



Tim Brown

It was the summer of 1953 when I became associated for life with polio. I had yet to reach my sixth birthday, therefore many of my memories are a bit sketchy. As I recall, I had been at a picnic that day playing on the swings and slides. As the day progressed I began to become ill. Upon returning to my home, my parents called my doctor, who still made house calls in those days. He had me immediately taken to Herman Kiefer Hospital for further examination. One of the most unpleasant memories of that day was the spinal tap that I was given soon after reaching the hospital. I also remember being physically restrained by what seemed to be many large men, during that very painful process. The results of that test indicated I had indeed contracted polio and, therefore, dictated the beginning of many months of continuous hospitalization and treatment.

I remember very crowded wards at Herman Kiefer with many beds in each. At first, I was totally paralyzed but eventually the paralysis settled in my right leg. Once the problem became more localized, I was able to get out of bed and, by wheelchair, move about the floor. With so many other boys around my age, it didn't take long to make friends and cavort with them. Wheelchair races and such activities kept us occupied, no doubt at the dismay of the staff. I do recall that there was not much self-pity displayed by these patients. In fact I felt fortunate to not have been afflicted as badly as some others that I could see, especially those imprisoned in iron lungs all day and all night without end. What I do not recall are having visitors from outside the hospital apparently the result of being quarantined.

Most of my stay in the hospital remains a bit of a blur in my mind. Treatment and therapy appeared unending, punctuated by, what seemed to a young boy, huge needles and steaming hot wool wraps on my legs. Eventually, I learned to walk again, at first wearing a brace, eventually without. I guess that is when they sent me home.

From the moment I arrived home, even though my home had stairs to get in and more stairs to reach the bedrooms and bathroom, I don't recall receiving or expecting any special treatment from my family with the stairs or anything else. I had a younger brother and sister, neither of whom contracted polio. I subconsciously adopted the attitude to "just deal with it." And from that point on, I did just that... dealt with it. From the time I left the hospital until my mid-teens, I was in the care of a very capable osteopathic surgeon named Maurice Castle. An ongoing problem was a tight "heel cord" which, in the end, defied all attempts to correct, including a stretching process using plaster casting for several entire school summer vacations and the use of night bracing which was so painful it prevented sleep. Surgery was threatened at one point to cut the heel cord, but, ultimately, that never happened.

Other major treatment during those years became necessary as I aged. My affected leg began to become shorter than the other leg, leading to worries of eventual spinal malformations as I developed. The first attempt to correct this problem took place at nine years old. I underwent an, as of that time, unproven surgical procedure at Mt. Carmel Hospital during which a "pin" was placed in the growth center of my lower right leg intended to incite that leg to grow faster than the other. It was a success, at least for a while. By the time I became thirteen years of age, the difference in leg lengths had again become unacceptable. At that time the reverse procedure was used on my left leg to slow its growth. Luckily the combination of the two surgeries eventually prevented the spinal malformation. Those major medical procedures aside, I recall growing up quite normally, at least from my perspective. Associating with friends, going to school, learning life's lessons all seemed the same to me as it was to anyone else. Knowing my limitations, I just found one way or another to do whatever I put my mind to do. Like any adolescent, I was self-conscious about appearing to be different from others. My biggest concern was that my affected leg was thinner than my normal leg. As a result, I spent many hot summers wearing long pants to avoid detection. But that and a minor limp when overly-tired were all that might have been obvious at a glance to others until I reached my mid-forties when my limitations began to increase. I graduated from a Catholic all-boys college prep high school that stressed athletics. Being unable to play the sports I did the next best thing in order to participate and joined the school paper as a sports writer.

At least I was able to ride the school bus with the teams to the games. Following high school, I graduated with a degree in finance from the University of Detroit. It was at U of D that I met the wonderful woman who became my lifelong companion. We raised two great daughters who are both doing well. Although it became necessary for me to retire earlier than planned as a result of my post-polio limitations, I had a 40 plus year career in executive management positions with three different companies. Fortunately, these jobs were not physically demanding. Since 1963 I have been treated for Post-Polio Syndrome by Dr. Daniel Ryan at the St John Post-Polio Clinic. This has proven to be very helpful to me, and I truly wish I had begun seeing Dr. Ryan sooner. Had I done so, I believe I could have further slowed my increasing limitations. It was because of the Michigan Polio Network and Dr. Ryan's clinic, that I have finally met others with similar experiences. Basically, I went through life being unaware of coming onto contact with anyone else who had also had polio. But then again most of us did not readily speak of our polio-related experiences either.

While it took the better part of my first year of retirement to become accepting of what was the rather sudden necessity to end the stresses and somewhat extreme efforts of continuing to work, I am now more comfortable with this new lifestyle. My wife has been very understanding and has taken over many of the tasks that I can no longer handle. While physically limited, I am finding ways to put my experiences and skills to use to benefit others. I feel quite fortunate to have been able to lead, from a physical perspective, an almost normal life for most of my years.