

The Witness Trees

By Joe Randig

Witness trees are, by definition, trees that are associated with an important historic person or event and are memorials to both life and death.

Recently I had the opportunity to return to the hospital where I received twenty-two months of rehabilitation following polio in 1952. At that time it was known as the D.T. Watson Home for Crippled Children. (It has been a rehabilitation hospital for the past eighty-three years and is currently HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Sewickley, Pa.)

As I turned off the main road and started back the quarter-mile lane to the hospital I realized that it was exactly as it had been sixty-six years earlier.

The lane is a beautiful, winding drive lined on both sides by large, very old trees. Then it hit me. They were “witness trees.” I could almost hear them whispering, “Welcome back, Joe” just as they had so many times all those years ago.



The trees first welcomed me on a cool October day in 1952 but I didn't see them as I was in the back of an ambulance. I was very sick, paralyzed from the waist down. I didn't know where I was.

After two months of rehab I was allowed my first visit home for the Thanksgiving weekend. I was bundled up against the cold and placed on the backseat of our 1940 something Packard.

The drive from Sewickley to Butler was on a long winding road known as the orange belt. The trip took over an hour with lots of right and left turns, up hills and down and a few forks in the road. (I'm sure my dad had many suspenseful winter drives taking me home for weekends then returning me again).

I don't remember the day to day details of the time I lived there (ages five to seven), as some of my memories are like looking at the world through a soft-focus camera lens. I want to share those memories that I do have, memories that will always be a part of me.

Near the hospital entrance there was an oddly located traffic light, odd because there was no intersection there. The light would turn from green to yellow to red and back to green just like all other traffic lights.

After I got my leg braces and learned to walk with crutches I became well acquainted with that light at the imaginary intersection. We used it to practice crossing the street. When we got to the other side we were challenged by a high curb that simulated stepping up into a bus. All this was done under the watchful eyes of the witness trees. I imagined them holding their breath, hoping that we would not spend months or even years being rehabilitated only to be killed because we couldn't cross a street fast enough.

Education was not forgotten while in the Watson Home. There were two classrooms, one in the boys' wing and one in the girls' wing. They functioned like old fashioned one room school houses with one teacher. Some grades were taught in the morning and others in the afternoon. I don't remember any details of that schooling but I did pass first grade and have a photo and report card to prove it.

David M. Oshinsky, in his book, *POLIO AN AMERICAN STORY*, describes the Watson Home as a “rather elegant facility” and it really was, especially in the eyes of a six year old.

In addition to traditional hospital rooms and wards the home had numerous common areas

with classic wood-covered walls and elaborate ceiling light fixtures featuring a zodiac theme.

When I was in my final year there at the age of seven I was allowed to take my meals in the formal dining room. This was the kind of room found in fine homes, spacious, tastefully decorated and with thick carpeting. We dined at long wooden tables with matching chairs and ate on china with real silverware. Doctors and nurses ate on one side of the room and if we were well-behaved we earned the privilege of eating on the other side with the witness trees watching to be sure we had good manners and kept our elbows off the table.

By the Spring of 1953 equipped with my new braces and crutches I was ready to explore the huge brick building surrounded by trees and acres of grass. My two room mates and I felt like we had the run of the place as we played in the dirt under the shrubs and wandered the dirt roads on the outskirts of the property, all of it under the watchful eyes of the trees looming overhead.

We discovered a pet cemetery, the power plant and a shop where braces were made. I can see



the small fires in the forge and hear the tink, tink, tink of hammers on red hot metal molding bars of steel to fit around tiny legs.

When passing a room in the hospital I would occasionally see an iron lung which reminded me of a submarine that could breathe. That's exactly what it was doing for the person inside. A motor ran constantly creating a rhythmic sound of air moving in and out . . . in and out.

I also saw rocking beds, another life-saving device invented by my doctor, [Jessie Wright](#). These were beds with motors that kept the bed in a constant seesaw motion, allowing air to flow in and out of the patient's lungs.

As in so many situations, there were things I loved and things I hated. One of the common treatments for paralyzed muscles was hot packs. Pieces of wool were soaked in hot water then wrapped around our legs in an effort to relax the muscles to make physical therapy easier. Anyone who ever had the hot packs placed on their legs will never forget the smell of wet wool.

As much as I disliked the hot packs, there was something else I really hated: night splints. At bedtime, my legs would be strapped into straight, rigid splints from the tops of my legs to the tips of my toes. I did everything I could to remove them without getting caught by the nurses.

What I liked the most was the pool. Hydrotherapy first became part of the rehabilitation at Watson in 1932. The building I was in had a nice pool in a big bright room with that ever-present pool smell that was absent in the rest of the hospital. I can still remember floating in the arms of a physical therapist. Perhaps I was high on pool chemicals, but I remember never wanting to leave that warm, comforting water.

As much as we were helped by the necessary rehabilitation some polio survivors speak of having been abused. I was never abused or mistreated in any way and happily never saw any abuse, but I believe the situation may have fostered some instances of it. These were such difficult times for everyone involved. We were very sick children who were taken from our homes and parents. We were placed in institutions filled with other very sick kids and unfamiliar adult faces.

Fear, anxiety, sadness and disappointment were only some of the emotions faced daily by patients, parents and our caregivers. I understand that some of the children may have misbehaved as a way of coping with the stress. Some of the caregivers may not have responded well to their behavior.

I sometimes wonder if any consideration was ever given to how we were being effected

psychologically by what we were experiencing. The adults had each other to talk to but we children children didn't have the ability to express our feelings in a healthy way. Yes, we were there to receive the help we needed to help us lead lives as full as possible in the future, but we were too young, and frequently too sick, to have any understanding of that.

All the while, the witness trees watched silently and kept their own counsel.

When I had regained strength and the ability to function with the braces, I was allowed more weekend visits home. Some of the children seldom saw their parents and never left the hospital. When my parents became aware of this they got permission from the administration to take some of the kids home with me, one at a time, for a few days. I like to think that this small kindness gave the kids some relief from the hospital routine and helped them to cope with their situation.

In May of 1952, a few months before my arrival at the Watson Home, the old trees had the honor of bearing witness to an important event. A young scientist named Dr. Jonas Salk brought his newly-developed polio vaccine to the hospital, and with the consent of parents, gave it to a small group of Watson Home patients making them the first children to receive the Salk vaccine.

In 1955 Dr. Salk returned to the Watson Home where he was welcomed by the witness trees and by me and my family. The polio vaccine had been approved and Dr. Salk contacted the home seeking a group of volunteers to take part in a clinical trial which consisted of being given the vaccine then being monitored for several years.

By this time I had been discharged but continued to receive outpatient treatment. When asked, my dad did not hesitate; he signed up my family and we became part of the "Watson Home Group."

We had our blood taken to see if our bodies already had the polio antibody then we were given the vaccine. Over the next few months we were tested, given booster shots and tested again. For the next nine years my family and I returned once a year to have blood taken and checked to be sure our bodies were maintaining the antibody. In 1964 Dr. Salk returned to the "Watson Home Group" to collect our final blood samples and bring his last clinical trial to an end.

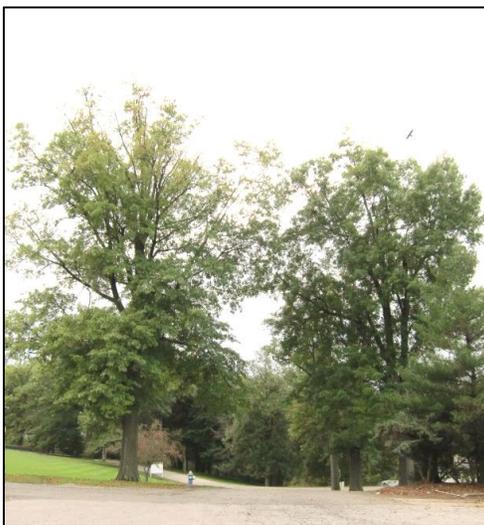
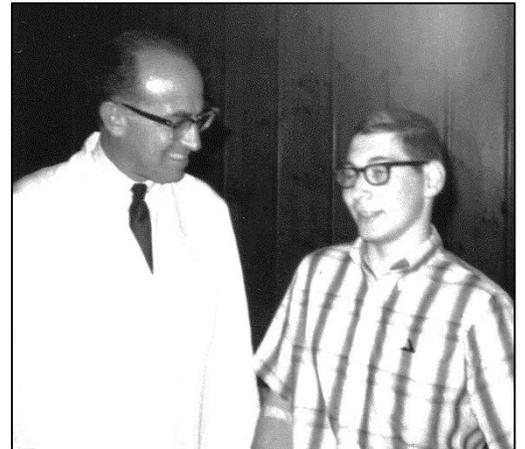
Over one hundred years ago Pittsburgh attorney David Thompson Watson and his wife purchased the beautiful, sprawling summer estate overlooking Sewickley and named it Sunny Hill. Having no children of their own they started an orphanage for girls. With the outbreaks of polio and the need for rehabilitation hospitals the purpose of the estate changed and in 1935 the current hospital was built. With the passing of both Mr. and Mrs. Watson in 1916, they never saw the full benefit of their dedication to caring for children.

In the 1980s care was extended to adults but in the 1990s the trees oversaw the construction of new buildings and a return to the Watsons' mission of caring for children, with the establishment of the Watson Institute dedicated to the out-patient care, education and rehabilitation of special needs children.

It is estimated that between 1920 and 1970 3,200 children were cared for at the Watson Home. Over all of those years the witness trees monitored the coming and going of doctors, nurses, therapists, aids, cooks, housekeepers, groundskeepers and secretaries whose one purpose was to care for and restore the hurt and broken bodies and spirits of the children and adults who needed their help.

Their names may be forgotten by the world but every Spring when the beautiful witness trees come back to life every one of the their thousands of leaves has a name on it: Dr. Salk, my name, maybe yours too, ensuring that we will never be forgotten.

The trees saw us all, and they remember.



Acknowledgements:

In the Summer of 2018, the PA Polio Survivors Network was planning a webcast, that we hoped would be available live to survivors throughout the State. I thought it would be great to get Pittsburgh area polio survivors together to view the webcast at the D.T. Watson Home. I contacted Lisa Hopkins, Business Development Director at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Sewickley. She liked my idea and without hesitation set about organizing our gathering thus giving me the opportunity to return to the Watson Home which sowed the seeds for this essay.

I contacted Susan C. Holton, Associate Director, Sewickley Valley Historical Society who was kind enough to look through the archives and provide me with newspaper articles containing important historical information.

I would like to thank both of these ladies for their generosity. Without their help I could not have written this essay.

A very special thanks goes to my wife Linda who is my compass, my able-bodied assistant, my editor and my life partner and without whom I would accomplish very little.

Sources:

POLIO AN AMERICAN STORY by David M. Oshinsky
Oxford University Press, 2005

The Sewickley Herald June 10, 1970

The Sewickley Herald November 12, 1975

National Park Service Mosaics in Science website November 12, 2018

“From D.T. Watson To HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Sewickley”



D.T. Watson Home historical display set up for the survivor reunion and webcast event, October, 2018