

‘They didn’t expect us to live’

# Brothers nearly died of polio in 1949

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**ARCADIA TWP.** — Bob Bertram was terrified. The nine-year-old boy lay helpless in a children’s hospital bed. He could hear his brother Donald, 11, gasping for life in an iron lung.

It was August, 1949. The Bertram boys were stricken with polio, 36 hours apart. Don’s virus settled in his lungs. Bob’s was in his throat.

“We got it from going swimming in Lake Pleasant,” Bob said. “It was Aug. 1 or 2, I’m not sure of the date. It was 93 degrees out. We hauled hay that day and put it in the barn. My dad was working afternoons at Buick in Flint.”

The Bertrams lived on Lake Pleasant Road a mile north of Bowers Road. After working in the hay, Don and Bob changed into their swimming trunks and walked south to the lake. Their brother Ben, 13, kept his shirt and overalls on and carried a fishing pole. They were headed for Cedar Park on the northeast corner of Lake Pleasant.

“Charlie Ball, he lived on Ball Drive. He owned that property, all the way to the lake,” Bob said. “He gave us permission to cross his property. If somebody else saw us, they’d say, ‘Hey! You can’t walk across there.’ But he always let us.”

“There was scum on the water that day. Actual scum. When something like that happens (getting polio) you don’t forget.”

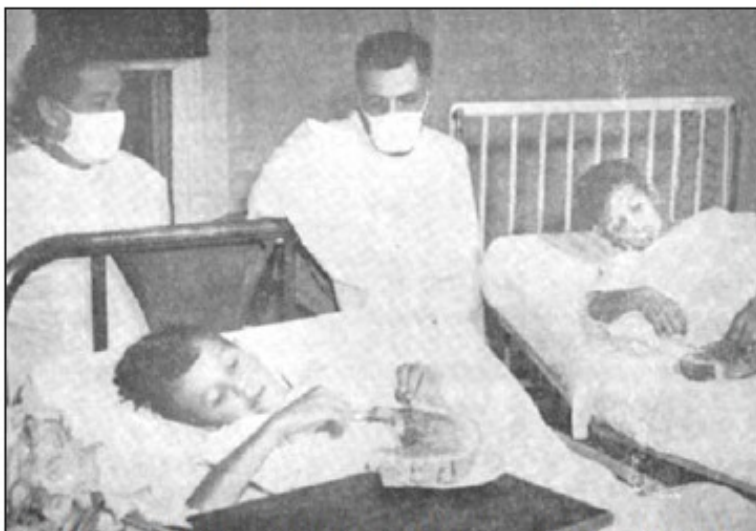
Poliomyelitis is a disease caused by a virus. It can cause flu-like symptoms, meningitis, paralysis and death. A vaccine developed in the 1950s eventually eliminated the disease in the United States.

The polio virus is spread by person-to-person contact, or more commonly through the fecal-oral route, according to the World Health Organization. The website said polio also can be caused by contact with the environment, by drinking infected water or swimming in it.

To this day, Bob Bertram believes that’s how he and his brother Don came down with polio. Not long after their excursion in the lake, the boys were diagnosed. First Don. A day and a half later, Bob.

“Neither one of us was supposed to live,” Bob said. “We went to the Lapeer hospital first. Don was there the day before me. Dr. Smith of Imlay City, he’s the one who put us in there. He said we had polio.”

Perhaps the city hospital on Pine Street couldn’t deal with the dreaded



Robert Bertram, 9, (left) and his brother Donald Bertram, 11, of Arcadia Township are pictured recovering from polio at Hurley Hospital in August, 1949.

disease. Don was rushed to Hurley Hospital in Flint, and his little brother soon followed. Decades later the name was changed to Hurley Medical Center.

“They put us in the basement. Back then the doctors weren’t sure how contagious it was,” Bob said. “My brother would have fits. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t get his air so they put him in the iron lung. The machine pumped air into his lungs because he couldn’t do it. He had a mask on all the time. In 30 minutes it would be all wet and he would almost drown in the water. I’d wake up and hear him and I’d start bawling.”

At one point Donald’s temperature soared to 105 degrees and he took a turn for the worse. So did Bob, who had the bulbar kind of polio that restricted his throat. For five days he couldn’t drink or swallow anything.

By then they were on the critical list and the doctors were certain the brothers were going to die. It must have been after midnight when the phone rang at the Bertram household. Alma, their mother, was told to get to the hospital as soon as possible because her sons would be dead before 9 a.m. Her husband Benedict was working the night shift at Buick Motor Division in Flint.

Ellis and Mildred Haskell, the neighbors, drove Alma to the hospital in Flint. Her husband left work and met her there. They feared it was the last

or more he was freed from the machine for good.

Doctors and hospital administrators would not confirm or deny the boys contracted polio from swimming in a lake. The physician who treated them said of the four polio patients in his care, all had gone swimming just before they came down with the disease.

As the Bertram boys got their appetites back they talked wistfully about the watermelons growing in their father’s garden. The day came when he brought them some during a family visit to the hospital. Ben talked to his younger brothers through a window.

Dr. George Hays, the city health director, and Fannie Johnson, a physiotherapist, asked *The Flint Journal* to feature the Bertram boys’ recovery as an inspiration for other parents whose children were stricken with polio.

The story ran on the front page of Section Two in the Sunday edition of Aug. 21, 1949. It said of the 40 polio victims taken to Hurley that year, the majority would return to normal lives with no paralysis.

Two other articles on the page were about polio cases. One was of a nine-year-old boy rushed from the Vassar city limits to Herman Kiefer Hospital in Detroit where an iron lung was available. He was escorted by state troopers from Flint.

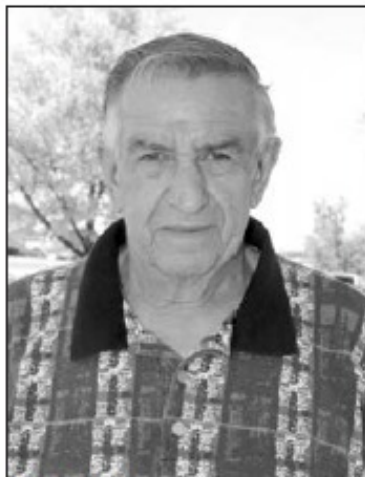
The other was of a 20-year-old Owosso man, on duty as an Air Force member at Selfridge Field. He was admitted to Hurley on Friday and died there of spinal bulbar polio Saturday night.

After spending the better part of August at Hurley, Bob Bertram and his brother Don were sent back home to the family farm. Bob said they missed a year of school because they couldn’t walk. The family dog was their faithful companion.

“We’d walk a few feet and collapse,” Bob said. “Donald could walk better than I could. We crawled around on our hands and knees. We went to Dr. Smith a couple times again. He said, ‘I never thought they could cure you of it.’ So we never went swimming in Lake Pleasant after that. Never again.”

Eventually the boys recovered and went on to live normal lives. Don poured cement for a living. He married, had four daughters and died in 1977 at age 59.

Bob is 76 and still going strong. He and his wife Marie own the Bertram farmhouse on Lake Pleasant Road. They have been comfortably settled there for many years.



Bob Bertram

time they’d see their two younger sons on this side of the grave. Later that day, the boys’ father went to the cemetery and looked at burial lots.

Slowly the boys recovered. Because they required special nurses 24 hours a day, the cost was covered by the Flint chapters of the March of Dimes and the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, Inc. As Donald improved he was removed from the iron lung, a short while at a time. After eight days