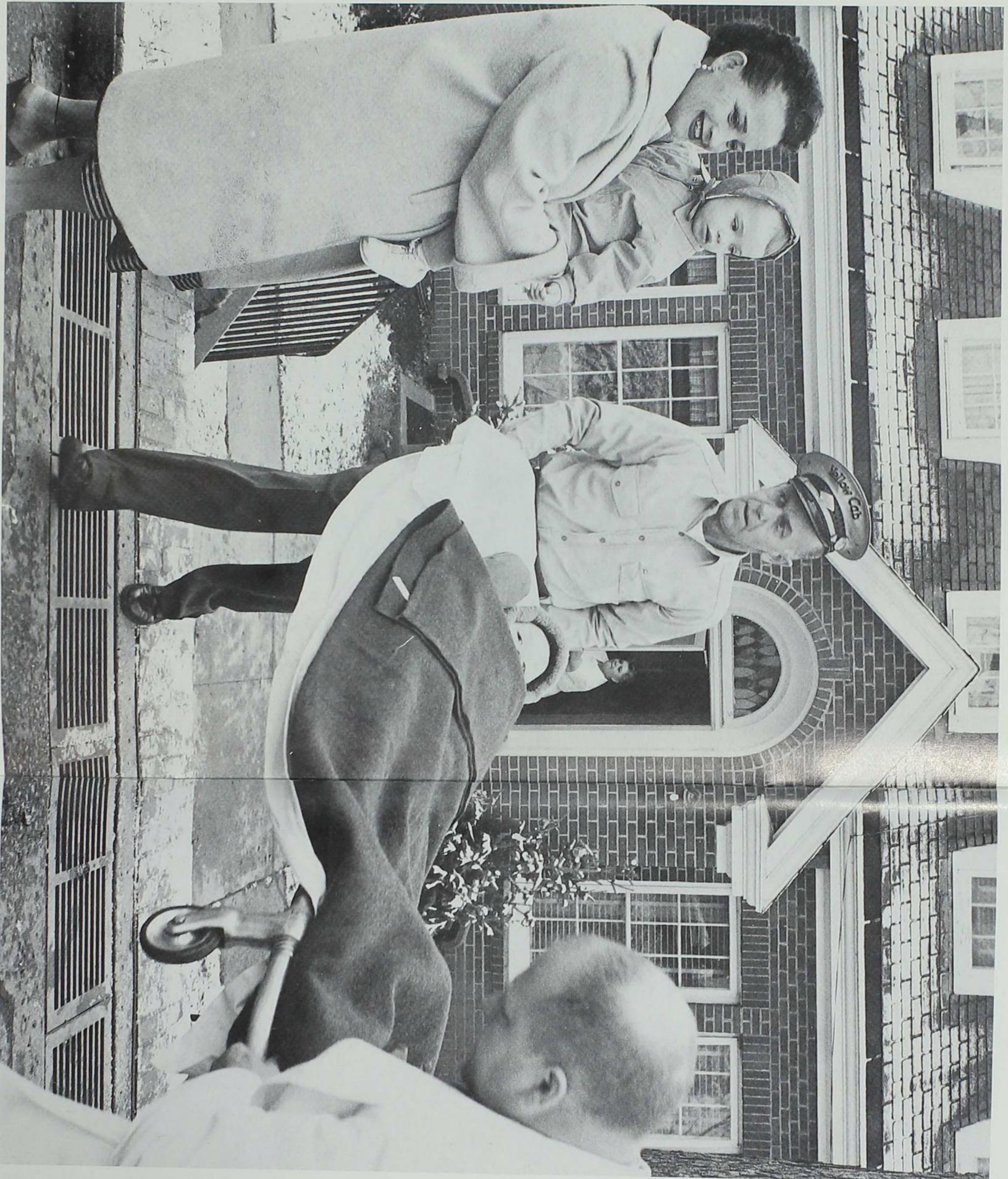


**August 1959:** Siblings Reva, Laverne, and Elaine Briggs from Villisca receive physical therapy at the Younker Memorial Rehabilitation Center in Des Moines. Mary Bellas, standing, was one of four registered physical therapists sent to Des Moines. Although therapy and rehabilitation continued for those with postpolio disabilities, a vaccine was now available. In 1955 Congress had allocated \$30 million to help states buy the Salk vaccine, and the number of Iowa cases plummeted—from 1,445 in 1954, to 580 in 1956, to 78 in 1957.





**December 1959:** Ten-year-old Hal Richard Bowers heads home from the Junior League Home for Convalescents in Des Moines. In 1962 the more effective Sabin vaccine would supplant the Salk vaccine. By 1965, the number of cases would decline to 72 *nationally*. The epidemic was over. □



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