

I didn't know much about this mysterious winter illness I'd heard adults describe—but it sure sounded promising.

Childhood Memories of Cabin Fever

Story By Joe McFarland

When I was a boy I dreamed of catching cabin fever, for the usual reasons. Being sick meant skipping school, which meant, to reiterate, not being in school.

If cabin fever could be my ticket home, I wanted to catch it.

Although I later came to greatly value education, I recall much of my studies in the fourth grade were spent dreaming of alternatives. Whatever cabin fever was—and it wasn't clear to me if cabin fever could legitimately be acquired in a house that wasn't built of logs—I was convinced cabin fever would be the ideal excused absence.

Yet adults were vague about specifics; so I had to eavesdrop.

As far as I managed to piece together, this thing called cabin fever was one of those medical conditions people acquired, then lost, between December and February, apparently without lasting harm.

I liked the idea of that.

The best part, I assumed, was the fact victims got to stay home from school for weeks at a time—*weeks*, mind you.

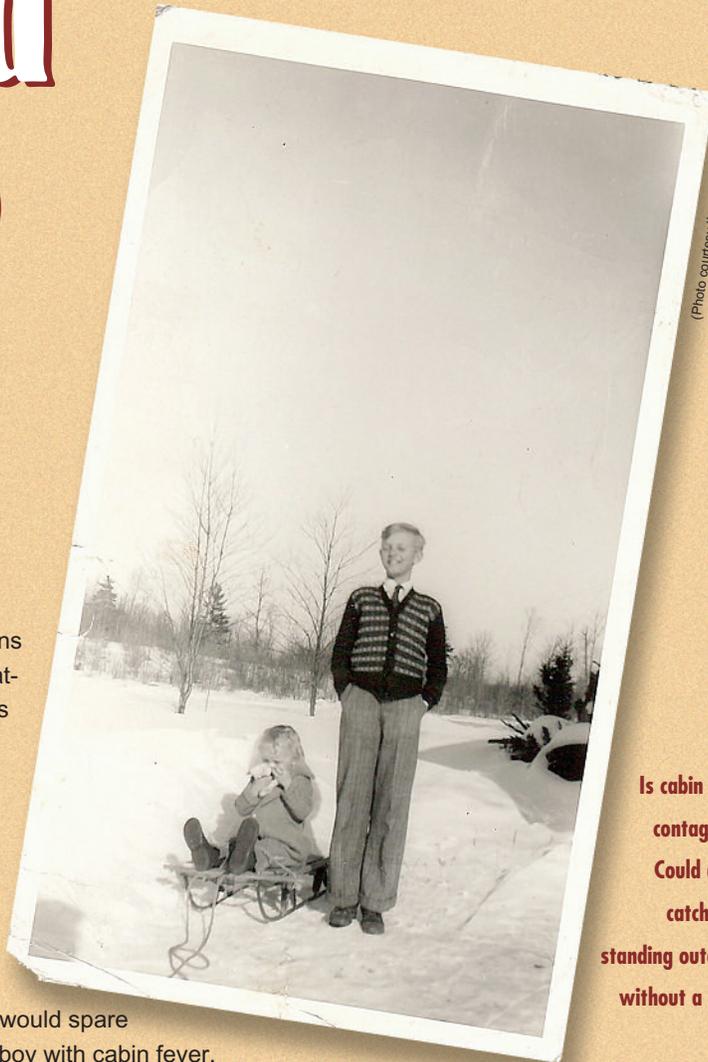
In the margins of my mathematics assignments I calculated the high volume of presents and cards which would be brought to my house. The good people of my community would spare nothing for the boy with cabin fever. I could spend the day opening cards, glancing at the encouraging and supportive words, then adding yet another crisp bill to the stack on my bed.

There would be no homework. Ice cream would be offered hourly. Expensive model trucks and bulldozers would fill my bedroom. For weeks, nothing related to effort would be expected of the boy with cabin fever.

Total scholastic immunity would be mine. So I began to dream of cabin fever in early November, opening my collar at the bus stop as the chill of winter spread across Illinois. I kept company with runny noses and unhealthy habits. My imagination invented tragic scenes of the impending neighborhood commotion.

So I began to dream of cabin fever in early November, opening my collar at the bus stop as the chill of winter spread across Illinois. I kept company with runny noses and unhealthy habits. My imagination invented tragic scenes of the impending neighborhood commotion.

So I began to dream of cabin fever in early November, opening my collar at the bus stop as the chill of winter spread across Illinois. I kept company with runny noses and unhealthy habits. My imagination invented tragic scenes of the impending neighborhood commotion.



(Photo courtesy the Scheuring family.)

Is cabin fever contagious? Could a boy catch it by standing outdoors without a coat?

Reports of my condition would be a local bombshell.

"He's got the cabin fever," I imagined concerned neighbors whispering as they crunched past my house on snow-covered sidewalks. "It's that little McFarland boy. They say he can't go to school for weeks."

Inside, I would be reading comic books, sipping sugary drinks through one of those flexible straws. My classmates would be memorizing regular and irregular verbs, reciting synonyms and antonyms under the glare of academic scrutiny.

Once a week, a doctor would arrive at the house, put his hand on my forehead while also listening to my heart, then turn to my parents with a grave expression.

Long winter days are the perfect time to enjoy the benefits of cabin fever.

couldn't wait to catch this thing called cabin fever. But I had a major problem: I had no idea how to catch cabin fever. The vulnerabilities were never specified by adults. Everybody always spoke of the illness in providential tones, as if the thing were an inescapable doom, or an unlucky number that pops up randomly in the darkest days of cold weather and grips only chosen victims.

Could I catch it myself? In Illinois? I was determined.

Maybe a dusting of snow down the neck would do the trick. I made reckless snow angels in the deepest drifts, buttons and zippers wildly unfastened. I was determined to catch cabin fever. My boldest theory was to remove the plastic bags my mother would wrap around my socks before stuffing my feet into winter boots. The bags, I suspected, prevented the agents of cabin fever from permeating the socks and entering the bloodstream.

My mother probably knew this, as did all mothers everywhere. Cabin fever, like an invisible germ, probably attacks with stealth. I concluded it was a national secret no child was ever told.

Several winters passed and I was unable to contract cabin fever.

Along the way, I successfully induced hundreds of runny noses and I even threw up once without trying. I got something called the mumps. But no cabin fever. My closest brush with extended relief from school was the day I woke up with laryngitis—the real deal, just like in the comic books. It was tremendous.

One day later, it passed.

"Here's your lunch box, kiddo," my mother said on the third day, two days after the laryngitis came and went.

My tragic childhood ended eventually. I no longer dream

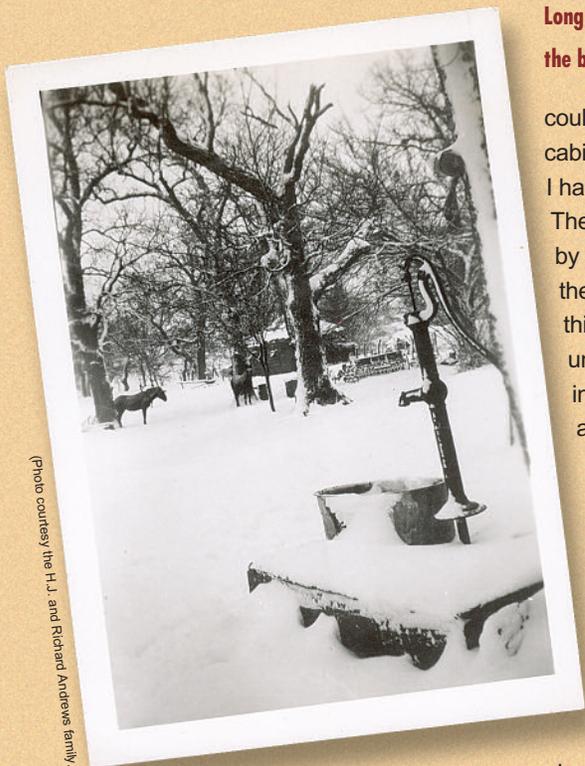
In the end, cabin fever remains a medical mystery best left to the imagination.

of cabin fever, having outgrown the perfectly good desire to stay at home and read comic books every day. Yet I still feel cheated. The doctor with the autographed football never showed up. Neighbors never sent cards. No money. I ended up, despite my best efforts, attending school and learning a great deal about prepositions, Dr. Jonas Salk, the Industrial Revolution and John Deere, the man who invented the self-cleaning steel plow. I wrote a book report about the life of Herbert Hoover.

But cabin fever remains a medical mystery. As each winter passes, I dutifully head to work each day with my collar loosened and coat unbuttoned, even in the coldest, most virulent wind. Deliberately, I shun orange juice and therapeutic lozenges—anything which might discourage cabin fever infection.

Yet I am luckless. Cabin fever still eludes me.

Therefore I've decided to advance to my next medical hope, a different strain of seasonal illness known as spring fever. I have been told by credible sources it can be caught by merely walking outdoors on a perfectly beautiful day in April, which is something I crave anyway, especially after a long winter of sitting indoors, dreaming of cabin fever.



(Photo courtesy the H.J. and Richard Andrews family.)

"May I be frank with you?" the doctor would ask before gathering the stethoscope and pressing everything into his medical bag. "It'll be another 75 weeks. That is, if there's going to be any chance of recovery.

"Rough water ahead. But he'll make it."

Then he'd pull my parents into the corner of the bedroom.

"It's progressed into the follicles," the doctor would whisper to my parents, whose faces suddenly would turn ashen. The doctor would offer my mother a sterile handkerchief.

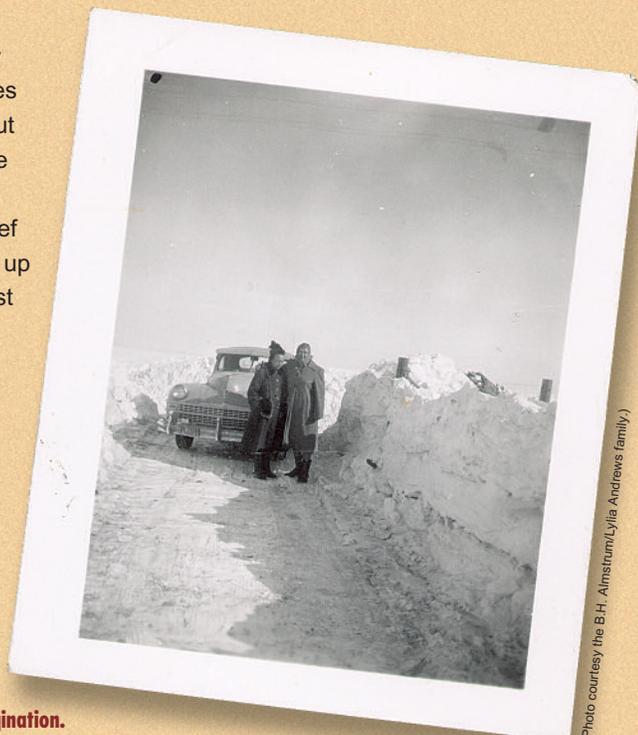
"Listen," he would say suddenly, as if the most critical point were ahead. "Do not let this boy go to school. Under any circumstances."

My father would shake the doctor's hand bravely and reassure him there would be no school.

"That's the most important thing right now," the doctor would say, then start to leave.

"Oh." He would stop himself at the half-opened door. "I've got this autographed football from the Chicago Bears. Mr. Halas wanted the boy to have it. Everybody on the team was crushed when they heard the news."

As winter progressed, I absolutely



(Photo courtesy the B.H. Almsrum/Lylla Andrews family.)