A Summer (and Fall) to remember!

The summer before my junior year in high school, my Aunt Helen (sort of an Auntie Mame type), said she wanted to give me and my cousin, Robert, a July 4th summer vacation experience we would always remember. We drove to Red Rock Canyon state park in western Oklahoma arriving after dark Friday and sleeping on air mattresses beside the car that evening. The road entering the state park dips down and forms a one lane road around the circumference of the canyon. The middle is grass with a swimming pool and restrooms. The walls rise 40 to 100 feet off the canyon floor. There were flowering bushes at the bottom of the canyon and trees reaching above the canyon walls. I awoke early the next morning and went exploring on my own following trails and climbing rocks. When I returned to camp, all were awake and I told my cousin to follow me as I was going to show him how to climb up the canyon walls. As I grabbed a healthy-looking stalk of grass near the top of the canyon, I came away with dirt and grass and air in my right hand as I slid backwards off the cliff! I remember bouncing off a gnarled bunch of tree roots and landing at the base of the cliff, unfortunately with my elbow hitting a rock jutting out of the ground. At this point both my cousin and aunt were frozen where they were unable to move in any direction. I learned later that my aunt was praying I was not dead. Now from across the canyon a lady and her family were running toward us; and she was proclaiming in a loud voice that “I knew something bad was going to happen.” More pissed off at myself than her, I took this comment as a derogatory analysis of my climbing skills and a challenge! I intended to rise up and tackle the canyon again! However, when I tried to move, the pain in my left elbow and left hip was so bad that I decided not to climb any more at this time.

A call was made by someone for the town ambulance to come to the park. The town ambulance was at the fairgrounds helping prepare for the town’s annual Fourth of July rodeo—a major event in Hinton, Oklahoma. So, after waiting for 45 minutes, the ambulance arrived and took me to a small doctor’s office somewhere in town. (This was nothing like today’s 24-hour Med-Center. This was 1964!) The doctor may have given me a sling, or a bandage, or water, but he basically said he could do little and I should go to Oklahoma City for surgery. So, off we went in an ambulance for the 53-mile trip to Oklahoma City. I learned later that my aunt (my dad’s sister) was dreading every moment of this trip (hell, the entire day) and was very grateful that I wasn’t dead! Apparently, it had been arranged that we should call the hospital when we were about 5 minutes away. We had to stop and use a phone (there were no cellphones). As we stopped, I moved the curtain in this hearse-like vehicle to reveal we had stopped at a funeral home! “Aunt Helen”, I yelled, “Could you have picked a different place to stop and call?” Suddenly getting the flavor of the moment, both she and my cousin began laughing and apologizing at the same time. Determining I was not deceased, we proceeded on to the Baptist Hospital in Oklahoma City. I remember being wheeled on a gurney from the hearse into the hospital, and on the way looking up into my parents’ faces. Mom expressed worry and concern. Dad was not happy! I was stripped of all clothing, given a blanket, and placed in the coldest operating room in the building! I could hear but not see persons operating in the next room. This was not comforting.

Upon awakening I found myself in a hospital bed with a triangular pull-up bar over my chest. The doctor informed me that I had 2 screws in my elbow. (Go check out an 8/32 by 1½ inch screw at Lowes!) He said there was nothing they could do for the hip. I would have to stay in bed for 6-8 weeks for it to heal. No walking, no jumping. My first question was “When can I go home?” His response was “As soon as you can make a fist with your left hand”. (This was the elbow with two screws). “Watch this”, I said. As I began to close my fist, a painful, blood-curdling scream was heard throughout the hospital. And I realized I had never yelled louder or used that combination of words before. I reluctantly decided I wouldn’t go home today.

I could make a fist with minimal pain by Thursday. Friday morning, I went home to spend the next 6+ weeks in bed. The first 4 or 5 days were great. I was upstairs in a room with a window air conditioner (we did not have central air!), a large double bed, a portable urinal, occasional visitors and a mother doting on her only son. (This was in-fact my younger sister’s room which was twice the size of my room.) In fact, for the first few days, my parents went to all my favorite restaurants to bring me home food—BBQ, chicken, burgers and fries, etc. By the following Tuesday, Dad decided I would eat what everyone else was eating and they would bring it up to me. By Wednesday, Dad decided I could use a homemade under-car dolly to get from the bed to the bathroom. I was beginning to think I was going to have to mow the lawn on Thursday!! By the end of the second week home, Dad decided I could scoot down the stairs, sit in an office chair and actually have dinner with the family. (Dad was not a fan of just sitting around and doing nothing—healing from a sickness or injury).

In late August, a week before school was to start (after Labor Day, always), I returned to the doctor’s office. He pronounced the hip as cured and said I could walk again. He then said “Let’s see how your arm is” and grabbed my left arm from a sling-like position and jerked it straight out. No warning!! After having been told on July 4 not to carry anything with my left arm or straighten it out, I almost fainted with shock and fear. I managed to hold it together until Dad and I got almost to the car. At this point my wonderfully worried Dad helped me lie down in the backseat for the car ride home. By the time we got home, Dad thought it was somewhat humorous; Mom was sure her baby boy had been permanently scarred. And my sister got her room back!

At the time, I was too shocked to realize that Dad and the doctor had determined that Thanksgiving break would be the best time to take the screws out of my elbow. So now we have screwed up a third holiday! Friday night after Thanksgiving I spent the night in the hospital so I could have surgery Saturday morning. Saturday evening, I went home with my arm in a sling and was forced to wear it the following week to school. This necessitated me sharing my mountain climbing story with all who had not yet heard it.

All is well. My hip has never given me any problems. I have never been able to completely straighten my left arm but it never gave me any real problems. I have premonitions of rain in my left ankle, but that is due to a completely unrelated accident in a different year involving a tennis match and a racquet club wall!

My aunt has left this earth. Over the years my fall went from about 40 feet to close to 80 feet according to Aunt Helen. And Helen was always prone to exaggeration—according to Dad. In her honor when people ask me about this event, I always tell them it was 70 feet! I have never since tried to climb a canyon wall, and I have never been back to Hinton, Oklahoma!