

MERCY HOSPITAL CELEBRATES 150TH ANNIVERSARY

by C. Hax McCullough, Jr.

JANUARY 1, 1847, is a date of great and continuing significance to the health, happiness, and prosperity of Pittsburgh. On that day Mercy Hospital, Western Pennsylvania's first permanent hospital, opened its doors to people in need regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender, age, or ability to pay. As remarkable as that kind of access was in America 150 years ago, Mercy set innovative standards of health care in the burgeoning industrial city of 45,000.

Mercy Hospital was established by Michael O'Connor (1810-1872), the first Roman Catholic bishop of Pittsburgh. It was managed and staffed by seven Sisters of Mercy, a hands-on and activist order of Irish Roman Catholic women brought here in 1843 by Bishop O'Connor. For the Sisters of Mercy, founded in Dublin, Ireland, in 1831 by Catherine McAuley, Pittsburgh was their first foothold in America, and there was a lot to be done. Under the leadership of Mother Frances Warde (1812-1884), the sisters came to establish schools, an orphanage and, as soon as feasible, a hospital.

Pittsburgh in 1847 was tough, noisy, dirty, polluted, and dangerous. Nine-tenths of its permanent population were workers and tradesmen brought here to labor in mills which included 28 iron furnaces, 32 tanneries, 12 glass manufacturers, and 14 distilleries. In addition to jobs and shelter, these immigrants needed churches and charitable institutions. Approximately one-third of the population had come from Ireland.

The first Mercy Hospital was housed in an imposing downtown building at Sixth Street and Penn Avenue that had been a hotel and a school. In 1847, it was known as "The Concert Hall," and its assembly room became the new hospital's ward. There was room for only 20 patients and, during the hospital's 16 month stay, 254 patients were treated. Clergymen of all denominations had free access to their parishioners at a time when, to a devout Catholic, a Protestant minister was considered "a wolf in sheep's clothing."

On May 9, 1848, Mercy Hospital opened its own new three-story \$15,000 building on Stevenson Street with space to accommodate 60 patients. On high ground near the present hospital, it was described as being "in the country." Soon it too was overcrowded, but because of a lack of funds, enlargement did not occur until 1882.

Four physicians were enlisted at the outset: David McMeal, Joseph Gazzam, William Addison, and George Bruce. They served patients during three-month rotating terms without pay. When a patient wished to pay and could, separate arrangements were made. Reports about conditions at Mercy Hospital in its early days were very positive. In 1854, the visionary Bishop

O'Connor, satisfied with the administrative as well as nursing skills of the Sisters of Mercy, completed legal transfer of the hospital to them. Ever since, enlisting the help of generous Pittsburghers, they have met whatever challenges have faced the city, including strikes, fires, riots, floods, wars, and epidemics.

Smallpox, cholera, typhoid, malaria, dysentery, pneumonia, typhus, diphtheria, influenza, and many other "fevers" visited Pittsburgh periodically throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. These scourges often placed demands on Mercy Hospital which had to be met, no matter the cost in time and resources. As a newspaper editor wrote during one of these life-threatening epidemics, "No hospital in America and possibly the world has been more instrumental on occasions of unusual public distress than has been Mercy Hospital."

The doctors Dickson — father John (1812-1863) and sons John S. (1844-1892) and Joseph (1848-1892) — played important roles in the early history of Mercy Hospital. Dr. John Dickson began his medical practice in Sewickley before moving to Pittsburgh and providing free services at Mercy. He was recognized as the most notable surgeon in Pittsburgh, and was the first to do a tracheotomy in the city. After 1863, surgery at Mercy Hospital was performed in its own department using its own equipment.

Both Dr. John S. Dickson and brother Dr. Joseph N. Dickson were, like their father, distinguished surgeons who gave their time to Mercy Hospital. Both studied medicine at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and spent two years furthering their training in London and Paris. Of the two, Joseph was the more popular. He was referred to as "Dr. Joe" and was an avid sportsman and nature-lover. Dr. Joe's kindness and generosity were tested when Mercy Hospital suffered financial problems in 1874; it was at his own expense that badly needed medical supplies were purchased. In 1886, it was Dr. Joe Dickson who opened Mercy Hospital's first gynecology department.

Before 1847, the sickest people during epidemics were isolated in buildings designated as "pest houses." Mercy Hospital took in smallpox victims in 1849, and in 1854 there were so many cholera patients that some had to sleep on the floor. In 1872, it was smallpox again, for which there was no cure.

During the Civil War, Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war in Lincoln's cabinet and a Pittsburgher, sought help from Mercy Hospital. He had learned about the Sisters of Mercy in the years he practiced law here. Twenty-seven sisters from Mercy on a "service and relief" plan went to run Stanton Military Hospital in Washington. Several stayed until after the end of the war.

President Lincoln was a frequent unannounced visitor at night to the Stanton Military Hospital, and was glad to help the sisters who were running short of supplies and food. He issued a directive which read: "To Whom It May Concern: on application of the Sisters of Mercy in charge of the military hospital in Washington, furnish such provisions as they desire to purchase

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and charge same to the War Department.”

After the bloody Civil War Battle of Shiloh on the Tennessee River in April, 1862, Pittsburgh dispatched two hospital ships to the battle site. They were filled with medicine and supplies and a small army of nurses and surgeons including Dr. John Dickson. The ships left with 400 sick and wounded on board, and deposited all but 70 in Ohio River town hospitals on the way back to Pittsburgh.

On a hot summer afternoon in 1862, the laboratory of the Allegheny Arsenal in Lawrenceville exploded, killing 74 and wounding many more. Mercy Hospital received patients brought there for treatment in various horse-drawn conveyances (there being no ambulances).

In June, 1877, the Pennsylvania Railroad ordered a 10 percent reduction in its work force. Riots and violence resulted. The National Guard was called in. When a crowd stormed the railroad's roundhouse at 28th Street, they were fired on and 20 people were killed, including three children. Looting was widespread. Many buildings, including Union Station, were set afire. Doctors and nurses from Mercy rushed to the scene, though no records survive about the number of patients treated.

The earthen dam above Johnstown owned by South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club burst on May 31, 1889, releasing a reservoir of water that caused the legendary Johnstown Flood. This disaster killed 2,209 and washed away most all in its path. At Mercy Hospital, “Dr. Joe” Dickson immediately organized a group of doctors and nurses who went to Johnstown to aid and rescue survivors. Over 50 of the sick and wounded were brought back to Mercy for care.

After Dr. Joseph Dickson's death in 1892, the gynecology department at Mercy Hospital was headed by the Swiss-born Dr. Werder, a soft-spoken, kind, and unselfish gentleman. “He never had an enemy,” noted a Mercy colleague, Dr. E. A. Weiss, at the time of Dr. Werder's death in 1919. “His simple honesty, sterling character and extreme modesty were all characteristics of the man.”

The dedicated physicians of the 19th century who worked long hours at the hospital without pay were all gentlemen of the Protestant faith. The first exception to this custom was the much-revered Dr. Werder, a Roman Catholic.

Dr. R. W. Stewart was a highly praised surgeon at Mercy Hospital from 1892 until his early retirement in 1912. His know-how and personal charm were legendary. Dr. Stewart, Dr. Werder, and Dr. J.J. Buchanan (see accompanying main article) were a famous triumvirate of surgeons at Mercy before and after the turn of the century.

In 1918, the most deadly epidemic in history, caused by Spanish influenza, killed 22 million people worldwide. In the United States, 548,000 died — twice as many as died in “the war to end all wars.” When this epidemic reached Pittsburgh, 22,000 were taken sick and 4,500 died. All places of amusement were closed and streetcars were disinfected daily. On October 7, the U. S. Army took over Mercy Hospital. By October 19, one Pittsburgher caught the disease every 90 seconds, and one died every 15 minutes. During the epidemic, Mercy Hospital treated

586 cases, from which there were 62 deaths. The hospital also treated 476 cases of pneumonia, a frequent complication of the flu, of which 213 died.

When he died in December, 1919, Henry Clay Frick bequeathed \$1.4 million to Mercy Hospital, the largest personal gift at that time to a local hospital.

Among the many legendary “firsts” at Mercy Hospital:

- Dr. Alexander Pollock performed the first blood count in Pittsburgh (1851); in 1867, he was the first Pittsburgh surgeon to perform an ovariectomy;
- first hospital west of the Alleghenies to provide a continuous medical staff (1892);
- first Caesarean section in Pittsburgh (1894);
- installation of the area's first x-ray machine (1896);
- first hospital in Pittsburgh (1919) to offer an organized social services department;
- first burn unit in Pennsylvania (1967), established under Dr. Charles Copeland;
- first in Pittsburgh and the third hospital in America to implant nuclear-powered pacemakers (1973);

The hospital also is credited with numerous legendary accomplishments, including the donation during the Depression of nearly \$600,000 worth of medical care to destitute Pittsburghers. In 1936, during the St. Patrick's Day Flood, Mercy cared for the injured without electrical power.

Mercy Hospital has a 150-year record of extraordinary service to Pittsburgh's health needs. It is a great hospital today because the dedicated people of its distinguished history made it that way. As Pittsburgh grew, so did Mercy. As new drugs, treatments, and equipment became available, Mercy was among the first to use them. Having substantially rebuilt its hospital grounds near Duquesne University in 1984, Mercy today continues its innovations in the spirit of Christian compassion and personalized care still exemplified by the Sisters of Mercy. ☼

Mercy Hospital also works to promote wellness. In this sesquicentennial year, the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System is partnering with WTAE-TV and others in a new kind of good health campaign, “Get Healthy, Pittsburgh,” to educate people about their power to live more vigorous and productive lives.