**The 1920s:**

**THE BEGINNINGS OF VALLEY BAPTIST HOSPITAL**

**HARLINGEN** -- As Harlingen started the 1920s, the country was in the midst of a depression, but it was to end by the middle of 1921. The decade was actually to see a great leap in development in the city. This was no more evidenced than by the growth in the population. From a total of only 1,784 people in Harlingen in 1920, the city would surge to 12,124 people by 1930, according to the U.S. Census.

The dynamics of this growth were soon recognized by foresighted individuals in the community. After all, Harlingen was the hub of transportation in and out of the Valley. The Lower Rio Grande Valley Baptist Association had to select a Valley site for its planned sanitarium—a medical facility for long-term illness. Brownsville, with the area's largest population, was the logical choice for the new hospital. However, aggressive individuals in Harlingen had other ideas.

In competing with Brownsville for the site for the erection of a Baptist hospital, Harlingen pledged $75,000, according to an article in the Brownsville Herald on January 16, 1920. This pledge by Harlingen would allow the building of a $150,000 facility— or twice the cost of the one originally planned. This offer was attractive to the Baptist facilitators, as it would provide a much larger hospital than the one originally conceived.

Robert Hamilton, Sr., who moved to Harlingen in 1917, and Jack Earnest Stack were among leaders who saw a need for a hospital in Harlingen. Hamilton worked as a bookkeeper in the Texas State Bank of Harlingen from 1917 to 1920, before opening an insurance office. He and others approached Lon C. Hill and the Harlingen Townsite and Improvement Company, convincing Mr. Hill of the feasibility and value of having a hospital in Harlingen. Mr. Hill then pledged $15,000 toward the building. Short of cash, the townsite company conveyed four lots just south of where the hospital would eventually be built. Two stipulations were that the hospital would cost more than $50,000 and be built within three years (by 1923). The original incorporators of the hospital were Dr. N.A. Davidson, G.S. Stringer, and Judge Fred Bennett of Mercedes.
Matters did not proceed smoothly. An article in the *Harlingen Star* of Nov. 30, 1920 outlined several reasons for setbacks and obstacles which delayed the building of the Baptist Sanitarium in Harlingen. When the hospital was not built within the specified time frame, the lots were re-conveyed on Sept. 27, 1924 to the Cameron County Realty Co. based in Dallas. In return, the hospital pursuers received lots on “F” Street, without conditions.

Construction then began on a white stucco building in the 600 block of “F” Street. The contractor was W.T. Liston and Sons, who built the structure to designs by local architects Elwing and Mulhausen. “F” Street, formerly Mexico Street, was the ideal location for the hospital, because at that time it was the main thoroughfare to San Benito and part of the state highway system.

The 35-bed hospital opened in part on Jan. 22, 1925 and fully in May, 1925. Its charter members were J.T. Foster, S.G. Stringer, C.S. Wroten, and Dr. N.A. Davidson of Harlingen; Frank Robertson and Dr. Clarence M. Cash of San Benito; S.C. Tucker of Brownsville; Dr. R.E. Utley and Fred E. Bennett of Mercedes; E.C. Couch of Weslaco; Dr. L.M. Davis of Donna; and G.T. Balch of McAllen.

On Jan. 24, 1925, Valley Baptist Hospital held its formal opening. The ground floor was partially sub-surface. Two additional floors rose above it, with a very small fourth floor in the middle front added for aesthetic reasons. At this time, it had 19 rooms in two wards, and its cost to date was $75,000, not counting the grounds.

A little over two months later, on Sept. 30, 1925, the School of Nursing was established at the Valley Baptist Hospital. Unfortunately the hospital lacked adequate housing for the student nurses. They occupied a ward in the basement of the facility. Eventually a large two-story wooden barrack-like building would be erected next to the hospital to house nurses.

For its first full year of operation, the hospital and S.G. Strugh, president of the Valley Baptist Hospital trustees, reported that 564 patients were treated. Of these, 65 patients were charity cases. The 564 patients included 285 surgical patients, 165 medical patients, 35 obstetrics patients, 35 infants, and 70 accident patients. By October, 1926 patients are being turned away for lack of rooms. Private rooms were particularly in short supply.

The bottom line of the hospital's finances improved year-to-year. For the fiscal year ending on Aug. 31, 1927, the property was valued at $105,078. The following fiscal year, receipts were $26,661 and expenses were $25,415. The number of patients treated rise to 713 – an increase of 106 patients from the previous year. The hospital started keeping statistics on "hospital day service." This figure was 2,437 for the period from April 1, 1927 through August 31, 1927.
The salaries and payroll of certain employees in 1927 indicated how far a dollar would go at that time. The superintendent in charge of all the hospital operations received $175 a month; the nursing superintendent $135 per month; the night supervisor, $110; student nurses received $6 to $8 per month; and the cook $52 per month. Hourly wages included $1.50 per day for a dish-washer and $2.50 per day for a porter.


Also, a future physician was born at Valley Baptist Hospital on “F” Street in the 1920s – Dr. John Tucker, who was born in 1928. Dr. Tucker went on to a career of over 40 years in family practice with San Benito Medical Associates. His wife, Joyce, also later worked at the hospital on “F” Street, as a nurses’ aide in 1945 and then as a registered nurse in the 1950s – by which time Valley Baptist would have moved from “F” Street to its new location on Pease Street.

*(Story by Norman Rozell)*