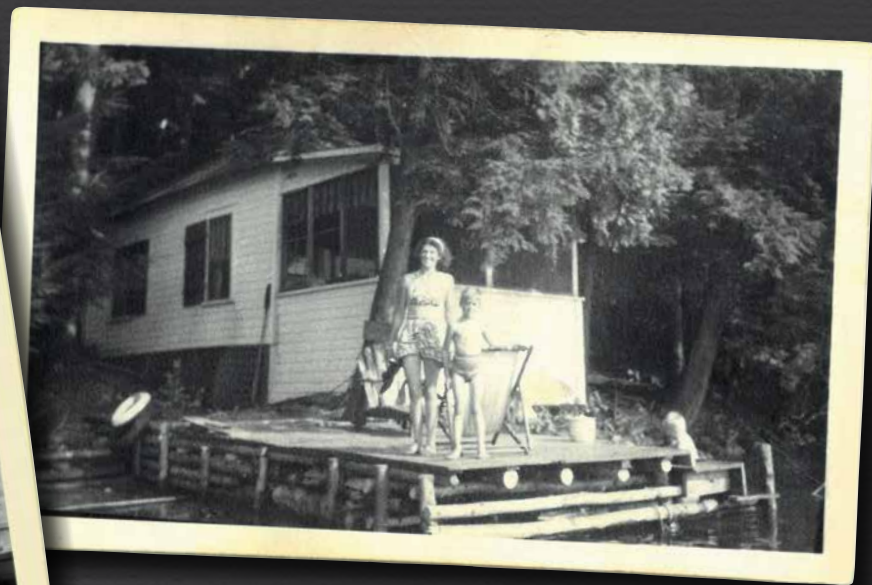




# Polio 1949: *A Memoir*



*By John Dick, M.D. '67*

A bout of polio when he was eight years old left John Dick, M.D.'67 with lifelong challenges, and valuable lessons about the art of perseverance.

The summer of '49 at Lake Dunmore promised to be a good one. I had just finished second grade and turned eight on the fourth of June. My parents, 14-year-old sister Gail, 2-½-year-old brother Bill, and I lived in Flushing, N.Y., where my father was a doctor and where Dad's parents lived within walking distance of us. My grandparents also owned a camp on what is now named Indian Trail, Lake Dunmore, which they bought from Hawley Churchill of Goshen, Vt. in August 1926. On the same property was a one room "fishing camp" where my family spent summers. The camp had one big room and a small porch where my parents slept, no running water, no toilet, no telephone, a big wood stove ("Smokey Joe") for heat and cooking, and an ice box to which men would deliver a block of ice once a week. Mom loved it.

Lake Dunmore has always been my emotional home. I have fond memories of being out on the calm, sunny lake in a rowboat with Mother to escape mosquitoes, listening to bull frogs and watching turtles sunning themselves. I also remember the subdued celebration there when Japan surrendered in August 1945, ending WWII. World War II had disrupted our lives, if in minor ways compared to the devastation millions in the world suffered. My father was a doctor in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific and totally away from sometime in 1943 until his return in the spring of 1946. By 1946-47 things were changing. Dad was home, my brother was born. Dad and I were building a tree house by our Lake Dunmore palace. I loved either cutting trees with Dad or just driving the camp roads alone with him, listening to him talk and relax. Life was good.

Usually, my father would spend only two weeks at the lake with us because of work, but the rest of us were there from just before school got out in early June until it began in early September. One reason for the extended stay was to try to avoid the polio epidemics that occurred in the summer months. Polio occurred more often where larger groups of children were. We were pretty isolated at Lake Dunmore.

In the 1940s the camps were summer residences. Many owners came from out of state. They did not have phones. Messages were often telegraphed to Brandon's telegraph office. That operator would call Norma Johnson at Cove Point, who would have her 9-year-old daughter, Jane, deliver the message. When Mom wanted to call Dad she would have to go half a mile down the lake to Marvin and Norma Johnson's house.

We arrived at camp in late June 1949, about three weeks later than usual, because Gail was graduating from eighth grade. That summer my parents were making changes to the camp. Marvin Johnson was adding a room for them, a separate room for my sister, a room for my

brother and me to share, and a bathroom with indoor plumbing! We would also get a refrigerator and stove. Mom, Gail, Bill, and I stayed in the one room camp partially exposed to the elements. Sometimes the roof over the ongoing addition leaked. Once during the night two raccoons got in and caused a ruckus. Another time a curious skunk entered through the screen door that had not yet been screened. Bats were

a nighttime aerial show. Mom took this with aplomb. However, she could not stand the mice. Mom and Gail's letters to Dad showed we were having a great time. Gail took me rowing, sailing, and swimming with a life jacket.

My summer at Lake Dunmore abruptly ended late one afternoon in early- to mid-July. I suddenly felt extremely weak and had to sit down by a big oak tree next to our camp. It felt like "electricity" going through my body. I could not make it inside. That was very frightening. The next thing I remember is being in a dimly lit room lying in a fetal position. I was in Mary Fletcher Hospital, in Burlington, 42 miles away, and must have been having a spinal tap. I remember nothing of the next few days. In fact, there is much about my hospital stay I do not remember. Fortunately I have letters Mother wrote to Father covering my ten-week stay in the hospital.

In an ironic twist of fate, Mom received a letter from Dad that day telling her we left New York just in time as polio cases there were mounting up. That evening she had to call and tell him I had polio.

I WAS FEBRILE AND STUPEROUS FOR A FEW DAYS. Gradually I became aware of my surroundings. I was in an isolation room where I remained for four or five weeks, confined to bed, with a paralyzed right upper extremity, not able to use my legs, sit up, or feed myself. Even my back muscles were affected. Doctors, nurses and visitors had to wear a mask and gown to visit me. Hot packs were applied several times daily to relieve muscle spasms. Once, this scalded me. This was not the place for an eight-year-old homesick momma's boy to be. But here I was.

I never would have survived emotionally if it were not for Dorothy Montague. "Monty" was a big, caring, loving, 30-plus-year-old nurse who stayed with me 12 hours a day buoying my spirits, often reading to me.

John Bell was my orthopedist. Dr. Bell was thorough, attentive and a person of few but thoughtful words. Dad did not know Dr. Bell or if he was competent. However, he knew Dr. McCauley, a very well respected New York City orthopedist, who came to Burlington twice to examine me and advise our family. Dr. Bell was very gracious with this. Keep in mind, then as now, many New Yorkers are suspicious of Vermont doctors' qualifications. It was Dr. Bell who won the respect and admiration of Grandfather Dick, himself a general practitioner from Flushing, and Mom. He was always encouraging, thorough, and compassionate but frank. While he could report improvement with my legs and back, he could never give good news regarding my arm.

Mom made almost daily 90-mile round trips from Lake Dunmore to check on me, leaving Gail to look after Bill. My Grandfather and Grandmother Dick were in the "Big Camp" next to ours, so Gail had some support. Dad's sister, her husband, and four of their six children were also at the "Big Camp." There was a lot of chaos in Mom's life with our camp partially torn apart with the addition going on, Dad in Flushing, two children to look after, me very ill in a hospital 42 miles away and no convenient phone.

Opposite, top, Mary Fletcher Hospital as it appeared in the 1940s; bottom left, John Dick in the summer of 1949 in his boat on Lake Dunmore, just before contracting polio; bottom right, John, his mother, and brother at their Lake Dunmore camp, 1948.



One episode early in my hospitalization is etched in my memory. I awoke and somehow thought my left arm was my right. For the next few moments I was overjoyed as I moved all the hand and arm muscles. Then I realized my mistake. I was very disappointed, but only for a short while. This resilient attitude I inherited from Mom.

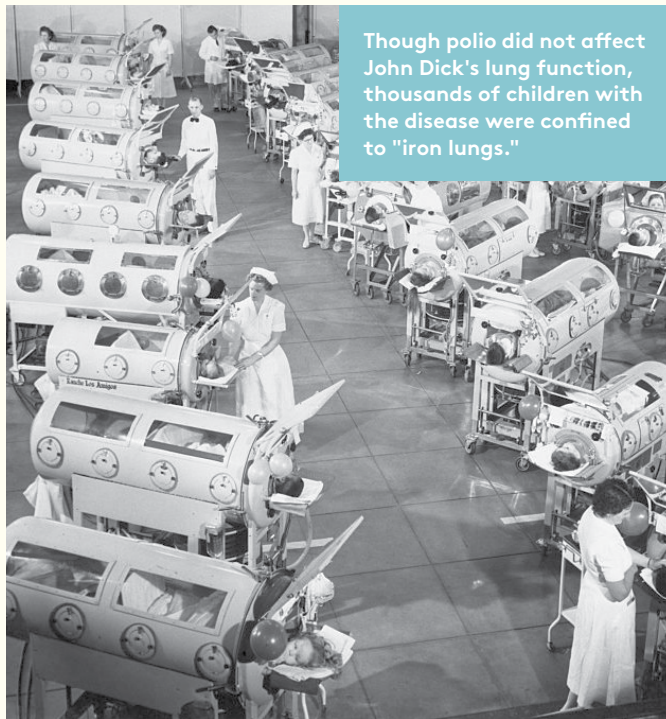
After four to five weeks of lonely isolation, I was moved into a room with a roommate, Lou. Lou was a little older and more outgoing than I. His polio was much less severe. His main worry was the possibility of getting an enema that was given if one did not have a bowel movement by day three. Lou was at day two-and-a-half. I was still not allowed up and had to use a bedpan. Lou's problem was solved when he borrowed my bedpan with its contents. A downside of this move was less time with Monty, whom I considered my personal nurse and depended upon. She generally found time to check on me and communicate with Mom. Finally I was allowed to sit up for short periods. Physical therapy began including one half hour in a whirlpool bath three times a day. In time I was allowed to stand briefly and take two steps. Slowly I "learned to walk" again. Gail and Bill were now allowed to visit me. Nobody had to wear masks.

Eventually, I improved to the point where I was moved to the solarium that had several beds and a view of the city. (Mary Fletcher did not get a dedicated polio ward until 1950.) The N.Y. Giants' summer camp in 1949 was nearby. From the solarium I could see them practice. I had enough interest in that to ask my uncle to send me binoculars. Near the end of my hospitalization I saw two patients in iron lungs [a mechanical respirator used by polio patients who had lost control of their chest muscles]. I think they were isolated. Certainly fate had been crueler to them!

The 42,000 cases of polio in 1949 broke the previous epidemic records in the U.S. of 25,000 in 1916 (of which my Grandfather Dick saw about 50 while practicing in Flushing) and 25,000 in 1946. Polio disrupted and financially ruined many families. The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis raised a phenomenal amount of money from private donations through The March of Dimes to help cover the costs and develop a vaccine. My family benefitted from this financial assistance.

The Salk vaccine was not made available until the spring of 1955.

I was discharged from Mary Fletcher Hospital in mid-October, after approximately ten weeks in hospital. My future therapy was still to be decided. There remained a long road to recovery ahead of me. Dr. McCauley recommended I be placed at the New York State Rehabilitation Hospital in Haverstraw, N.Y. This would have meant several months in an inpatient setting. Many polio patients went there. One of Mom's letters to Dad revealed how "numb"



Though polio did not affect John Dick's lung function, thousands of children with the disease were confined to "iron lungs."

she felt at the thought and that she had been upfront with me about it. She noted, "His chin quivered and he asked, 'longer than 20 weeks?'" She replied "yes" and I said it would not be "so bad." She told Dad they had to be truthful with me as "he weighs everything carefully." Fortunately, Haverstraw was not affordable. It was decided that my therapy would continue at home. I doubt I would have survived another institution.

MOM, DAD, GAIL AND BILL WERE at our partially renovated camp when I was finally discharged from Mary Fletcher Hospital in mid-October. Lake Dunmore never looked so good to me.

My world had been dramatically and permanently changed. Instead of going to the third grade in the public school in the fall of 1949, I was pretty much housebound, receiving physical therapy, being in the

bathtub about one hour twice a day, and taking long naps. Instead of going to my art and piano teachers' houses, therapists came to my house to teach me how to do crafts with my left hand. I had been right-handed before polio. A school tutor came two or three times a week. That person mostly read to me. I resisted being taught and did not get a third or fourth grade education. The best time was playing chess with Dad.

Once a week throughout the summer, I went to Mary Fletcher Hospital to be examined and treated by my old friends; Dr. John Bell, Monty, now a physical therapist, and Miss Corbett, another physical therapist. I made clear progress by the end of the summer of 1950, in spite of ongoing anxiety.

Fall of 1950, winter of 1950-51 and spring of 1951 in Long Island were long and boring. I think I was getting cabin fever with all that time being homebound. I began to read, mostly the Landmark series of history books. I loved those. A new one came out every couple of weeks, and I read well over 50 of them. Dad and I continued playing chess.

The summer of 1951 was spent at Lake Dunmore. I learned how to swim after falling in water over my head. It was sink or swim. I swam. I only had to go a very few feet until I could touch bottom. With that confidence, I became a very good swimmer and spent a lot of time in the water. I had a Haggerty Seashell dinghy, which I managed to row with

one arm and two legs and sail down wind. Another boy my age had a rowboat with sail and rudder, so we would race. It was not easy to manage a sail mainsheet and rudder tiller with one hand and two feet. He usually beat me, probably because both he and his boat were better. I learned I hated to lose.

In November 1951, we moved to Brandon, Vt., a town of 3,500 people only 11 miles from Lake Dunmore. Flushing was not the same Flushing my Dad had grown up in. It had changed a lot during and after WWII, and Mom's asthma seemed to be better in Vermont. A new one-year-old boxer came with us—Newtwood's Conchitia—another gift from one of Dad's patients. Our house was an elegant 1840's marble house with 12 acres of woods for our back yard. This was much better than Long Island. Chita and I roamed those acres as if we were in the wilderness. She lived until I was part way through medical school.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

I started the fifth grade in November after missing the third, fourth and the first three months of the fifth. I could not spell, write, or diagram a sentence well. Nor did I understand the math symbols of division, etc. I failed, but they moved me into the sixth grade the next year.

I was an OK student in the seventh through ninth grades, but preferred tapping trees and making maple syrup. That and a bout of whooping cough led to a spotty school scholastic and attendance record, leaving my mother fearful for her son's future. The upshot was that for the tenth through twelfth grades I was sent to Vermont Academy, an all-boys private school in southern Vermont.

**"HE TOLD ME I'D NEVER BE ABLE TO DELIVER A BABY AND NOT TO SHOW UP. TO ADD INSULT TO INJURY, HE ASKED IF I WAS ABLE TO TAKE BLOOD PRESSURES. I GOT THE MESSAGE AND SPENT THE MONTH AT HARLEM HOSPITAL IN NEW YORK."**

Although I did not like Vermont Academy, it was good for me. It taught me to be away from home. It also exposed me to Edmund "Beno" Tripp. Beno taught math and was one of my top two teachers ever. I finished third scholastically in the class, just barely making cum laude. Beno told me my cumulative average at VA was 85.0. "If it had been 84.9, I would not have given honors to you." At graduation I received a special award from our headmaster, the book *Endurance*, a true epic survival story of the Shackleton Antarctic expedition of 1914. It was not until many years later that I read the book and understood its significance.

When I was in my mid-teens, Mom had me seen at the Rusk Rehabilitation Clinic in New York City. Rusk was for people with all kinds of handicaps. Its most notable other patient was Joseph Kennedy, father of President Kennedy. One was either an inpatient or an outpatient. I was an outpatient. As I walked past the many

patients in the rehab unit, one asked, "Are you a civilian or inpatient?" "You're lucky," he responded when I told him I was an outpatient. I am ashamed to confess I was somewhat appalled at the sight of all those handicapped people, as I realized, "I'm like them." Nobody I knew back home had a physical handicap. Now that was all I was seeing. We were "cripples" and had few spokespeople or role models for success. No Special Olympics then. Two and a half of my three days at Rusk were for psychological testing. When told to draw pictures of my parents, I drew stick pictures. "That is very 'primitive,'" I was told. I wonder how many portraits that right-handed psychologist drew with his left hand. Rusk gave me some special eating utensils, such as a curved knife for cutting meat. These I threw away, not wanting to emphasize being different. I still tie my shoes/boots/sneakers rather than using those with Velcro, etc. A patient recently told me she was working at Shapiro's clothing store in Brandon when at age 11 or 12, I came in to buy shoes. She offered to tie my shoes but I indignantly replied, "I can tie my own." I often wear loafers and must admit they are handy.

THE FALL OF 1959 SAW ME HEADED to Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. I had only applied to two colleges. Williams was my first choice, but they passed on me. Union was a good fit for me. I joined a fraternity, where I learned how to catch a football, throw a baseball over hand for strikes, and party. I also received a very good education.

Since childhood I wanted to be a doctor. My father's office was in our house. I'd watch patients come and go at all hours of the day. I'd even made some house calls with him at night. He tried to discourage me. Others told me I'd never be able to be a doctor. By the first quarter of my freshman year, I decided to try. My grades were four D's and a C. I had missed three weeks with mononucleosis. Premed chairman, Leonard Clark, supposedly would not consider anyone who did not have a B average. He could not have been nicer. "We have doctors from three different medical schools coming to interview our seniors for admission and I'll have them give you their opinion." They

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POLIO MADE ITS FIRST LARGE APPEARANCE IN THE U.S. IN VERMONT IN 1894. READ AN EARLIER VERMONT MEDICINE STORY ABOUT THAT OUTBREAK AT: [MED.UVM.EDU/VTMEDICINE/WEB-EXTRAS](http://MED.UVM.EDU/VTMEDICINE/WEB-EXTRAS)

were unanimous, "Do not bother to try. You'll never make it." When they left, Dr. Clark looked at me, "Well Dick, you might as well try. If you do not make it, at least you will have had a good education." What a wonderful man—the only person besides my mother who made me feel I could do it.

Mom took no chances. Once I was doing well in premed at Union, she made an appointment to see Dr. Wolf, the dean of the University of Vermont College of Medicine. Fortunately, Dr. James Wallace had just finished four years of medical school at UVM and was doing an internship there. He had congenital absence of his left hand and forearm. Dr. Wolf had Mom and me meet him. He was very upbeat and encouraging. Years later I had the honor of covering his oncology patients at Rutland Hospital while he was on vacations.

Shortly after I had started medical school at UVM in the fall of 1963, Dr. Bell and I bumped into each other between classes. Ever the physician, after a brief "hello" he started examining my right arm while we were standing on the sidewalk with people passing by. Dr. Bell knew a polio specialist, Dr. Goldstein, at Johns Hopkins and referred me there. I did not want to go but could not say no to a man who had done so much for my parents and me. Johns Hopkins and Dr. Goldstein had nothing new to offer.

Monty was still a physical therapist at Mary Fletcher. It was good to get reacquainted. She was very proud of the scared eight-year-old she nursed through events that changed his life in 1949. Fortunately, I had a chance to tell her how vital she had been for my future.

Medical school, 1963 to 1967, was a great experience that professionally would be hard to top. It was a dream come true. There were 50 people in our class, of which seven were women. That gender discrimination has subsequently been corrected, at least as far as current admissions apply. We got along well, studied together, and played together. Freshman anatomy lab lasted four hours a day, five days a week. Fridays, after anatomy, many of us headed for The Mill, a bar in downtown Winooski, to unwind.

I still faced at least one more skeptic. OB/GYN was a required rotation. The department chairman called me to his office a few days before my rotation was to begin. He told me I'd never be able to deliver a baby and not to show up. To add insult to injury, he asked if I was able to take blood pressures. I got the message and spent the month at

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