ARTICLE WRITTEN FOR THE 85th ANNIVERSARY OF THE VALLEY BAPTIST HOSPITAL

Norman Rozeff, April 2010

In the 1920 the Baptist Sanitarium is Conceived

As Harlingen started the decade the country was in the midst of a depression, but it was to end by the middle of 1921. The decade was to see a great leap in development in the city. This was no more evidenced than by the growth in its population. From the 1920 U.S. Census total of 1,784, the city would surge to 12,124 persons by the 1930 one. The dynamics of 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. Brownsville with the area's largest was the logical choice. However, aggressive individuals to the west had other ideas.

The Brownsville Herald in its 1/16/20 edition gave the pertinent facts. The article stated that in competition with Brownsville for the site for the erection of a Baptist hospital, Harlingen pledges $75,000. This would allow the building of a $150,000 facility or twice the cost of the originally planned one. It was attractive to the Baptist facilitators as it would provide a much larger hospital than that originally conceived.

Robert Hamilton, Sr., who had lived in Little Deer Creek in Falls County, TX before moving to Harlingen in 1917, and Jack Earnest Stack were among leaders who saw a need for a hospital here. Hamilton worked as a bookkeeper in the Texas State Bank of Harlingen 1917-20 before opening an insurance office selling Home Insurance. He and others approached Lon C. Hill and the Harlingen Townsite and Improvement Company. They convinced him of the feasibility and value of having a hospital here. 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 in three years (3/2/23). The Brownsville Herald in its 1/16/20 edition gave the pertinent facts. The article stated that in competition with Brownsville for the site for the erection of a Baptist hospital, Harlingen pledges $75,000. This would allow the building of a $150,000 facility or twice the cost of the originally planned one. It was attractive to the Baptist facilitators as it would provide a much larger hospital than that originally conceived.

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Incorporators of the hospital were Dr. N.A. Davidson, G.S. Stringer, and Judge Fred Bennett of Mercedes.

Matters did not move smoothly. An article in the Harlingen Star of 11/30/20 outlined reasons for the setbacks and obstacles delaying the building of the Baptist Sanitarium in Harlingen. When the Baptist Sanitarium of Harlingen was not built within this time frame, the lots were re-conveyed on 9/27/24 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 the 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 it was the main thoroughfare to San Benito and part of the state highway system.

The 35 bed facility opened in part on 1/22/25 and fully in May 1925. Its charter members were S.C. Tucker, Brownsville; Frank Robertson and Dr. Clarence M. Cash, San Benito; J.T. Foster, S.G. Stringer, C.S. Wroten, and Dr. N.A. Davidson of Harlingen; 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 7/24/25 that the Valley Baptist Hospital had its formal opening. The ground floor was partially subsurface. 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 costs to-date were $75,000, exclusive of grounds. A little over two months later (9/30/25), 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 VBH (trustees), reported that 564 patients, of which 65 were charity cases, were treated. The breakdown has 285 surgical patients, 165 medical, 35 obstetrics, 35 infants, and 70 accidents. By October 1926 patients are being turned away for lack of rooms. Especially in short supply are private rooms.

The bottom line of the hospital's finances improved year-to-year. By the end of the fiscal year 8/31/27, the property was valued at $105,078. The following fiscal year receipts were $26,661 and expenses $25,415, so a modest amount remained banked. The number of treated patients had risen to 713, fully 106 above the prior fiscal year. The hospital commenced keeping statistics on "hospital day service." For the period 4/1/27 through 8/31/27 this figure was 2,437.

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, the night supervisor, $110, student nurses $6 to
$8 per month, and the cook $52 per month. Hourly wages included $1.50/day for servant-dishwasher and $2.50/day for a porter. Physicians practicing at the hospital in the 1920s included among others: R. E. Utley, A. C. McLamore, George Gallaher, Noah A. Davidson, Clarence M. Cash, A. M. Letzerich, and J. C. Watkins.

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, where Heinrich's brother lived, in 1937 then later came to the Valley in 1938. 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. The only other woman on the staff was Dr. Vivian M. Amidon whose husband was also a physician.

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.