

Warm memories of a dark time: POLIO SURVIVORS RENEW FRIENDSHIPS IN WARM SPRINGS

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Warm Springs --- In the old photograph, they are grinning at the camera: three boys, best friends, each holding a puppy that's wriggling to get away.

The mischief in their eyes and the delight in their faces are so infectious that it takes a moment to notice the picture's darker detail: the heavy steel braces strapped and buckled onto the slender legs of the boy on the right.

Sixty-seven years later, the braces are still visible, if you look carefully. But the smiles are even brighter than they were.

John Steinhauer, George Moore and Jim Stubbs met again this week, for the first time since 1934. They shook hands. They introduced their wives. They blinked, trying to absorb that they are 75, 74 and 73 years old. And then it was as if they had never been apart.

"I was the chubby one," said Steinhauer, an insurance agent in Hendersonville, N.C.

"I was the cute one," said Stubbs, who has a shaved head and a trimmed white beard and lives in Chaffee, Mo. "And George, he was the mean-looking one in the middle."

Behind them rose a buzz of conversation, the same questions repeated hundreds of times: Where were they living now? Whom had they married? What had they done since they were polio patients at the Warm Springs hospital, 50 or 60 or 70 years ago?

More than 160 polio survivors, spouses, family members and friends are gathered this week in Warm Springs for the first reunion hosted by the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation. Listening to them, as they stroll the grounds, is like taking a walk through that long-ago picture of Steinhauer, Moore and Stubbs. A golden afternoon. A happy set of friends. And off in the corner, barely noticeable at first, a suggestion of something painful and dark.

The children and young adults sent to Warm Springs in the 1930s, '40s and '50s were coming to the nation's premier treatment center for the most feared disease of its time. They had gone to bed one day with fever and awakened the next unable to use their arms or legs. They had contracted polio, when even a rumor of a case of the disease could close down a playground, a public swimming pool or a school.

"I remember my mother saying there was a huge sign hung on our house, saying 'Quarantine,' " recalled Pam Carroll of Lilburn, 54, who came to the reunion with her sister Patsy Glidden, a Warm Springs patient in 1948. "And when people walked down our street and saw it, they would cross the street and walk down the other side."

David Jones, who is 55 and lives in Norcross, was 6 years old when his legs collapsed under him, halfway up his house's stairs. "I was in the isolation ward at Grady Hospital,"

he said. "My mother and father used to bring a stepladder down to the hospital, and they would climb up to the window and talk to me through the screen."

At Warm Springs, the children found themselves in a place where everyone looked like them: on crutches, in wheelchairs or flat on their backs on gurneys, able to lift only their heads. They entered a society that the facility, supported first by Franklin D. Roosevelt's money and later by private charities, strove to make as normal as possible. There were Thanksgiving dinners, costume parties and movies every Saturday night.

Parents did not stay at Warm Springs. Some visited periodically, if they could afford it. In the days before interstate highways, it was an expensive trip and a long drive. But even though they were lonely for their families and struggling with their new disabilities, the kids of Warm Springs were, well, kids.

"One day it had rained like mad and there was a huge lake that had formed on the way to (the dining hall)," said Steinhauer, who entered Warm Springs at 8 years old after losing the use of his right leg. "I was in a wheelchair. So I rolled right out in the middle of that lake, but then I couldn't get any traction, and a nurse named Miss Lillian Zuber had to come and push me out."

The mildest therapy used at the hospital was exercise, performed on wooden platforms in the buoyant water of spring-fed pools. The harshest was surgery, used to freeze weak joints, straighten curved spines or transplant muscle tissue where it might do more good. Patients might spend months in body casts, recovering.

Looking back with the benefit of decades' more medical knowledge, the returnees have had to come to terms with how experimental many of those surgeries were. Often, they turned out to be useless.

"I don't have any complaint about anything that happened here," said Sandra Bath, 55, of Savannah, a Warm Springs patient 50 years ago. "We were here. We were taken care of. Other places, they put people like us in institutions."

Some of the polio survivors visiting Warm Springs this week never returned once they were released to their families. Others, though, came back many times --- to have more surgeries and therapy, to adjust their outgrown braces or to conquer new skills they needed as they became adults.

"I learned to drive here," said Glidden, 55, of Chester, S.C., who uses a wheelchair and wears a heavy corset to keep her torso upright. "My parents would bring me in June and come get me in August. I learned to be independent here."

Betty Wright, 52, the co-founder of the Atlanta Post-Polio Society, said Warm Springs was where many discovered their first true friendships, many of which are being rekindled this week.

"It let you belong in both worlds: You lived with your family, and then you would come here, and it was like you opened the door and were home again," she said. "A lot of us have a lot of fond memories. It sounds funny, but we were happy here."

Over the hum of motorized wheelchairs and the clank of two former friends "shaking hands" by tapping their outstretched crutches together, many of the polio survivors said they are not entirely unhappy to have had polio. It taught them toughness and persistence. It let them experience nurturing and compassion. It challenged them not to accept limitations: In an impromptu poll taken at breakfast Thursday, most of the polio

survivors said they had traveled to Europe, South America or Asia, and many had two children or more.

And it brought them to Warm Springs, their second home.

"There is so much emotion tied up in this place for them," said Dr. Anne Gawne, who directs the Warm Springs clinic that treats former patients who are developing the new disabilities of post-polio syndrome.

"They went to school here. They socialized here. They had romances here. This is where they grew up."