

Bette Jayne Burroughs, Polk County

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Interviewee: Bette Jayne Burroughs

Interviewer: Kate Scott

Date of Interview: September 26, 2007

Location of Interview: Des Moines, IA

Run Time: Approximately 90M

Cassette

As Infant

Biographical Data Form

Oral History Release

Misc. Typescript

Newspaper Clippings

Photographs (11)

Transcript



In 1923, infantile paralysis took something away from Bette Burroughs when she was only seven months old (shown right with her parents in Des Moines). No one had an explanation.

Because of an allergy to milk, she knows her parents ventured out into the country to get her goat's milk. Looking back, she thinks it could have been contaminated. Nevertheless, her condition only made her stronger, more compassionate and determined. According to Bette, "Polio affected my spine, my left leg, and both feet. But, I have a happy history. My parents, including my grandmother, never let me think that I was anything but normal. I've always been grateful for that because not only have I always not considered myself handicapped, I considered myself a normal person. I always felt like I had to keep that normalcy and then achieve a little more to prove that I could do almost anything."

The great depression made hard times even harder. Bette's mother drove her on muddy, unpaved roads from Des Moines to Iowa City in an old Model T every six months for medical treatment. Though she does not recall the specific year she began going to the University of Iowa Children's Hospital, she does recall her mother's determination to prevent doctors from operating on her feet when she was eleven. "If we had to be there more than one day we stayed in a hotel. She would not let them operate on my feet. They did make a back brace because I had very severe curvature of the spine so I remember being fitted for that with parafin." Bette also remembers the famous Austrian physician, Dr. Arthur Steindler, "They would take me in a room and [draw] lipstick down my spine...he was rather stern and either you did what he said or you did not come back."

The sights of the hospital are still seared in her memory. "I did see a lot of victims there of different ages. I saw mis-formed children. I remember a little boy that was burned with stubs of arms and legs rolling down the hall. Some of these things were very difficult and it is hard to express it. But, you [left] thinking you were very fortunate because you saw so many children that were in much worse shape than you."

After graduating from Roosevelt High School in 1940, Bette began her secretarial career and a career of helping others. She worked for the National Youth Administration and Smouse School in Des Moines. "I got to go into physical therapy and work with children that had polio. I loved the work. I could really understand their plight."

She retired from Otis Elevator in 1988. Bette, now 84 years old, feels it is her faith that keeps her going. As founding elder of the Westkirk Presbyterian Church, her most rewarding work was with Good Samaritan Commission and with West Des Moines Human Services. Bette was so dedicated, Otis Elevator recognized her with a \$1000 Community Service Award. "My strength did not all come from me," says Bette, "it came from the Lord and my faith – I was able to do things that I had no idea I could do."