



The Polio Crusade

Monday, February 2, 2009 at 9pm on PBS (check local listings)
pbs.org/americanexperience

In the summer of 1950 fear gripped the residents of Wytheville, Virginia. Movie theaters shut down, baseball games were cancelled and panicky parents kept their children indoors—anything to keep them safe from an invisible invader. Outsiders sped through town with their windows rolled up and bandanas covering their faces. The ones who couldn't escape were left paralyzed, and some died in the wake of a devastating and contagious virus. Polio had struck in Wytheville. The town was in the midst of a full-blown epidemic. That year alone, more than 33,000 Americans fell victim—half of them under the age of ten.

On Monday, February 2, PBS's AMERICAN EXPERIENCE premieres *The Polio Crusade*, a one-hour documentary from filmmaker Sarah Colt (*Geronimo*, *RFK*) that interweaves the personal accounts of polio survivors with the story of an ardent crusader who tirelessly fought on their behalf while scientists raced to eradicate this dreaded disease. Based in part on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Polio: An American Story* by David Oshinsky, *The Polio Crusade* features interviews with historians, scientists, polio survivors, and the only surviving scientist from the core research team that developed the Salk vaccine, Julius Youngner.

“Daddy and Mama took everything Sonny owned, all of his clothes, his bed, his chest of drawers, and he had a fabulous comic book collection. They took everything out to the middle of the garden and they made a pile and burned everything he owned. They were told to do that, so we would not get it,” recalls Anne Crockett-Stark, who was just seven years old when her brother fell ill during Wytheville's polio epidemic.

The victims found an unlikely champion in New York lawyer Basil O'Connor. His innovative public relations campaign transformed polio – a devastating, but relatively rare disease – into a nationwide cause. He rallied the American public to fight a war against polio.

In 1928, O'Connor inherited the leadership of a polio rehabilitation center from his law partner—future president Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As the nation reeled from the economic trauma of the Great Depression, O'Connor faced a pressing challenge: funding. He took an unlikely new approach, turning to the public for donations. Rather than relying on wealthy philanthropists, O'Connor asked every person to contribute what small change they could. His pleas struck a cord with Americans – within days, envelopes stuffed with change flooded the White House mailroom, and “The March of Dimes” was born.

Basil O'Connor made a pledge to provide care for every polio patient in America, and to invest in scientific research to create a vaccine that would end the disease forever. One young researcher caught O'Connor's attention, a scientist whose sense of urgency for a vaccine matched his own: Dr. Jonas Salk, the director of the Virus Research program at the University of Pittsburgh.

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During World War II, Jonas Salk was part of a government effort to develop an influenza vaccine - he believed he could apply the same, killed virus approach, to polio. But established researchers scoffed at Salk's theory and dismissed his methods. A bitter feud arose between Salk and his leading rival Albert Sabin, an established polio researcher at the University of Cincinnati who was working on his own, live virus, vaccine.

The two men were unrelenting in their pursuit of a vaccine, but it was Salk who would introduce his formula first. On April 26, 1954, at the Franklin Sherman Elementary School in McLean, Virginia, the Salk vaccine field trials began. It was the largest public health experiment in American history—no one was certain it was safe, or whether it could provide effective protection against the crippling disease. By June 1954, nearly two million school children in forty-four states had taken part.

On April 12, 1955, almost a year since the end of the field trials, the Salk vaccine was ruled “safe, effective, and potent.” Within just a few years of being licensed, the Salk vaccine decreased the number of polio cases in the United States by fifty percent. By the early 1960s, the number of Americans contracting polio fell to a few thousand annually.

“This vaccine vindicated twenty years of giving dimes, twenty years of volunteering. It was a victory for millions of faceless people who had done what they could to end the scourge of polio,” says David Oshinsky in the film.

“The story of the polio crusade pays tribute to a time when Americans banded together to conquer a terrible disease,” says AMERICAN EXPERIENCE executive producer Mark Samels. “The result was a medical breakthrough that saved countless lives, and had a pervasive impact on American philanthropy that continues to be felt today.”

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston
Senior producer Sharon Grimberg
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ACCESSIBILITY

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including twenty-four Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and fourteen George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for *Two Days in October*.

ABOUT WGBH BOSTON

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For more information about AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and *The Polio Crusade*, visit pbs.org/americanexperience

Promotional photography is available for download from pbs.org/pressroom and pressroom.wgbh.org.

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