



The Nurse's Office

Jerry Woodfill



The card came in the mail. Before I disclose its contents, things need be said about Brantwood and Hohman, Indiana medical paranoia. The scourge known as Polio hung as a prospect over both Indiana communities. I'd liken it to the threatening sickle in Poe's short story *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

The terror of the disease discouraged many parents from sending their children to public pools. Wicker Park swimming pool, at the height of the pre-Jonas Salk vaccine days, might as well have been the Black-Hole-of-Calcutta as far as my Mother was concerned.

Fortunately, she got a grip on her fears so that I learned how to swim there, taking aquatic instruction on the dog-paddle and other more advanced strokes. This led, one lonely morning, to my survival. I was 100 feet from shore when I found myself "over-my-head", the term for any depth more than 6 inches greater than a young swimmer's height. The *deep* in this case was a mere five foot, sufficient to drown me. I panicked.

There was absolutely no one to save me. No Wicker Park life guard, no life raft, inner tube, rubber ducky air-float, puffy water wings, plank of flotsam, nothing! I was finished.

Then came the miraculous, an inexplicable inner calm, the kind I'd seen my hero cowboy *Hopalong* Cassidy get when a desperado drew his gun. My skinny limbs began that perfunctory canine stroke learned in the urine warmed waters of the Wicker Park pool.

Thank God! Mom had acquiesced, exposing me to the ravages of Polio. Had I been infected, I, nevertheless, might have survived, though in an iron lung. That would not have been the case without the dog-paddle I learned there. I would have drowned.

Incidentally, my Uncle Bob did contract Polio as a youth. It left him with an impaired ability to swallow. However, he is well into his 90s, at this writing, having long outlived all in my family who never got the disease. Again, heredity reigns.

Brantwood's little Lords, of which I was among, had no private school nearby to shield them from the influence of the common elements, i.e., children from "across the Monon Railroad tracks." The options were the Culver Military Academy, hundreds of miles away though a very fine option for incorrigibles or the near by St. Thomas More Catholic school. Though but five miles distant, Mom's Missouri Synod Lutheran leanings scratched it from the list. Besides, the family income was limited.

The public *links* to education it would be, Lincoln Grade School. Conveniently, Lincoln's campus was but a nine iron shot from Brantwood, walking distance for every privileged lad and lassie in the realm.

Remarkable about Lincoln Grade School was its roofline. It had the shape of a 240 foot long by 50 foot wide gutter. Often, rain funneled from the roof's open ends like Niagara's roaring waters, drenching those of us without umbrellas.

Should a flood of biblical proportions befall the Brantwoodian Kingdom, the populace could flee to that roof. It surely would serve as ably as Noah's Ark. In fact, those divine specifications given Noah revealed the providence of Lincoln School's architect. The Ark hull and the school roof were identical.

But what about that card that came in the mail? It had to do with Lincoln School's medical vigilance. The school nurse operated a mini-clinic housed next to the principal's office. A long list of unusual medical tests, procedures, and preventive

practices were regularly performed on the 400+ juvenile victims, ages, 6-13.

There was the tattoo torture inflicted on every one. Protest was futile. It was for the miniscule chance that fate ordained a ghastly accident, a torrential blood spurting from a wound, each spurt syncopated to the final beats of an expiring heart.

"If only we knew the child's blood type, perhaps, there might still be time to save the tyke."

"Doctor, this child is from Lincoln Elementary School!"

"Yes. Nurse check his right side. They tattoo all of 'em there, just like prairie cattle."

"Ah, ha, there it is!"

"He's an A-positive type. Praise the Lord! We'd got a dozen pints of A+ in the cooler!"

"Thank God for those Lincoln school administrators. That nurse...she's the Florence Nightingale of the Highland Independent School District!"

And that was the justification for the pain each of us endured. I'd liken the pricks of the multi-needled tattoo "burner" to a small dose of the State's electric chair. It sort of buzzed into your flesh, burning, pricking, injecting the vial blue ink subcutaneously beneath the epidermal layer.

That night, I undressed to the waist. With Mom's hand mirror, positioned like a submarine's periscope, I looked for the image stamped forevermore as that brand identifying me as a Lincoln Lion.

"There it was." But...

"Oh...no!"

"It didn't take."

Somehow those needles didn't make the vertical line in the plus (+) mark dark enough. You couldn't tell if I was a + (plus) or - (minus).

To this day, my fear remains of a hapless ambulance tech finding me prostrate, entangled amidst the carnage of my Explorer.

"Yes, there it is. He was one of those Lincoln School kids. Shoot him full of his blood type. **A-NEGATIVE!**"
Agh!

No, the card wasn't an official acknowledgement of my blood type, though they did give me one just before that branding.

But, considering what I know historically about my classmates, (*A half century has passed.*) to my knowledge, not one has benefited in the way the nurse said we would from getting that tattoo.

Another of Lincoln School's required medical procedures was the Hair and Scalp Surveillance Exam, a most bizarre and humiliating undertaking, sure to encourage a case of "hookey" the day it was scheduled.

The dreadful process was confined to a dark closet in the nurse's office. The juvenile subject sat rigidly erect. Gloved in latex, the nurse deftly raked a comb-like sickle in slow random swipes through the subject's head-hair. Her other hand grasped some kind of light-ray device that looked like a prop from a Frankenstein movie. A supernatural appearing pinkish-purplish beam flooded her view of the scalp so that the entire room lit up as though nurse and subject were encapsulated in a pink Christmas tree light.

The comb-light apparatus was said to ferret from the scalp hidden vermin like lice, dandruff, and colonies of indescribable microscopic and, of course, potentially fatal bacterium cultures. But it was my mother's dire warning which most terrified my tender psyche,

"Don't wear another kid's hat or you'll get the RINGWORM!"

My deepest fear was the nurse's surveillance beam uncovering amongst my crue-cut hair follicles, a full-blown, advanced, final stage, terminal, metastasized,

untreatable, fatal case of that unspeakable contagion RINGWORM!

When the nurse gave her prognosis, I sighed in relief. The note sent home said only, "Jerry, has dry scalp. Try another shampoo."

For yet another year, I was RINGWORM free!

That card mentioned earlier was not the scalp exam result. It was much more dire.

Those annual darkroom parasitic searches spawned unforgettable tales among the waiting victims. Perhaps, this was the genesis of that tapeworm story often told in hushed tones of disgust and derision. More likely it was a result of reading the tri-fold health education flyer sent home with each of us.

In this "worm-warning-tri-fold" was a sketch of the step-by-step tape-worm infection process. What began with walking out-doors barefooted, progressed through the stages of tape-worm infection, including maturation of the worm, and ultimate intestinal infestation in the host human carrier. The closest thing I could compare to the descriptive process would be those early 1960s lunar landing posters showing the launch into Earth orbit, trans-lunar injection (the journey to the Moon), and the ultimate Moon landing.

In comparison, launch for these tape-worms was your naked feet. Innocently stepping on a nest of their lava was the same as launching them into the cosmos of your body. Like the Moon mission, the second stage worms climb intravenously into and up your legs. Their mission success comes when the morbid beasts reach your bowels, i.e., stomach, colon, intestines, large and small, as well as your throat. At that time, comes the momentous words, "The tapeworms have landed!" along with the sequent pronouncement of the child, "Mom, I've Got a Problem."

The ravishes of a tape-worm colony sucks the nourishment of Mom's daily three course meals of salad, meat, and desert into growing longer and longer worms. The flyer said the tapeworm was a "parasite" but the person was a "host". This had to be a lousy name for the affected person. My idea of a host was a person who invited a guest into his home. Certainly, no one would welcome the visit of a tapeworm.

But the horror story heard often about the Lincoln School campus dealt with a method for getting the tapeworms, off-the-moon, i.e., out of the body and back to Earth. It seemed that a wholly tapeworm infested family, moved into the neighborhood from the south, i.e. from across the Creek. (These were, of course, not Brantwoodians.)

Despite enormous helpings of pig jowls, collard greens, liver, and wild possum meat, the "youngin's" were "wasting away," thin as an Indiana corn stalk. Apparently, scores of miles of tapeworm torsos *serpentine*d through each child, from gullet to anus, consuming most of that southern cooking.

Now, these southerners were more worldly wise than Brantwoodians, finding kindred wisdom among the Hammond-Hessville populace, not needing medication, surgery, or mechanical means for tapeworm deliverance, the extracting of the elongated beasts. "The *milk-cure* would save those kids."

These southerners must have been neighbors of Shep's coarse Bumpus clan, but their remedy for tapeworm dated back to the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Those pioneers knew well the medical benefits of the "milk-cure" just as surely as the fatal consequences of the "milk sick", an early form of milk malignance that killed within a day of consuming the cow's contagion.

Unknown to Brantwoodians, tapeworms cannot resist warm foamy milk any more than a Wabash Street Wino can cheap wine. That gaggle of southern kids kneeled down, side by side, mouths open wide so not to obstruct the passage of those tapeworms. A red wood picnic bench sat beneath their four open mouths. The process required each child to breathe solely through the nostrils of the nose. This prevented the trekking tapeworms from choking the hosts, i.e., the children.

A shallow pan was placed on the bench before each of the infected tapeworm carriers. From the kitchen came the irresistible tapeworm pottage, a porridge of warm

foamy Pleasant View Homogenized Dairy Milk.

The return to Earth phase was ponderous for the worm as well as the juvenile host. It was said, to consume several hours of gagging, vomiting, choking, spitting, screaming and moaning. But, be assured, the mission was always completed successfully. Needless to say, I seldom walked bare footed outside 8728 Woodward Avenue.

This had to be one of those "urban legend" tales that today's Internet blog-sites parrot. But in 1950, at Lincoln School, validation true or false was impossible. My Dad had sort of a fetish for these kinds of ghastly and altogether nauseating stories. His favorite, supposedly true, reminds me of *The Christmas Story* scene where the Bumpus' hounds devour the family Christmas turkey.

Again, a nameless family of unfortunates surrounded the Thanksgiving feast prepared by the clan's mother. The center piece, as expected, was the 20 pound turkey, cooked hours overnight to a tender, juicy perfection.

Because of the family's generosity, wanting to share their modest blessings, (*After all, it was Thanksgiving!*) they had invited a street person from the tawdry real estate under the Ridge Road Creek bridge. This child of ill-fortune is given the honored seat at the head of the table.

To begin, the perfunctory blessing is said over the manna placed before them. Then, the pitch fork sized turkey fork is lifted, poised to spear the big bird's chest, preparatory to drawing and quartering the bird in traditional Thanksgiving butchery. That is when it happened. It was the guest interloper, not really his fault, but, nevertheless, just as terrible. There are sneezes and there are SNEEZES of which the event was of the awful latter case, a spewing, harking, quaking, inner rumbling of phlegm and expectorant blasting from the vagrant's mouth, lips, and nasal passages with such force as to be the envy of the *hosers* of the BVFD, the Brantwood Volunteer Fire Department.

The glistening golden brownish hairless chest skin of the family bird caught the brunt of the blast, instantly bathed in the slimy, foamy saliva, mucus and general mixture of Mogen David and less pricey *imbibings*. The Turkey's chest color had changed hue from golden brown to a creamy, silvery white. Like an oyster, it was slimy to touch. Only the bird's large size had shielded the family from residual exhaust leaking pass the fowl's carcass.

At once, the smiling facades of the hungry feasters darkened with thoughts not unlike those entertained by incarcerated felons awaiting their final meal. What choice was there but to lift the contaminated bird, its platter, along with the stuffing falling from its open neck wound from the table? The only alternative was for the fowl to be washed, reheated, and re-served? And so it was.

Dad enjoyed the conclusion of his tale, watching the grimace on my face when I asked, "What happened then?"

"That night the entire family, except for the vagrant, came down with the dysentery."

I didn't know what that word meant and didn't want to show my ignorance so I found it in the dictionary. It meant "a sickness in the lower bowels, with diarrhea that becomes mucous and hemorrhagic." Now, I didn't know what hemorrhagic meant either. So I looked it up. The definition reveals just how repulsive Dad's tale was. It meant a discharge of blood. "What a Thanksgiving that must have been!"

Enough of Dad's fantastic stories, the sad look on Mom's face, her measured, carefully chosen words as she handed me that card told me it was not the stuff of tattoos, hair lice, worms, or stressed bowels. It had to be life threatening, and it was...

Next to Polio, the grim reaper stalking Brantwoodian youth in the 50s was the dreaded malady Tuberculosis. TB for short. No one escaped those screening X-rays at Lincoln School. Some kind of a huge rolling van docked like an oil-tanker in the parking lot. It looked more like one of those Oscar Meyer Wiener Mobiles than a medical diagnostic facility.

The 400 Lincoln Lions and Lionesses filed in line for several days hearing those words, "Inhale deeply young man. Hold your breath. Yes, its cold on your chest but only for a moment. Be patient." The shutoff of the machine's buzz, with the simultaneous and abrupt, "NEXT STUDENT!" told me it was O.K. to step back, put my shirt back on and leave.

Except for that icy contact with my bare skin, the test was no more bothersome than the shoe-fit X-ray diagnostic machine at the Highland Department Store. At least that X-ray-er showed my toes wagging in my Tom McCann's while I watched. I didn't need a card to come in the mail weeks later telling me my shoes fit.

The card came two weeks to the day the X-Ray-Mobile motored North onto Highway 41, perhaps, in route to Shep's Warren G. Harding Elementary School in Hessville, 5 miles closer to Lake Michigan's shores than Lincoln School. There, other mere youths in the prime of life might, also, receive the same card..."We have found a suspicious indication of a potential problem on your recent chest x-ray.

See your physician immediately. Lake County Medical X-ray Community Services.

At once, the scene of a choking, convulsing Tiny Tim came to mind, immediately followed by Boy's Town's Father Flanagan at Mickey Rooney's bedside ministering last rites. I protested out loud, "Mom, I can't have TB, its winter. The Wicker Park pool's been empty for three months." My thinking had made that pool the single and only place on planet Earth one could contract Polio, Tuberculosis, Whooping Cough, and lesser-maladies like Cancer, Typhoid, or Cholera.

My official Doctor Kildare immediately became World Book page 8192 of volume 16 which was "T" among the lettered volumes of our set of Encyclopedias. Carefully, I studied its prognosis. I was not comforted by these words, "Tuberculosis is one of the most serious infectious diseases, and today...causes about one tenth of ALL HUMAN DEATHS...sometimes called THE WHITE PLAGUE because it is SO DEADLY...It may attack all INCOME GROUPS. (Even Brantwoodians!)"

The worst was yet to come from my good Doctor World Book. "Many a child has been infected by careless spitting of others."

"My God," I thought, "Dad's Thanksgiving story could have had a much worse conclusion than dysentery. It might have been TB infecting the family."

Then came the symptoms, "chills, fever, pain in the chest, cough, labored breathing, and lung congestion." (I had them all though it was likely from simply breathing the polluted "yellow-tinged air which hung over the steel mills.)

"So," I wondered, "What stops the symptoms and heals the disease?" Again, my Dr. World Book Volume T, M.D. minced no words. Its "bedside" manner was as subtle as a root canal, "These symptoms last four to twelve weeks ending in DEATH. THERE IS NO KNOWN CURE."

I was a "dead boy walking"! Likely, I wouldn't make it to summer vacation. No Camp Pokagon this year, no more Wicker Park pool. I couldn't even retaliate and give the guy whose sputum I walked through back his stupid disease.

On the World Book page was a 5X7 inch photo of that cumbersome x-ray machine, x-raying a young woman with a nurse standing close by pushing the woman against that cold framework. The apparatus looked like something the Merciless Ming would subject my hero Flash Gordon to endure. Closely, I studied the photo's caption, hoping against hope, for some hidden flaw in the process, "The X-Ray is a Quick Way to Detect Tuberculosis, it shows SPOTS ON THE LUNGS."

"God no," I wept, "That's what the post card says, "a spot was on my x-ray." It was over for me. If I'd only have had a less serious malady like a mile long tapeworm feeding on Mom's predictable Thursday liver dinner, or a Ring Worm infestation that kept a nylon woman's stocking over my hair for the rest of my life to keep me from infecting others, or if I'd only had lice, or bed bugs, or leeches, or pin worms...anything but TUBERCULOSIS!"

I read on: Sometimes victims survived a bit more than 12 weeks, but in such cases, "No child should live in a room where he can infect another with this dreaded disease."

At once, the scene imaged before me. I was prostrate in a hospital bed, a plastic tent over me, attendants attired in defcon space suits bringing my last meal. I was a "Typhoid Jerry!"

Knowing death certain within the school year, I felt my eyes begin to tear, "I wouldn't even make 2nd Class Scout, I'd die a lowly Tenderfoot member of the Eagle Patrol.

About to close Volume 16, I noticed the following topic, "Tuberculosis Society of America." One of their fund raising methods was offering Christmas stamps. "Small consolation," I fretted "if I died within the 4 week window of survival, I just might become a listed victim for the year 1954."

The saying goes, "A coward dies a thousand deaths but a brave man but once." By the time of the scheduled retest on a hospital's X-ray machine, I was well on my way to that thousand count. But my symptoms were not getting worse. Perhaps, the steel workers were striking and the open hearth pollutants had abated, but things were definitely improved.

The retest confirmed it. It found no evidence of Tuberculosis. I would not die a Tenderfoot after all.



The Nurse's Office Comprehension Questions
(Enter answers on the line to left of each question.)

_____ 1. Jerry received a package in the mail.
(T)rue or (F)alse

_____ 2. Jerry's mother worried he'd get _____.
a. AIDS
b. Polio
c. Impetigo
d. Pinworms

_____ 3. The Wicker Park Pool saved Jerry
from?
a. TB
b. sunburn
c. influenza
d. drowning

_____ 4. Brantwoodians avoided the pool.
(T)rue or (F)alse.

_____ 5. Jerry's mother didn't want him
swimming in the Wicker Park Pool
because _____.
a. Gangs might do him harm.
b. He'd be run over by a car walking
to the pool.
c. He'd catch a disease.
d. Some kids went to the bathroom in
the water.

_____ 6. Why did the nurse tattoo the students?
a. So they could be identified if they
were kidnapped.
b. It was a fad which made them
distinct as Lincoln Lions like
wearing a school sweat shirt
with the mascot on it.

c. To identify their blood type for a
transfusion if they had an
accident.
d. To help them distinguish their right
side from their left.

_____ 7. How did Jerry discover his tattoo was
flawed?
a. He bruised his side and the
nurse told him
about it.
b. He used his mom's hand mirror to
see it.
c. A friend saw it at the Wicker Park
Pool and
laughed about it.
d. It started festering and itching
causing him to ask his
mom to look at it.

_____ 8. What was the purpose of the nurse's
hair and scalp exam?
a. To make sure students were not
violating the hair style code of
the 1950s at Lincoln School,
that is, no Elvis Presley
type hair styles.
b. To send a note home that the
student needed a haircut.
c. To suggest the right kind of
shampoo for the student's hair.
d. To find evidence of scalp and hair
disease or parasites.

_____ 9. What did Jerry compare the tapeworm
infection process to?
a. Jules Verne's book, *A Journey to
the Center of the Earth*.
b. The three little bears' eating their
mother's porridge.

c. Finding his way out of a haunted
house maze.
d. Neil Armstrong's *Eagle* spacecraft
landing on the Moon.

_____ 10. What did the vagrant do to the turkey?
a. Slipped a drumstick into his pocket.
b. Named it Oscar Meyer.
c. Patted it on its chest.
d. Expecterated on its carcass.

_____ 11. The card that came in the mail said
_____.
a. Jerry might have polio.
b. Jerry had won the lottery.
c. Jerry had ring worm.
d. Jerry might have TB.

_____ 12. Jerry decided to investigate what the
card said by _____.
a. Calling the doctor.
b. Asking the school nurse.
c. Examining volume 16, pg. 8192 of
the encyclopedia.
d. Watching Dr. Kildare on television.

_____ 13. What did Jerry NOT think about his
fate?
a. No Camp Pokagon this year.
b. No more Wicker Park Pool.
c. He was a "dead boy walking."
d. He felt sorry for the person who he
thought gave him the disease.

_____ 14. What disease or malady did Jerry
most fear?
a. a mile long tapeworm.
b. ring worm
c. Tuberculosis
d. pin worms

- _____ 15. Jerry began to cry because _____.
- He would not be able to have the hair/scalp exam again next year.
 - He'd thought he'd die a lowly Tenderfoot Boy Scout.
 - He'd miss his mom's calf liver dinners on Thursday nights.
 - He'd never be able to experience the tapeworm milk cure.

- _____ 16. Who would you rather be in the story?
- One of the family at the Thanksgiving dinner.
 - The kid whose "spew" Jerry thought he's stepped in at the pool.
 - One of the kids taking the "milk cure."
 - Jerry

- _____ 17. Who among those listed below are not Jerry's hero?
- Flash Gordon
 - The television cowboy hero Hopalong Cassidy.
 - Frankenstein
 - Dr. Kildare

- _____ 18. What saying impressed Jerry?
- "Dead men tell no tales."
 - "Stupid is as stupid does."
 - "A coward dies a thousand deaths..."
 - "What you don't know can't hurt you."

- _____ 19. Jerry's symptoms improved because _____.
- There was less pollution in the air.

- They were imagined, and he stopped being fearful.
- He was resigned to dying and stopped worrying.
- He really didn't have TB.

- _____ 20. The major anecdotes in *The Nurse's Office* did NOT include _____.
- The story of the vagrant at the Thanksgiving dinner.
 - The tapeworm cure being administered to infected children.
 - The nurse's hair/scalp exam being conducted.
 - Experiencing the Lincoln School tattooing.
 - Receiving the wrong type blood after an automobile accident.
 - A ricocheting BB breaking Jerry's glasses

- derision
 - maturation
 - intravenously
 - parasite
 - host
 - torsos
 - serpentine
 - malignance
 - trekking
 - fetish
 - nauseating
 - interloper
 - expectorant
 - facades
 - incarcerated
 - dysentery
 - hemorrhagic
- ridicule
becoming fully developed in a vein
an animal or plant living on or in another animal or plant
the animal or plant in or on which a parasite lives
bodies
snaked, wove (coined word)
a deadly thing
to travel or migrate
obsession or unnatural desire, slang hang-up"
sickening
intruder
spit or other ejected fluid from the mouth
faces or fronts
imprisoned
diarrhea
bloody

The Nurse's Office Vocabulary List

<u>Word</u>	<u>Synonym</u>
1. paranoia	fear
2. inexplicable	puzzling
3. desperado	desperate criminal
4. perfunctory	routine
5. acquiesced	agreed
6. vigilance	alert watchfulness
7. miniscule	extremely small
8. syncopated	irregularly sounded
9. subcutaneously	under the skin
10. epidermal	outer
11. prostrate	to lay flat on the ground
12. metastasized	spread
13. prognosis	forecast of the course of a disease (prediction)
14. genesis	origin