The 1930s:

A DECADE OF SERVICE; OVERCOMING STORMS, DIFFICULT TIMES

HARLINGEN  --  If the 1920s laid the physical foundation for what would evolve into a complex and valuable institution in the community, then it can be said that the 1930s set the spiritual and moral tenor of Valley Baptist Hospital that would elevate it to become one of Harlingen's most admired institutions.

It was Hurricane No. 11, later popularly known as the Labor Day Hurricane of 1933, that put the hospital to a major test. The category 3 storm with winds well over 100 miles per hour made a direct hit on Harlingen and San Benito on
September 5, 1933. The severity of the storm can best be measured by providing the single statistic that 40 Valleyites died due to its furiousness. The hospital immediately came to be the center of relief for the numerous injured. So many required care that some of the hospital's doctors performed their services at the Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel where people had taken shelter.

Fortunately, word of the impending storm had reached point further north in Texas and additional aid was soon on the way. A relief train from San Antonio arrived in Harlingen on Sept. 6 together with a hospital unit from Fort Sam Houston. The army medical unit consisted of 177 enlisted men, 12 officers, five nurses, two ambulance companies, and a hospital company.

The mayors of San Antonio and Houston had acted expeditiously upon learning of the turn of events. San Antonio's mayor organized a train by the afternoon of Sept. 5 and rode along with it. This included six baggage cars with supplies and food, coaches carrying 60 nurses and 50 doctors, and even a tank car with drinkable water in anticipation that the municipal supplies would become contaminated. The train organized by Houston's mayor had ten coaches with doctors and nurses and a carload of supplies. At Robstown another car was picked up. It carried 18 nurses and 18 doctors. Soon two train cars from Dallas and one from Austin were also on the way.

To accommodate the many injured citizens, many large tents were erected in the spacious front lawn of the hospital on “F” Street in Harlingen. If it looked like a war zone, it almost was. The Salvation Army was on the scene early, furnishing simple meals and sandwiches to the hard-pressed doctors, nurses, and security personnel. The Army also asked nothing in return. During and following the disaster, the mettle of the hospital staff had been severely tested, and it had come through with flying colors.

Each of the early doctors at Valley Baptist Hospital has a story worth telling. One interesting story illustrates the all-embracing philosophy of the hospital. It deals with a husband-and-wife team of doctors, Dr. Heinrich and Annie Lamm. In addition to their Valley Baptist Hospital work, where Dr. Annie was an anesthetist and also delivered babies, they had a general practice for years in La Feria.

Heinrich and Annie Lamm were German Jews, who as Hitler became increasingly oppressive, fled to the United States in the 1930s. After settling in New Jersey, where their ship landed, they went to Kansas City in 1937 then later
came to the Valley in 1939. Dr. Annie Lamm was one of the area’s first practicing female physicians. She practiced at Valley Baptist Hospital for 37 years and delivered more than 2,500 babies.

Dr. Heinrich Lamm also made history – and there is in fact an item connected with him on display in New York, at the Corning Glass Museum. A newspaper article there details a discovery that Dr. Lamm made as a medical student in Germany in 1930. Doctors were searching for a non-intrusive way to examine parts of the human body. Heinrich had put together a packet of thin flexible glass rods which could bend and go around sensitive organs. These could conduct light and images, thereby providing the physician a view of body conditions which were previously inaccessible. He had, in effect, created one of the first fiber optic devices, if not the first.

Of course the 1930s were also the time of the Great Depression, a time of great hardships. Prices were much lower then. For example, Dr. Max Harris, a longtime physician in Harlingen, has a bill showing the total hospital charges were only $62 on Jan. 24, 1935 – the day that Dr. Harris was born at the old Valley Baptist Hospital on “F” Street. The $62 included 10 days of obstetrical care in the hospital for his mother, Maxine Harris, and laboratory services. Dr. Harris would return to Valley Baptist in 1947 as an internal medicine physician. He later served as Chief of Staff during the time when Valley Baptist established its hospice program in 1979 and also became accredited by the Texas Medical Association to grant continuing education credits for physicians.

Throughout the 1930s, dedicated individuals and their medical associates, together with the hospital staff, strengthened the ties with the community that would one day make Valley Baptist Hospital a great and dependable resource.

(Story by Norman Rozell)