

SHOPPING FOR SHOES WITH X-RAYS—H. David Vuckson

Anyone who goes shopping for new shoes is familiar with the sliding metal scale that is used to determine your foot size and its width in order to select new shoes that are comfortable. For several decades from the 1920's into the late 1950's there was a very different, novel way to supposedly help in choosing the correct size of shoes, especially for growing children and that was by using an X-ray machine for the feet. For those of you learning of this for the first time it may seem incredulous, but I can assure you that these devices were real and that I and many other Collingwood residents personally experienced their use in a shoe store on Hurontario Street.

These X-ray machines were called "Shoe Fitting Fluoroscopes" and they were made by several different manufacturers and used primarily in North America, Britain and Australia. They were in a wooden cabinet with a ledge near the bottom. A customer would try on a new pair of shoes and then step up onto the ledge and insert their feet into the machine. Underneath the feet was an X-ray bulb. The X-rays penetrated the shoes and the feet and the image of the bones in the feet showed up at the top of the machine in three separate green-glowing viewing windows: one for the child customer, one for the mother, and one for the salesperson. Children especially were encouraged to "Wiggle your toes, Johnnie!" Oh, what fun for Johnnie to see inside his little feet! Poor Johnnie had little choice in the matter and his mother probably made the final decision on new shoes based on the price she could afford and how they looked to her. Considering the rate at which children—feet included—grow, chances are they would soon be back for another toe wiggling session and another dose of radiation.

The manufacturers touted these expensive machines as an aid to selling shoes and as a way to make it fun for children to go to the shoe store with their mother. What they didn't promote was the fact that the child customer, the mother, and the shoe salesperson were all bombarded with radiation because these machines leaked radiation all over the place. Depending on how many pairs of shoes were tried on in a visit, those involved received lesser or greater amounts of radiation. There are accounts of some children treating these machines as toys and stopping in at the shoe store on the way home from school to be able to watch themselves and their friends wiggle their toe bones especially if a member of their family worked there. Perhaps they thought that they would see their feet glow in the dark at bedtime.

We are all familiar with X-rays of our teeth at the dentist's office for which we wear a heavy, lead bib to shield ourselves from the radiation. Not so with these machines for the feet. The customer was quite literally standing over the X-ray bulb with just a thin layer of aluminum above the bulb for a shield. The radiation field extended well beyond the feet and the shoe salespeople received the largest amounts of radiation, considering how many customers they would deal with day after day.

I didn't have as much exposure to these machines as others did because I grew tall fast which caused pain in my feet, and so for a number of years in the later 1950's we had to go to Toronto to a specialty children's shoe store to find shoes that would work for me. By the late 50's the machines were banned and the sliding metal scale so familiar to all was in universal use.

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