

WHEN I COULD NOT SMILE

By Cindy Peters

Do you remember the song "I'll Never Smile Again"? There were times in my life when I felt that way during grief or mourning. But what I am referring to I experienced from childhood until I was a young adult.

I was born and grew up as a cute child until I lost my baby teeth. Afterwards, I inherited too large and too many teeth for my small mouth. Mine were crisscrossed and buck-toothed on top. I was teased at school and called "gopher."

My brother was lucky as he received braces in the 5th grade. My parents felt they could afford them, as he only needed braces on the top teeth and no tooth pulling was required. I needed major reconstructive surgery and braces on top and bottom with a head gear. As a result, I was too ashamed to have an open-faced smile. Since I had severe protrusion with my top teeth it was difficult to smile with my mouth closed. I did receive a little relief in the 7th grade when my parents invested in a retainer for my teeth. It straightened my teeth but did not correct the buck teeth very much.

Then a miracle happened when I discussed this problem with my college roommate my freshman year. She told me of a dentist that for \$500 would put braces on my teeth. He was not an orthodontist, but he was trying to learn the craft.

First, due to overcrowding, I needed eight teeth extracted, which included four incisors and four wisdom teeth. My parents still carried me on their insurance so most of the extraction expenses would be covered. I could either go to the dentist twice for the extractions or go to the hospital under anesthesia and have it done. I voted for the hospital. So, I went to the hospital and had the eight teeth removed all at once. I remember waking up with a swollen mouth, severe pain and three impacted teeth. My husband, who was then my boyfriend, held the bedpan as I threw up what felt like gallons of blood. If that is not true love what is?

It was a hot, humid miserable South Dakota summer as I tried to heal from the procedure. The good news is that I could only eat soft food and drink liquids for weeks. As a result, I looked great as I had lost 20 pounds. Once I healed, I faced the painful task of braces. In those days, the braces were very heavy and cut into my mouth. Once a month I had the braces tightened. It hurt a great deal. I also had to wear the cumbersome head gear at night to pull in my buck teeth. The dentist was not sure it would even work as few adults wore braces back then. It was believed that children's teeth were more pliable.

I was scheduled to wear the braces for 2-½ years but I took them off six months early for my wedding. I wore a retainer at night for many years afterwards. I was glad I made money while attending college so I could pay for my braces.

One of my favorite causes to invest in is for children with cleft palates or for poor people who cannot afford dental care. While I do not have the perfect tooth alignment or a perfect smile. I am so happy I went through the ordeal to feel like I could smile again and help others. It is a terrible thing to feel like you cannot smile.