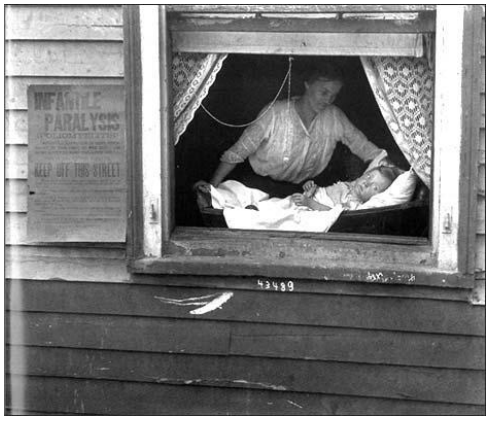
Polio - Children Coped with the Disease



Boards of Health, in America, issued warning signs - like the one depicted to the left of the window in this picture - to guard against contracting polio. This image depicts one of those signs in New York City, circa 1916.

The sign states:

> *Infantile Paralysis*
>
> *Poliomyelitis*
> *Infantile paralysis is very prevalent in this part of the city.*
> *On some streets many children are ill. This is one of the streets.*
>
> *KEEP OFF THIS STREET.*

Sometimes health officials would visit the homes of people whose children were suspected of having polio. They were allowed to remove those children, from those homes, and house them with other children (who actually had the illness).

In this way, uninfected children (who were thus removed) developed increased odds of becoming sick with the dreaded disease. (See, for example, *A Summer Plague: Polio and its Survivors*, by Tony Gould, published by Yale University Press, at page 4 and following.)

This image was used, at the time, in many different ways. It is also on the cover of *Dirt and Disease: Polio Before FDR*, by Naomi Rogers.

The dreaded illness continued to cripple or kill children (as well as some adults) as the years went by. By the 1950s, when President Eisenhower was in office, the disease had become "one of the most serious communicable diseases among children in the United States." (See NPR's story on "Wiping Out Polio: How the U.S. Snuffed Out a Killer.")

President Franklin Roosevelt (often known as FDR) was an adult polio victim.

People held a birthday ball on the 30th of January, to honor FDR, while he was President. Those balls, held in various American cities, were really efforts at raising funds to fight the much-feared disease of polio.

Then, at the end of 1937, something very important happened to widen the disease-fighting efforts. Eddie Cantor, a comedian and recording artist who was very famous at the time (and who was featured, as a character, in HBO's recent "Boardwalk Empire" series), had something to do with a new campaign which he suggested calling the “March of Dimes.”

We learn more about this very interesting history from the March of Dimes website:

Comedian Eddie Cantor (1892-1964) holds a very special place in the history of the March of Dimes, for it was he who coined the phrase "March of Dimes" used to identify the Foundation today. Eddie Cantor was a multi-talented performer – vaudeville star, singer, actor, comedian, radio and television personality – whose rise to fame began in the New York City theatrical revue, the Ziegfeld Follies, in 1917.

Beloved by the American public and known as "banjo eyes" for his wide-eyed visage, Eddie Cantor had a deep well of compassion to match his enormous talent, for he embraced a variety of humanitarian causes over the course of his long career in show business. One of these was the March of Dimes, and the story of how he created this name has special distinction.

Beginning in 1934, the fight against poliomyelitis (also known as infantile paralysis, or polio) was commonly associated with the annual Birthday Balls held each January 30th in honor of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's birthday. These lively fund-raising parties were organized in cities throughout the United States just as the country emerged from the Great Depression and were unique in their appeal to ordinary citizens to join the campaign of finding a solution to this dreaded disease.

After FDR issued his proclamation announcing the creation of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis on September 23, 1937, to carry on the battle against polio on a national basis, it was left to Eddie Cantor and other promoters to organize a fund-raising strategy for the next Birthday Balls in California.

Americans were still feeling the impact of the Great Depression. How would they respond to a national fund-raising drive? Cantor thought it best to seek the help of individuals who could turn the hope of a national approach into reality:

On November 22, 1937, Cantor met with W. S. Van Dyke II and Harry Mazlish of Warner Brothers in the office of John Considine, Jr. in the studios of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to discuss their plans. In the meeting, Cantor recalled a successful 30-second radio appeal for relief funds after a catastrophic Mississippi River flood. Applying this idea to the National Foundation, Cantor said, "I am sure that all of the national radio programs originating in Hollywood would devote 30 seconds to this great cause!"

He suggested that the money raised could be directed to the White House, pending the approval of the President. After another moment of reflection he suggested, "We could call it the March of Dimes." This idea brought the general approval of everyone in the meeting.

Was the "March of Dimes" an original Cantor thought - or - was there something he might have been thinking about when he coined the phrase?

Naturally, neither Cantor nor the others immediately realized the historic importance of this lively catchphrase, but they instantly understood its appeal, based as it was on a pun on the contemporary newsreel, The March of Time. They continued to prepare for the 1938 Birthday Ball and the special radio appeal for the President's birthday.

The United States comptroller for the currency, J. F. T. O'Connor, wrote to the President, "I have never discussed the matter with men who were more enthusiastic about anything as they were over the aid which they were anxious to render to disabled children."

Cantor worked vigorously on the campaign and enlisted the support of Nicholas Schenk at Twentieth Century Fox as well as the most popular entertainers of the day – Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, Deanna Durbin, Lawrence Tibbett, Jascha Heifetz, Joe Penner, Kate Smith, and Edgar Bergen and "his wooden-headed friend," the puppet Charlie McCarthy.

With the support of national celebrities, and the radio spots which broadcasted the idea across the country, the "March of Dimes" was ready for an official campaign-launch on the 3rd of January, 1938:

The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis was officially incorporated on January 3, 1938, and the first March of Dimes radio appeal occurred during the week preceding the Birthday Ball events scheduled for January 30.

As Cantor himself stressed, "The March of Dimes will enable all persons, even the children, to show our President that they are with him in this battle against this disease. Nearly everyone can send in a dime, or several dimes. However, it takes only ten dimes to make a dollar and if a million people send only one dime, the total will be $100,000."

With such enthusiasm behind the event, how many dimes were actually sent to the White House? Astonishingly few, at least initially:

This optimistic pitch collided head-on with the dismal news that the appeal garnered only a trickle of dimes in the days following the first broadcast. In fact, only $17.50 had been sent in to the White House in two days.

The slow start didn't last long:

> *But what followed became a deluge: by January 29, over 80,000 letters with dimes and dollars flooded the White House mailroom to the extent that official correspondence to the President was literally buried in an avalanche of donations, a total of 2,680,000 dimes or $268,000.*

The President was extremely grateful to everyone who responded to sending in their dimes. The day before his birthday, FDR went on the air, in a radio broadcast, to thank the American people:

> *During the past few days bags of mail have been coming, literally by the truck load, to the White House. Yesterday between forty and fifty thousand letters came to the mail room of the White House. Today an even greater number – how many I cannot tell you, for we can only estimate the actual count by counting the mail bags.*
>
> *In all the envelopes are dimes and quarters and even dollar bills – gifts from grownups and children – mostly from children who want to help other children to get well. Literally, by the countless thousands, they are pouring in, and I have figured that if the White House Staff and I were to work on nothing else for two or three months to come we could not possibly thank the donors. Therefore... I must take this opportunity...to thank all who have aided and cooperated in the splendid work we are doing.*

Pictures, like the one at the top of this page, motivated people to help suffering children. The March of Dimes is still involved in helping to fight diseases which impact children.

Credits:

Image depicting a scene in New York City, in 1916, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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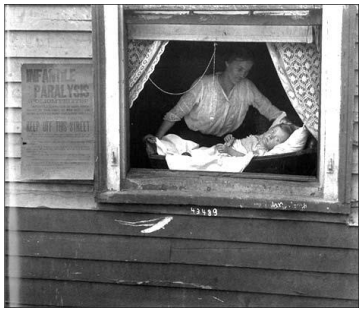
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Polio-Children-Coped-with-the-Disease1

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Polio-Children-Coped-with-the-Disease1

Media Stream



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