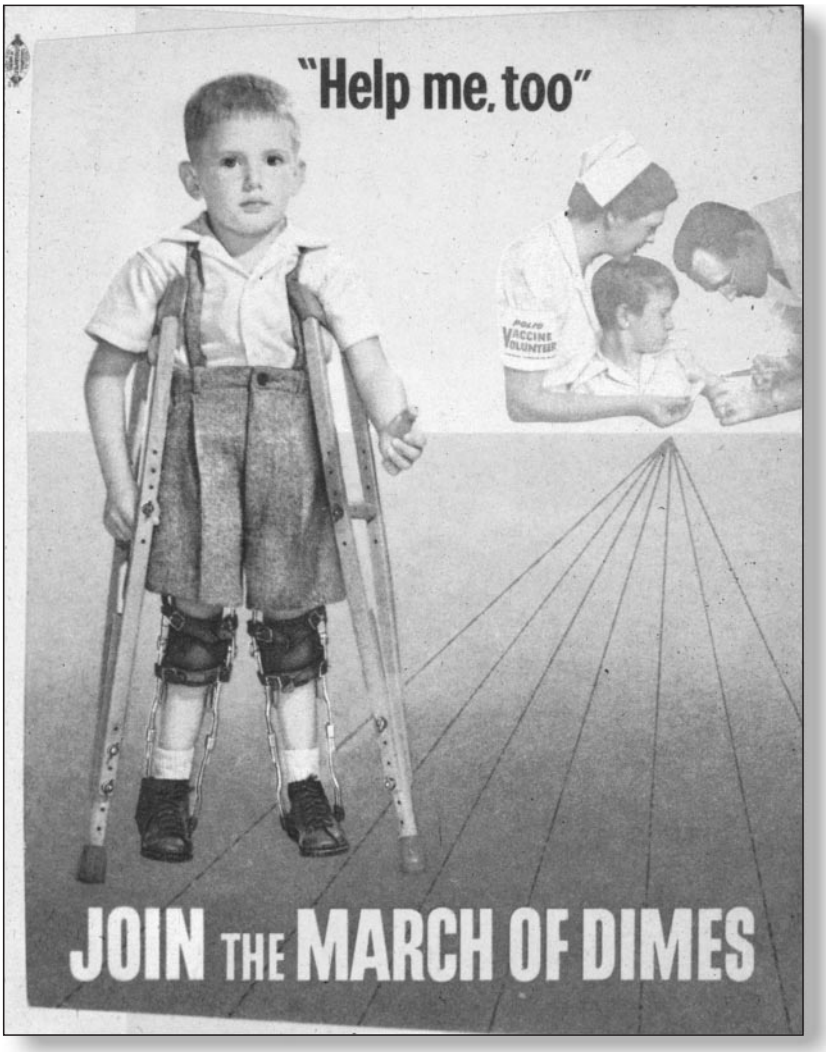
"... So That Others May Walk": The March of Dimes

William H. Helfand, Jan Lazarus, and Paul Theerman



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STRICKEN WITH POLIO IN 1921 at the age of 39, Franklin Delano Roosevelt put his remarkable political skills to work on behalf of other polio victims to develop a rehabilitation center in Warm Springs, Georgia. In 1928, the demands of his campaign to become governor of New York led him to transfer leadership of the rehabilitation center development to his law partner, Basil O'Connor. O'Connor made Warm Springs a nonprofit foundation, created the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, and used the prestige of the Roosevelt name and position in his fund-raising efforts. At first, these projects depended on charitable gifts as well as a series of annual balls, pegged to Roosevelt's birthday at the end of January and promoted with the slogan "Dance so that others may walk." The funds were used for patient care at Warm Springs and for financing research into the causes and prevention of polio. Soon, however, more funds were needed.

A new direction came from an unexpected source. In 1938 Eddie Cantor, the popular star of vaudeville, films, and radio, suggested a new type of appeal, which he termed "The March of Dimes." The name was a wordplay on the contemporary newsreel series "The March of Time." Through the popular media of the day—radio, posters, broadsides, and film shorts—the country's most popular entertainers backed a campaign for the public to send their dimes directly to the White House in Washington. Postcards like this one, showing a well-dressed child with polio, accompanied a card into which one could insert as many as twenty dimes; there was space for bills as well. A dime in the 1930s was worth $1.27 in today's money, and the March of Dimes proved to be worth its weight in gold. ■

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