

War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: Not given

In 1943, I took my physical exam for the draft and passed even though I have been deaf in my right ear since age 12. I was drafted for three years into Civilian Public Service (CPS) and was sent to camp Wellston in the Manistee National Forest in Michigan. Camp Wellston was a converted Civilian Conservation camp and we inductees did regular forestry work, including fighting a forest fire. In addition, we planted and cultivated trees and sawed some trees down for firewood using two-man crosscut saws.

In the fall of 1943, I transferred to the CPS unit at Dayton State Hospital for mental patients. After a few months of being locked on the ward of men mental patients for 12 hour shifts, I requested a transfer to the Dayton State Hospital farm. This was a large dairy farm where we milked 100 Holstein cows every eight hours, plus did regular farm work in the fields. Not having grown up on a farm, I learned a lot, including artificial insemination of the cows.

Previous to my CPS experience, I had studied art and music thinking that I would become a commercial artist or a teacher. However, while at the farm, I suddenly got the idea of becoming a doctor. So, I started taking pre-med classes at the University of Dayton.

In 1945, I volunteered to be a human guinea pig for a nutrition experiment. This project was run jointly by the Physiology Department of Northwestern University Medical School and the Army Nutrition Lab in Chicago. The people responsible for planning and conducting the experiment were Dr. Andrew C. Ivy, Major George Berryman and Dr. Friedemann. There were seven of us volunteers, and all we knew at the beginning was that the subject of the experiment was Pellagra, a disease caused by a deficiency of Vitamin B 1, Niacin. In this country, Pellagra is most commonly found in the southern states where the diet often consisted mainly of salt pork and cornbread.

We seven subjects were housed in Abbott Hall on the lake front, and we ate our meals in Passavant Hospital, where Dr. Friedemann's Biochemistry lab was located. The general plan of the experiment was to put us on a normal, healthy diet for three months, then for six months five of us would go on a vitamin B1 deficient diet and the other two (controls) would be given B1. Finally, in our last three months, we all were given a healthy diet with vitamin supplements. All seven of us ate the same food throughout the experiment, the difference being the pills we received. The two control subjects got vitamin B1 and the rest of us got placebos. Of course, the pills all looked alike, so at first we didn't know who the controls were. We were able to figure that out because some of us developed mild signs of Pellagra during phase two of the experiment.

I didn't mind the diet at all. I have always liked cornbread, and growing up with two hungry brothers, I was used to eating almost anything our mother put before us. We were allowed to leave Abbott Hall and eat with our families occasionally, and we were trusted to avoid foods that were not on our diet, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Our nutritional status was carefully monitored by innumerable blood tests, weight measurements, psychomotor tests and psychological tests. We took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Test several times, which consisted of about 1,000 questions. The only one that I remember was: "Do you like tall women?" I always answered it "yes."

Coffee was not on our experimental diet (phase two), and one time one of the doctors from the Army Nutritional Lab accused me of cheating because he thought that my teeth appeared to be stained with coffee. Generally, we got along well with the Army doctors, and I was able to convince this one that I had not touched a drop of coffee. I didn't really like coffee, so not having it on our diet was not a problem for me.

Not only did we have frequent blood tests to keep track of our blood chemistries, but most of the time we had to collect our urine in gallon jugs. So, everywhere we went, we carried shopping bags containing our urine jugs. One day, one of the men was traveling across town with his shopping bag, and he had to make a streetcar transfer. He was standing on a bridge watching the trains go below and he set his bag down on the sidewalk. When his streetcar arrived he reached down for his bag and it was gone. He looked around and saw a man one block away carrying his bag into a building. He raced there and got his jug of urine back, from a surprised thief.

We were weighed almost daily, and in order to keep us at a constant weight, our caloric intake was controlled and we were exercised at regular intervals. Sometimes, we went to the Lawson YMCA to climb stairs or play handball, and at other times we were taken to the University of Chicago to run on their treadmill.

Some of us did develop mild, early symptoms of Pellagra. The main change that I noticed was that I did not have my usual level of energy, and I could not think as fast as normal. Also, I had some paresthesias, which were strange skin sensations. For example, I was riding on a streetcar one day when I felt as though water was running down my legs. I checked and there was no water.

When the doctors decided to put us back on vitamin B1, they didn't tell us, but instead just changed our pills. We knew it immediately, because we all felt better. When we were started on Phase three we were taken to the Army Nutrition Lab, where we were given a "banquet," with coffee, ham and eggs, toast and jelly, rolls, etc. What a meal! None of us suffered any permanent effects from our vitamin B 1 deficient diet for six months, and I still like cornbread!