THE FIRST HOSPITAL: SAINT MARY'S INFIRMARY

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During the Civil War, the military hospital in Cairo was the first of several the Sisters staffed. After the War, Cairo became the site of the first hospital owned and operated by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. It always had a hard time. If anything could happen to an institution, or in it, it happened in Cairo. This paper does not pretend to be a complete history of the institution. I'm not even sure it can capture the affection the Sisters felt for the place.

In 1865 as the war was winding down, Bishop Juncker of Alton, Illinois, now Belleville, Father Louis Lammert, pastor in Cairo, and Dr. Horace Wardman tried to persuade the Sisters of the Holy Cross to remain in the city and open a private hospital. Unfortunately, the ill-fated Chapter of March, 1865, had just elected a new provincial, Sister Alphonsus Rodrigues from Louisiana and Mother Angela, who had supervised the hospitals during the war, went to Notre Dame to help Sorin and her brother, Father Neal Gillespie, launch The Ave Maria. The Council at St. Mary's declined the offer made by authorities in Cairo.

Two years later everything changed. Rome declared the Chapter of 1865 null and void and hence invalidated the election of Mother Alphonsus. A new election was held and Mother Angela returned to her position of authority at Saint Mary's. In October of that same year, 1867, Mother Angela in passing through Cairo saw many people ill with fever who were put off the boats in Cairo to die on the banks of the river. With the Council, she decided to accept the offer to start a hospital in Cairo. They sent Sisters Augusta and Matilda to open the place. Augusta, you will remember, had been a nurse throughout the War and had been head of the Overton Hospital in Memphis. They called the new place Saint Mary's Infirmary, the name by which it was known until 1947 when the name was changed to Saint Mary's Hospital. It was separately incorporated ten years later.

The need in the city was as great as it had been during the War, but the temporal prospects were poor. "Hospital furniture, which could have been obtained for a mere trifle from

the military hospital at the end of the war," had to be purchased at high prices. Furthermore the financial prospects of the city were poor and the citizens could give very little help. "Reaction after the war had not been favorable to the financial prosperity of Cairo and very little assistance could be expected from the citizens."[1] "The only practical hope for success" was in the Marine patients for which Angela expected to make a contract with the Secretary of the Treasury.

Cairo was a beautiful ante-bellum town with some lovely old mansions and magnolia trees lining many streets. Its southern character continued into this century. Cotton was grown in the fields outside the town and as late as the 1960s two gins still milled cotton in the city. The weather was almost unbearably hot and humid. After all, the city is ninety miles south of Louisville and four miles farther south than Richmond. Yet in 1890, a publication called Attractions of Cairo, Illinois claimed that the cooler waters of the Mississippi which bordered the north side of the town "rushed in" to replace the warmer air above the Ohio River on the south so that constantly there was a "very free and cool bridge over and through Cairo to the Ohio, that promptly dries up every gas as rapidly as it is generated."[2] The black population was large and segregation flourished.

The Sisters lived from hand to mouth. When they arrived they began to collect money so that they could rent a place. They obtained $153 and soon afterward rented a house. The next month, the county, "desirous of having the county invalids cared for in a better manner than they were", asked the Sisters to take care of them. A contract was drawn up which required the Sisters to "nurse, board and lodge said sick, as well as furnish them medicine and medical attention at the rate of 92 cents a day."[3] A judge paid the rent for a larger house on Washington Street and the sick were moved there on January 1, 1868.

After the Sisters spent two years in small inadequate buildings, Mr. Taylor, a trustee of Cairo City Property, gave them forty lots on Walnut Street to use for a hospital. Here they erected a frame building. Sister Augusta made it a point "never to refuse or send a sick person away but kept all who applied from a day to a week, whether they could pay anything or not -

which, of course, taxed the house. . . ."[4] In 1893 a three-story brick building was erected in front of the original building and in 1910 a new porch or enclosed veranda two stories high added "greatly to the appearance of the Infirmary as well as the comfort of the convalescent among the patients."[5] The Sisters did all the nursing until 1899 when they hired a "competent lady nurse as a night nurse" and so relieved the Sisters "of that arduous duty."[6] Gradually the number of hired help increased, but the one night nurse remained constant. In 1908, there were two hired men, three hired women - and one night nurse.[7]

Saint Mary's Infirmary endured more than its share of crises and calamities. During the winter of 1898-1899, severe temperatures burst the water pipes.[8] A far greater challenge, however, was an epidemic of meningitis in Gale, a town in southern Illinois. When the local physician called for help, the Sisters sent two of their senior nurses - fortunately the nursing school had opened only a few years earlier in 1910. The young women had volunteered and found themselves not only nursing but serving as washerwomen and seamstresses. Because roads were so bad that the doctor could not get everywhere, the two nurses sometimes took his place and even acted as undertakers. One night the snow was so heavy that one of them had to ride a mule to reach a house two miles distant. When the doctor contracted mumps, the two women cared for him as well as the other patients. Eventually they too became ill and had to return to the hospital to recuperate.[9] In March of 1925, fifty cyclone victims were cared for in the hospital.[10] In 1928, a train wreck sent physicians, graduate and student nurses, and Sisters to Mounds, a small town about eight or ten miles northeast of Cairo. The injured were placed in baggage cars and rushed back to Saint Mary's. In less than five hours, 58 patients were cared for with the help of people from the city.

Every year the city was threatened by floods on the Ohio or Mississippi. (Remember Cairo is located at the junction of those two rivers.) In 1913, the water was so high that women and children were sent out of the city when it was feared that the levees would not hold. Governor Dunne sent the militia to help bulkhead the levees. For a whole month the danger continued but the levees held.[11] Two Sisters became so nervous and excited by the rising water

that the superior proposed sending them to relatives in Chicago, but the superior general wanted them at Saint Mary's Notre Dame. Meanwhile, the Sisters left in Cairo remained on duty caring for the sick refugees and soldiers who came to reinforce the levee. Consequently, their commanding officer sent word that the patients need not be moved, and assured the Sisters that if the levee did break, his regiment, the seventh, would be the first to come to the rescue of the patients and the Sisters.[12] In the spring of 1927 flood waters reached a new height - fifty-six feet, marooning the city and making it impossible for patients to come from the surrounding areas.[13] Another flood in January of 1937 caused the mayor to order many patents discharged and again to evacuate women and children from the city. All furniture was moved from the first floor and the hospital was ordered to prepare to take care of the levee workers this time from the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Coast Guard and other helpers who themselves might need assistance. A base hospital was established with two doctors in constant attendance. The emergency lasted from January 25 to February 18 when people were allowed to return to the city.[14]

On May 29, 1945, hail more then an inch and a half in diameter destroyed screens and glass, uprooted trees and destroyed telephone power. It did so much damage to the smoke stack of the laundry that the facility was without steam for two days. In the midst of the storm, Sister Alma Louise fell in the kitchen and broke her ankle in four places. (She claims that she slipped on spilled oil caused by the fall of an air vent from the ceiling.)[15] The problems did not vanish with the years. In the middle of the night of January 11, 1962, the fire alarm sounded. However, it was not fire but flood. Extreme cold had frozen the sprinklers in the attic of the oldest part of the hospital, causing them to burst. The cascade of water went down through the walls and ceilings through the social area on the second floor to the pediatrics section on the first. The children were evacuated.[16]

Delivery of health care was very different then, but the loving care and the challenges were just as critical. As we saw, during the year 1899-1900, the Sisters for the first time hired a "competent lady nurse" for night duty.[17] Among their remarkable cases was a Mrs. Mary Philips suffering from locomotive ataxia, not even able to sit up in bed. Sister Magdalen cared for her

"like a baby" during the twenty-nine years Mrs. Philips was a patient there.[18] The county paid "the nominal sum of ten dollars for the case." Clara Wagner, brought in by the county commissioner, was healed but then had nowhere to go; so, the Sisters kept her - for eighteen years.[19] Although she was a Lutheran, she asked for a priest and was baptized on her deathbed. A boy of fourteen years walked off a moving sleeping car, breaking his leg in five places, his arm in three and receiving an open wound from the spine to the abdomen. The shattered bone was removed and a silver plate "drilled in." Weeks after his discharge, he returned to the hospital "not even lame."[20] In 1933, the home of a Frank Malone, an invalid for years, was destroyed by fire. Because he had nowhere to go, he was brought to the hospital where he lived for four days. He was baptized before his death.[21]

The human hazards seem very modern. In 1913, for instance, a twenty-five year old man shot and killed a surgeon because he thought insufficient care had been responsible for his mother's death. A few days later he also accused the doctor of attacking his wife when she had gone to the doctor's office a few days earlier.

Even the staff worked by different rules. Doctors were not limited to a regular medical staff, but any doctor in the city or surrounding towns had the privilege of bringing patients to St. Mary`s. Dr. Grinstead had his private operating room, built and furnished at his expense. In October of 1911, Dr. Boudurant, being miffed at the Sisters because he could not use Dr. Grinstead's facilities, left St. Mary's and opened his own private sanitarium. When he complained to the superior general, Mother Perpetua said she did not think it just to allow others to use Dr. Grinstead's room - for she had given all doctors the same privilege.[22] Only in 1919 was a medical staff organized.[23] Each one had his own instruments and only in July of 1940 did members of the staff pool their instruments which became the property of the hospital valued at $3939.40.

In general, higher superiors of the Sisters made recommendations and controlled policy - even in minor matters. Let me give an example. Apparently the door of the central supply room was not locked at night and nurses were free to help themselves to oxygen, intravenous solutions

or any other item. Many items were thus never charged. In the fall of 1951 Mother Rose Elizabeth, then the superior general, recommended that the door be locked - obvious solution - when it was not supervised. At the same time there were not enough admissions to keep an admitting officer busy all day; so the functions of an admissions clerk and credit officer were vested in one person - at the "recommendation" of the religious superiors. There were many times, however, when the Sisters were happy to have the intervention and support of their higher superiors.

Some years later, in the fall of 1959, Dr. Chambliss applied for staff membership and was refused with no reason given. Someone, maybe the administrator, appealed to Mother Kathryn Marie, then the superior general. She wrote to the staff that they had given no reason for their refusal and that subsequent investigation of his credentials had revealed no problem - and he was well qualified. She and the Council thought that the hospital should accept him regardless of the voting of the staff.[24]

The relationship between the hospital and the city was always a mixed blessing, ranging from supportive to critical. In 1932, for instance, a lawn fete sponsored by the women of Cairo netted $200.[25] When the women held a similar fete the next year, the Cairo Evening Citizen urged its readers to attend, saying that the hospital was one of the city's greatest assets.[26]

The county occasionally paid the hospital for its care of indigent patients - in 1941 the check amounted to $17,000 for a period of some years. When a new addition was dedicated on October 18, 1953, Dr. Flint Boudurant, chief of the medical staff, welcomed the people. The mayor, Egbert A. Smith, recognized the progress that had been made and Dr. Roland R. Cross of the Bureau of Hospitals in Springfield, commented on what had been done in the field of medicine and congratulated the Sisters for the work throughout the years.[27]

By 1948, however, the relationship had deteriorated alarmingly. The doctors became dissatisfied and talked about erecting a city hospital. Mother Rose Elizabeth came to assess the

situation: the Sisters might leave Cairo! Even the Chamber of Commerce became worried. The meeting with the doctors lasted three hours. At its end the doctors pledged their loyalty to the Sisters. (During the meeting the Sisters were praying in the chapel with the Blessed Sacrament exposed!) The Chamber of Commerce, the mayor and the doctors also came to an agreement.[28]

Of all the problems with the town, the racial one was always the gravest. Such was the racial prejudice in the city that Blacks could not be cared for in the main hospital. Once a black woman was delivered of a child or a black person underwent surgery, that person was immediately thereafter taken out of the hospital to the annex. Even when they were eventually admitted to a ward on the first floor of the hospital itself, they had to enter by a special door.[29]

In 1951 when state law required a licensed pharmacist to dispense medications, the hospital hired a black man recommended by the Board of Pharmacists.[30] There was a great furor. The situation became alarming. Fiery crosses were burned in several places and discrimination increased. The pharmacist was hired. In 1952, the doctors objected to black aides and demanded that they be dismissed immediately. Such a decision, however, was reserved for the higher superiors of the Congregation. Both Mother Kathryn Marie, the Provincial, and Mother Rose Elizabeth, the Superior General, went to Cairo. A member of the Department of Public Health represented Governor Stevenson. The regulations determined at that meeting seem to have vanished - if they were ever recorded anywhere. The archives narrative is ambiguous about the outcome. Mother Rose Elizabeth "agreed to have certain policies set forth that would correct the 'apparent' existing conditions."[31] By 1958 the chronicles of the hospital could note: "A colored nurse was employed. . . with no repercussions."[32] By the time the hospital closed there were Philippine nurses and a Chinese doctor from the Philippines.[33]

Acceptance of black doctors created some difficulties. In April of 1959, two black doctors applied for admission to the medical staff. One, Dr. Robinson, was accepted and one was rejected.[34] Dr. Robinson treated both black and white patients, but all of them were placed on the first floor. In October, the other applicant, Dr. Chambliss, was accepted - because Mother

Kathryn Marie, the superior general, sent a letter to the staff. Since the medical staff had given no reason for their refusal of him and the doctor was well qualified, she said, the General Administration felt that the hospital should accept his admission regardless of the voting of the others.[35]

When conditions like separate entrances and water fountains ceased to exist is not clear. We do know that at a house council meeting in 1944, the superior-administrator urged the Sisters to "prevail upon he colored help to use the bathroom assigned to them in the Colored Ward o prevent dissension among the white help; also, to discourage them from drinking from the water fountains in the halls." [36] Sheer necessity seems to have ended much of the segregation. With the opening of the new pediatrics department in October of 1958, black patients were cared for on the first floor, and the wards for the white patients were moved to the second floor.[37] Because for almost a century segregation was the rule at St. Mary's, black employees thought they were not allowed to eat in the employees' cafeteria and so took their lunch in the lower lounge area or some other part of the hospital. In 1960, however, all employees were required to eat in the cafeteria to avoid food spillage in other parts of the institution.[38] Full Integration in the wards seems to have come in 1961 although with much opposition from the medical staff. By this time, however, Blacks were also employed in some departments and included a laboratory technician and an evening receptionist.

When the Civil Rights movement moved into high gear, conditions did not seem to improve in Cairo. Fiery crosses were a frequent occurrence - even on the lawn of the hospital. When the sound of gunfire frightened the Sisters and destroyed their sleep, Sister St. John's directive was simple: "Sisters, put your pillow over your head and go to sleep."

There was in interesting anomaly in the racial issue. On November 1, 1960, a statue of Martin de Porres was erected on the front lawn of the hospital near the doctors' entrance. The pastor of St. Columba's presided and the children from that school participated. The reason for the statue was the favors granted through Martin's intercession.[39] They were not specified.

By 1972, the financial condition of the hospital was so desperate that Mother Olivette notified Governor Walker that unless financial assistance from the State of Illinois was immediately forthcoming, Saint Mary's Hospital would be forced to close by the end of February, 1973. Yet on October 29, 1971, the census reached 123, "the highest it had ever been."[40] Negotiations of all sorts dragged on. In June, Holy Cross Hospital of Silver Spring sent its public relations director to coordinate activities with the press. Such a step was necessary because reporters who were critical of the city of Cairo wanted to blame the attitudes of the local officials and their continued discrimination against Blacks. During the week of March 26, 1972, the Civil Rights Committee staged public hearings in Cairo in order to explore inequalities. The administrator of Saint Mary's and her assistant were called to testify before the commission.[41] The nature of the hearing and the testimony were not included in St. Mary's archives.

On the other hand, the mayor talked about "the fiscal mismanagement of the past ten years." Other sources attributed the closing to circumstances symptomatic of southern Illinois - finances and the acute shortage of manpower especially doctors. The hospital was sold to PADCO and the merger contract signed late in August, 1973. The transfer was effective September 1. It was henceforth PADCO Community Hospital. That too has ceased to exist.

Almost every one of the 193 Sisters who served in Cairo loved the place - many passionately. Some of them agree, however, that the place should have been closed years earlier.

Why was there such devotion? Each Sister had her own deeply personal reasons, but they all agree that they really were aware that they were serving the poor and those discriminated against. An unsigned history of the hospital says, "Besides our own from Alexander County, the poor from Pulaski and Mississippi Counties are always with us making our field for charity very large."[42]

Not only did the Sisters work hard in the hospital, bringing healing to the sick and dying. They brought lost Catholics back to the Church, baptized countless babies and adults when they were at death's door.

They also served the people of Cairo in two schools and lived at the hospital. One school, St. Columba's, was founded for the black children in 1928 by the African Mission Fathers. It was always very small and very poor, but the children were lively and good. They had May processions and Christmas programs that featured an elaborate nativity scene. By 1963 the public schools were officially integrated, the number of Sisters declined and the school was closed. St. Patrick's parochial school was the other. Founded in 1906, it closed in 1949. The Sisters lived at the hospital until 1933 when the pastor provided a convent.

The odds against which all of the Sisters and their devoted staff struggled still seem overwhelming. Today there is no hospital in the city of Cairo.

ENDNOTES

1. Archives at Saint Mary's [henceforth ASM], Cairo, p. 10.

2. ASM. See typed copy of article in Cairo archives.

3.ASM. Cairo p. 11

4.ASM. Cairo, p. 15.

5. ASM, Cairo, p. 68

6. ASM, Cairo, p. 24.

7. ASM, Cairo

8. ASM, Cairo, p. 22

9. ASM, Cairo undated and unsigned typed history of hospital

10.ASM, Cairo, p. 90.

11.ASM, Cairo, p. 71

12. ASM - Cairo, p. 71.

13.ASM, Cairo p. 96

14. ASM, Cairo, 1936-1937, p. 2

15. ASM-Cairo, 1944-1945, p. 6.

16.ASM - Cairo, 1961-1962, p. 8.

17.ASM, Cairo, p. 24

18. ASM, Cairo, p. 24 and 77.

19.ASM, Cairo, 1933-34, p. 20

20.ASM, Cairo, p. 26

21. ASM, Cairo, 1933-34, p.20

22.ASM, Cairo, 1911-12, p. 69.

23. ASM, Cairo, 1918-19, p. 84.

24. ASM-Cairo, 1959-1960, p. 4.

25. ASM-Cairo, 1931-32, p. 11

26. ASM-Cairo, 1932-33, p. 15.

27. ASM-Cairo, 1953-54, p. 3

28. ASM-Cairo, 1947-48, pp. 6,7.

29. Interviews with Sisters M. Clarissa and Alma Louise.

30. ASM - Cairo - Class Meeting Minutes, Jan. 10, 1952.

31. ASM - Cairo, 1951-1952, p. 6.

32. ASM - Cairo 1958-1959, p. 1.

33. ASM - Cairo, p. 4.

34. ASM - Cairo, 1958-1959, p. 6.

35. ASM - Cairo, 1959-1060, p. 4.

36. ASM - Cairo, Council Meeting Minutes, Oct. 2, 1944.

37. ASM - Cairo, 1958-1959, p. 4.

38. ASM - Cairo, 1959-1960, p. 6.

39. ASM - Cairo, 1960-1961, p. 4.

40. ASM - Cairo, 1971-1972, p. 5

41. ASM - Cairo, 1971-1972, p. 9.

42. ASM - Cairo - unsigned history of the hospital