

Fluoroscope

By D.H. Coop

If you lived in the United States from the 1930s to the early 1950s, shopping with your mother was not an adventure for young children. The only thing for those of us who were young was getting into trouble by asking questions or wandering off and getting lost in the store. Yet, there was that one day that the shopping trip was a step into a world of wonder and amazement, and that was the trip to the shoe store.

The salesperson would take you over to a machine that measured your feet scientifically, measuring the length and width of your foot for the perfect fit. At the huge machine, you would stick your feet into the base, look into a view port at the top of the machine, and see with Superman vision the bones in your feet. Other children would stand around the machine waiting for a turn to see their feet or each other's hands. The machine was a place of wonder and excitement, and it often turned into a fight over who would be next.

Machines like these showed up in the 1920s for a variety of medical problems. The shoe fluoroscope was advertised as visual proof that fitting your child's feet with shoes was done with scientific precision. Early in the 1920s, concerns were raised about the exposure to X-rays. Yet, real concerns only came after the atom bomb was dropped on Japan and radiation concerns became more evident. Real warnings were published in 1948. Then, in 1953, more warnings were reported, and the Food and Drug Administration placed a ban on the machines. Pennsylvania was the first state to ban the use of the machines in 1957. The one in use in the United States was in Boston in the 1970s.

I still have fond memories of visiting the shoe store and the machine that had nothing to do with the way my shoes fit. The only reason for the machine was to entice mothers and their children to the shoe store by giving us the thrill of seeing the bones in our feet, just like Superman.