

Living with the scourge of polio

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

The fear came in the summertime.

In the early part of the 20th century, repeated epidemics of polio struck the United States, often leaving previously healthy children and young adults with life-changing paralysis. Polio is caused by a virus, which, in the pandemics of the early 20th century, struck in the summer and early autumn.

Parents lived in dread of



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Polio struck Jan Secrest as a young woman in 1949.

polio season. Public swimming pools closed down to avoid spread of the contagion. Thousands of children and young adults were afflicted; some died.

One of those struck down was a robust 39-year-old named Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Falling ill in 1921, he was left paralyzed from the waist down. In 1933, he would assume the presidency of the United States — standing for his inauguration with the aid of braces and canes. He would battle the Great Depression and fight World War II from a wheelchair.

In 1949, polio struck a young woman who had gone on a cross-country trip with her husband, Hal Secrest, to celebrate his graduation from Stanford University. Her daughter Barbara, a longtime Sisters resident, believes that she contracted polio in Illinois. By the time she returned to California, she was gravely ill.

Jan Secrest died at 91 earlier this year. Despite being felled by the scourge of polio as a young bride, she lived an exceptionally full life, full of gratitude. Barbara described her mother as having a “sunny

attitude about her disability.”

Grateful that she did not end up in an “iron lung,” which kept sufferers of respiratory paralysis alive, she counted herself lucky to have undergone months of physical therapy to enable her to walk.

“It was actually quite fun,” Jan told her children. “I had Frisky the squirrel to entertain me while I was confined to bed for months.”

“She was incredibly stoic and not complaining,” Barbara said.

Barbara was born in 1954. Her mother’s condition was a simple fact of life — and one that Jan went out of her way to downplay.

“It was just a part of my life that Mom couldn’t do a lot of things that we could do,” Barbara reflected.

Jan focused on what she *could* do. She taped her thumbs around her knitting needles and carried on. When she wanted to rearrange the furniture in the house, she got on the floor and scooted it around.

“She never let her handicap get in the way of figuring out how to do stuff,” Barbara recalled.

Only once does Barbara recall that her mother showed the pain that she must have felt at the constraints the disease had placed upon her. Barbara’s sister Anne found her crying in the kitchen because she couldn’t take her children out to play in the snow.

When she and Hal purchased a hardware store in Independence, Oregon, Jan worked six days a week, with Hal making sure the aisles of the store remained navigable for his wife.

Just as Barbara came into the world in the middle of the 20th Century, the work of Jonas Salk on a polio vaccine was pushing polio out. The pall of terror that fell upon the country during polio season abated.

“She was a great admirer of Salk,” Barbara recalled. “She did describe the immense sense of relief, not just for herself personally, but for the country where that (the vaccine) was developed and available.”

Jan was struck by post-polio syndrome later in life — a not uncommon phenomenon that left her confined to a wheelchair. She never lost her



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Jan Secrest was one of the first to venture out in her wheelchair to take in the vista from the Whychus Overlook.

positive outlook. As Barbara noted, “she created a life she could manage.”

In fact, she saw benefits to having experienced such an affliction.

“She said that it gave her more compassion and understanding for other people,” Barbara said.

The dread associated with polio is a faded memory now. Yet, the threat still lurks.

“That disease is still out there,” Barbara Secrest notes. “It’s not eradicated — it’s controlled. It’s still out in the world.”



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