

Mansfield Memories: Mansfield residents line up for polio vaccine in 1956

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January 12, 2021

This is the second in a two-part series on the polio vaccine.

About 71% of Mansfield's first- and second-graders were vaccinated against polio in 1955. One of those who did not receive the shot was young Eddie Randolph, who contracted the dreaded virus later that summer.

Eddie was at his grandparents' house on Fruit Street in August 1955. In the afternoon he was playing in the yard, but by evening he developed chills and a cold. His grandparents put him to bed and called physician Anthony Gasson, who quickly diagnosed polio.

Eddie was transported to Boston where he experienced paralysis of the neck and spine. The polio then spread to his legs. Eddie spent four months in the Boston Floating Hospital followed by a three-month stay at a children's convalescent home in Needham.

By April 1956 Eddie had come home. Dick Yager of the Mansfield News, a highly skilled photojournalist who went on to work in much larger media markets, captured Eddie's return to Roland Green School. Yager snapped a photo of Eddie approaching on crutches while still carrying his lunchbox.



Principal Joseph LaLiberte held the door open for Eddie

Principal Joseph LaLiberte held the door open for him. When asked if he “gets along” on crutches Eddie replied, “Sure I do!”

The photo is registered with the Library of Congress under the name “Threshold of Tomorrow.”

The story reminded townspeople about the importance of the polio vaccine. Several clinics were held in 1956 to begin a more widespread dissemination. One clinic scheduled for mid-July illustrates the high demand for the vaccine.

It was to be held at the offices of the Mansfield Visiting Nurses Association on High Street. Attendance was expected to be light as the temperature was hot and many families were away on vacation. The clinic was to begin at 8:30 a.m.



Physician Raymond Ockert

When physician Raymond Ockert arrived he found a line that already extended to the corner of North Main Street. Despite the assistance of VNA nurses, Ockert couldn't keep up. The line soon stretched onto the North Main Street sidewalk beyond Lord's drug store and nearly to West Church Street. The office quickly became so hot that the VNA borrowed a 36-inch floor fan from the nearby Mansfield Press.

A police detail was secured to help direct traffic. As patrolman Walter Johnson worked he saw 7-year-old Eddie Randolph waiting in line standing on his crutches. The burly police officer went straight to little Eddie, picked him up in his arms, and delivered him directly to Ockert with no further waiting.

As the children departed they were handed a lollipop. Some were crying so hard they didn't even take one. But nearby drug stores did a booming business as

parents bought their youngsters milkshakes and ice cream as a reward for their bravery.

Some of the boys were mischievous as they departed the clinic trying to frighten those still waiting in line.

“I’ll tell you one thing that didn’t help,” said one nurse. “Those young boys who came out rubbing their arms and proclaiming that ‘they stick it in your foot and it comes out your ear!’”

The clinic was scheduled to end at 11:30 a.m. but the doctor and nurses worked an additional two hours to make sure everyone was vaccinated. The Mansfield News reported that Ockert “may have set some kind of record.” He administered 791 vaccines in five hours. “That works out to over 150 per hour or one shot every 26 seconds!”

Vaccinations for adults would soon follow. Clinics continued locally into the 1960s and ’70s. The triumph of medical science came in 1979 when the United States was declared polio-free.



Patrolman Walter Johnson