

HISTORY NOTE: Candy Land

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Many of us who grew up with disabilities remember our hospital stays and the medical staff members who treated us with kindness. When possible, we might have gotten a special treat with a meal. A teddy bear or doll from home. Or maybe we played a favorite game.

Most children remember playing the game Candy Land. Using candy-themed symbols and cards, players move their game pieces around a colorful track, with the winner reaching the end of the track first. About one million of the games are sold each year.

In a recent *Atlantic* magazine article, toy historian Tim Walsh notes that an amazing 94 percent of mothers are aware of Candy Land. More than 60 percent of households with a five-year-old child own the game.

Not only is Candy Land celebrating its 70-year anniversary in 2019, the game has a unique tie to the disability community. *The Atlantic* article originally appeared in *Object Lessons*, an essay and book series about the hidden lives of ordinary things. Writer Alexander B. Joy describes how Candy Land was invented by schoolteacher Eleanor Abbott. Abbott created the game in a polio ward.

Today's families have no idea of the fear sparked by the polio epidemic of the 1940s and 1950s. Polio, which mainly affected children, strikes suddenly and causes muscle weakness by attacking the nerve cells in the spinal cord. It causes lifelong muscle issues for some and is fatal to others. Patients were confined to hospital beds or iron lungs back in the day.

Baby boomers recall lining up in school gyms and community centers to get the polio vaccine. Events were cancelled to deter the spread of the disease. The Minnesota State Fair was cancelled in 1946 due to an outbreak of polio in the state.

Joy wrote, “The outbreak had forced children into extremely restrictive environments. Patients were confined by equipment, and parents kept healthy children inside for fear they might catch the disease. Candy Land offered the kids in Abbott’s ward a welcome distraction— but it also gave immobilized patients a liberating fantasy of movement. That aspect of the game still resonates with children today.”

Joy noted that early versions of the game featured a drawing of a boy wearing a leg brace.

Little is known about the Candy Land inventor. Abbott lived in San Diego and taught school. Some accounts state that many of the royalties Abbott earned on Candy Land were donated to children’s charities.

Joy learned through his research that Abbott herself had a unique perspective on polio, as she contracted the disease in 1948 when she was in her late 30s. She spent her recovery time in a San Diego hospital, in a polio ward where most of the other patients were children.

“Seeing children suffer around her, Abbott set out to concoct some escapist entertainment for her young wardmates, a game that left behind the strictures of the hospital ward for an adventure that spoke to their wants: the desire to move freely in the pursuit of delights, an easy privilege polio had stolen from them,” Joy wrote.

Joy praises Candy Land for provided children with the ability to travel and see new destinations, allowing an escape from the boredom of the polio ward. Trips to the Molasses Swap, Gumdrop Mountains, Ice Cream Floats and Peppermint Stick Forest provided a delightful escape.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota’s disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities.