

# This Day in History... January 3, 1938

## March of Dimes

On January 3, 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt established the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, later renamed the March of Dimes.

In the early 1900s, polio affected thousands of American children every summer. Found in contaminated food and water, it was easily transmitted and mostly affected children.

However, in 1921, Franklin Roosevelt contracted polio at the age of 39, costing him the use of his legs. Roosevelt worked hard to keep his condition out of the public eye. He had a deep sympathy, though, for those who were disabled and sought to help them.

In 1926, Roosevelt founded the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation (named after the warm springs he visited for therapeutic aid). Then on January 3, 1938, Roosevelt reconstituted the charity as the National Foundation for Infant Paralysis (NFIP). The NFIP was a non-partisan association of scientists and volunteers. It worked to develop a polio vaccine and helped those with polio through their physical rehabilitation. The foundation also created a network of local chapters to raise money and distribute aid.



*This stamp was designed to symbolize the struggle against polio.*



Franklin D. Roosevelt

*This stamp was issued for FDR's 100th birthday.*

Initially, the NFIP raised funds at the annual President's Birthday Ball, through donations from wealthy celebrities. Over time, however, the number of children affected outpaced the fundraising. Therefore, President Roosevelt began appealing to the public to help. During one fundraiser, singer Eddie Cantor jokingly told the public to send dimes to the president, which helped inspire the term "March of Dimes."

The people of America answered his call – flooding the White House with 2,680,000 dimes (\$268,000) in donations. The press called the public response, "a silver tide which actually swamped the White House."

By Christmas, booths were set up in cities around the country where children could donate their dimes. Children were significant donors, claiming they wanted to help other children to get better.

By 1941, the March of Dimes raised enough funds to develop an iron lung, which helped polio patients breathe when they lost muscle control of their lungs. In 1946, the US produced an FDR dime to honor his life and his work for the March of Dimes. In 1949, the March of Dimes tasked Dr. Jonas Salk with developing a polio vaccine, which he achieved in 1955. Salk's vaccine helped to decrease the number of polio cases per year from tens of thousands to just a handful.



*This stamp is from the Distinguished Americans Series.*

Once polio had been defeated, the March of Dimes shifted their focus to birth defects prevention in 1958. In this new avenue, the March of Dimes began funding genetic research and helping to create birth defects treatment centers in hospitals around the country. They also helped to found the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California, which studies a variety of diseases.



*From the Great Americans Series.*

During this era, Virginia Apgar was a leading figure in the March of Dimes. She was one of the first in the organization to discuss the issues of premature birth. She led a campaign for immunization against rubella, encouraged birth defects registries, and helped get genetic history and pregnancy history included in medical record keeping. It was also during Apgar's time that the March of Dimes began to promote healthy pregnancies with the slogan "Be good to your baby before it is born." In the years since, the March of Dimes also added decreasing the rate of premature births to its mission.

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