

# Mansfield Memories - The polio vaccine comes to Mansfield

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January 5, 2021

*MANSFIELD - This is the first in a two-part series on the polio vaccine.*

Bobby Casey of Pleasant Street was the poster boy for Mansfield's 1952 March of Dimes campaign to eradicate polio.

"Just put your dime in here," said 8-year-old Bobby to his sister Alice as he placed his coin into a collection bank.

Bobby and two of his sisters were infected by polio in 1949. His sisters recovered well, but Bobby was transferred to a Boston hospital where he remained for four weeks.



Bobby Casey, who recovered from a long bout with polio, represented the Mansfield March of Dimes Drive in 1952, in this Mansfield News photo. At left is his sister Alice.



Raymond G. Ockert administers one of the first polio vaccines in Mansfield to Daryl Bryan with help from volunteer nurse Ethel Clement in this photo from the Mansfield News. Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society

Upon his return home he had to sleep on an hard board and receive physical therapy for months. It turned out Bobby was more fortunate than some. He made a full recovery. And all those dimes that Bobby and so many others contributed were about to achieve a medical miracle.

Polio was a frightening virus that spread from person to person. About 95 percent of those who contracted it were asymptomatic. Some developed cough, fever and other symptoms and recovered quickly. But polio invaded the brain and

spinal cord of an unfortunate few, causing paralysis that left survivors disabled for life.

The virus terrorized the world for the better part of a century before Jonas Salk announced that he had successfully tested a polio vaccine in March 1953. In the early 1950s the virus left about 35,000 Americans paralyzed every year. But by the 1960s less than 100 Americans were paralyzed by polio over the entire decade. In the 1970s there were less than 10. In 1979 the United States was declared “polio free.”



Robert Cardin receives a lollipop from Mrs. Horace Jalbert after receiving one of the first polio vaccines in Mansfield in 1955 in this photo from the Mansfield News. Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society

After Salk completed clinical trials the vaccine was ready for distribution. In March 1955 Mansfield was preparing to receive its first round. Distribution was to be coordinated with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. It was decided that Mansfield would begin by vaccinating all of its first- and second-grade students. Ninety percent of parents signed up their children for the vaccine.

Locally it was the Board of Selectmen, acting in their capacity as the Board of Health, that requested the vaccine from the state. At that time the Town Clerk was also the “public health agent”, and he would be responsible for setting up clinics. The shots would be administered by local doctors in coordination with the Mansfield Visiting Nurses Association at their headquarters on High Street.

Excitement begin to build as local residents envisioned a world that was polio free. But two months of mixed signals and unmet deadlines at the state and federal level held up the vaccine’s arrival in town. When it was clear Mansfield would soon receive its first allotment, first- and second-grade



John Kenney, left, prepares polio vaccine for Douglas King with assistance from school nurse Alice Fullerton in this photos from the Mansfield News.  
*Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

parents were asked again if they wanted their children vaccinated. This time only 71 % agreed.

Town Clerk H. Lincoln Paine sent Mansfield police officer Walter Johnson to the state labs at Forest Hills, Boston. Johnson picked up 133 vials of the Salk vaccine, each of which contained three shots.

The first inoculation clinic was held June 1, 1955, at the offices of the Visiting Nurses Association of Mansfield. Shots would be delivered by Raymond Ockert and John Kenney, assisted by Roberta Tripp of

the VNA, school nurse Alice Fullerton, and other VNA nurses. Buses delivered students from the Roland Green, Spaulding, Paine and John Berry schools to High Street.

In total 190 children received the Salk vaccine that day. The Lions Club provided lollipops for the youngsters. There were 32 students absent that day and 22 more were on a field trip to Boston. They were inoculated the following week. And the effort to distribute the Salk vaccine in Mansfield was underway.



At right, Linda Davis and Ronald Vickery collect for the annual polio drive at the Fireman's 67th Firemen's Ball in 1958 in this photo from the Mansfield News. Nearly \$25 was raised.