

From Henry's Desk by Henry Holland

Polio, the First Twenty-four Hours

Recently I have noticed that the days of this September fall exactly as the dates fell in September 1950. The day I contracted polio was Sunday, September 17, 2006 and the day that I was admitted to the polio isolation ward at the Medical College of Virginia Hospital was Saturday, September 23, 1950. The dates and days this year are exactly the same as then. As many of you I have been trying to record some memories of my life with polio. For this newsletter I thought I would share my account of my first twenty-hours after the invasion of the polio virus into my body. I am sharing more detail than may be of interest to the reader. For me, remembering the details helps me to interpret the greater event. Here goes:

"Son, you have polio" expressed Dr. Robert Morton on Saturday morning, September 23, 1950. These words were terrifying to me at age 11 and they still convey a haunting anxiety when I think of them today. I remember every detail of that awful Saturday and what a permanent impact the poliovirus made on my life. Many times over the years I have wondered and asked myself, "Why me?" The impact of crippling polio affected my self-esteem, my self-image, my goals in life, my personality defenses, my religious pilgrimage, and my understanding of others.

Let me start with the invasion of my body by the poliovirus. I had returned to school entering the 5H grade on Thursday, September 7th. I had attended James Ewell Brown Stuart Elementary School in the north side of Richmond, Virginia since beginning public school in January 1945. The school system in the Richmond Public Schools at that time required a child to be 5 ½ years old to begin school. As a result I began school in the middle of the school year and my grade promotions were always during the middle of the regular school year. I entered the second semester of the fifth (5H or high) grade on that September 7th. Meeting my classmates after a long summer was a good feeling. I got my books for the new school year, put on book covers and got my supplies after school that first day. My school attendance and performance had been excellent. School was beginning that year as it had for previous years. After completing the first full week of school, I was looking forward to the weekend and riding my Roadmaster bicycle.

On Saturday morning, September 16th, I awakened and sat up on the side of my bed. I proceeded to get dressed with underwear, short pants, and a T-shirt. I leaned over to tie my sneakers and I immediately felt a stiffness or pain in the back of my neck. It hurt to touch my chin to my chest. I immediately thought that a stiff neck was an early warning sign of polio. This may sound hard to believe, but I distinctly remember this thought passing through my mind.

Every year at the local neighborhood theater, the Brookland Theater, a short movie clip would be shown during the annual March of Dimes polio drive. The warning signs of polio

would be mentioned and I remembered the one about the stiff neck. After the movie clip, cardboard canisters were passed along the aisles and folks dropped their dimes and dollars into the canisters. I recall the smiling appearance of the March of Dimes poster child. The child's smile persisted despite the braces that were strapped to the child's legs.

My polio thought on that Saturday morning quickly vanished and I went about my day as planned. I went on a lengthy bicycle ride near a ravine in my neighborhood. I also attended the Saturday afternoon matinee of a double feature western at the Brookland Theater. Admission was only eleven cents. That night was spent with no sign of illness. The next morning I experienced the same painful stiffness in my neck as I dressed in preparation to attend Sunday school. While in the bathroom that morning, I began to feel some nausea and had a headache. As I began to descend the steps, my grandmother noticed that I was not feeling well. She took my temperature and I had a fever. She ordered me to stay home and to return to bed. My grandmother was a practitioner of many 19th century medical treatments. Whenever I got sick, no matter how mild or severe the disorder, bed rest was mandatory. Her treatments involved the abundant and vigorous application of Vicks vapor rub all over the nasal passages and chest, and the hanging of a turpentine rag on the bedpost for any type of upper respiratory disorder. For gastrointestinal disorders, her remedies involved various broth and laxatives. If the symptoms were not quickly resolved, the application of a warm water enema was often the next treatment alternative. I had been subject to these treatments in the past for measles, chicken pox, mumps, and scarlet fever. Despite these treatments, I had always recovered completely. I remember feeling sad that I could not go to Sunday school. I did feel poorly and accepted the bed rest sick role, but I had every confidence that I would recover.

The next morning, the family doctor, Dr. Robert Morton, was summoned. Dr. Morton was a general practitioner who lived only two blocks away. He made house calls and had treated me during my usual childhood illnesses. Somehow, he had injured his right hand and his finger movements were affected. He held his pen between the ring and little finger of his right hand whenever he wrote a prescription. His pen made a noticeable scratching sound as he wrote. In my mind when he went to write a prescription, I would usually feel better as I would know that some medicine would soon be available that must have magic potency to cure my ailment. He examined me on that Monday morning. I was already upset about missing a school day. He took my temperature with his pocket thermometer and proceeded to examine me. His examination involved a rather gagging look down my throat and a rigorous palpation of my abdomen. My grandmother was also in the bedroom. He turned to her and announced his diagnostic impression. Dr. Morton had one of those loud voices that could be easily heard from upstairs when he entered the front door downstairs. "He's got Devil's Grippe." In retrospect, this diagnosis was valid. The force of the devil had a grip on my body, more specifically my stomach and intestines. I immediately felt some relief as the thought of polio had entered my mind again. I knew that I should recover from the Devil's Grippe and be back in school in a few days. Thus, my first twenty-four hours with polio ended.