Chapter 3

Growing Up with a Physical Handicap

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It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life.

—Simone de Beauvoir, 1957

Although I have been a professional writer and historian for years, when I was asked to write a chapter on growing up with a physical handicap, my response was strongly negative. I questioned whether I wanted to commit my personal statement to paper or even if I wanted to delve into my years of struggle and search for identity. Finally, after agreeing to the project, I found it painful to review and write an honest portrayal of the physical and emotional stress that altered my life as well as those of my family. Slowly, this chapter, which topically is unlike anything else I write, was completed. Preparing it has renewed my conviction that I was fortunate in my family and friends, who offered support, and occasional opposition. They helped me channel drive and defiance into a constructive life.

I have organized reminiscences of my unique, often troubled youth into three sections; (1) my reactions to restrictions, hospitalizations, and social attitudes caused by a devastating illness; (2) adolescence, education, and the rebellion inherent in both; and (3) my desire, and fight, to become personally and financially independent.
GROWING UP, AND SUDDENLY HANDICAPPED

Recently, a woman visitor telephoned from Yosemite Valley to compliment me on one of my recent books, *Yosemite and Its Innkeepers*. As our conversation dwindled, she said hesitantly, “I understand you have a health problem.” “Health problem? Me? Good grief, no—I’m extremely healthy.” Suddenly, I recognized her euphemism and added laughingly, “Oh, well, I do have a wheelchair, but it’s no problem.”

Afterwards, I thought how odd it was that while my physical handicaps of involuntary motion and spinal curvature necessitate a wheelchair and daily exercises, they truly are secondary to my life as a writer, historian, publisher, and mountaineer. For 17 years, I have lived alone, awkwardly but happily, on a forested spur 12 miles west of Yosemite Valley, where I “raise” pine trees, manzanita, and books. Before that I alternated city winters with mountain summers. I use a wheelchair but also drive a car and ride three-wheeled bikes, one at home and the other in Yosemite Valley. On backpacking trips, I am aboard a mule or crawling or rock climbing. Such zestful independence and health were shatteringly absent between the ages of 9 and 30, when a rare, progressive, and disabling disease affected me and, of course, my family.

Because of the economic Depression of the 1930s, and my father’s profession as a highway engineer, my childhood differed from the one-home, one-school, one-culture norm. By the age of 9, I had lived in 17 homes (houses, tents, and even a pioneer log cabin); had attended eight schools, varying in size from a three-story city structure with several hundred students to a one-room country school; and had known city, country, and mountain cultures. Before the Depression, Dad had been the well-paid chief of a survey party, with a savings account, a three-bedroom house, two cars, investments, and a wife and child. By the time my sister was born in 1931, he had lost his job, the house, one car, savings, and investments and had to borrow to pay the hospital bill for mother and infant. By digging postholes, he managed to stay off relief.

In 1932, he welcomed an engineering position with the Bureau of Public Roads at $115 per month, even though it meant moving from job to job at the whim of weather and the bureau. My father loved the outdoor life of the national forests and parks, while mother said, “I don’t care where we live, so long as I can have you and running water.” In many places, “running” water was supplied by Dad carrying buckets.

My father’s background had been hardscrabble and unconventional, while Mom’s was orderly and traditional, yet both were highly