Part I: Its Background and Conception

Why would a doctor want to come to a wild frontier community lacking in most amenities? If we are generous we can speculate that they may have been adventurous or had a wanderlust. Others may have sought a change in climate and/or scenery. Still others may have been young and just starting their careers. On the unflattering side we could surmise a doctor may have fled more civilized areas to escape debt or an unhappy marriage or even that he was too incompetent to practice elsewhere.

The medical problems that would have confronted doctors in early Harlingen would have included: the usual childhood illnesses such as measles, mumps, diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and scarlet fever among others. Typhoid and cholera were still major diseases throughout the world. Childbirth and related maternity complications were a routine part of a general practitioner's work as were administering vaccinations. Broken bones and lacerations were a regular occurrence for anyone dealing with horses and livestock. Appendicitis cases were always worrisome as treatment was possibly too late. Burns were frequent as were slashes, punctures, and cuts from the area's xerophytic vegetation. Present but not as frequent were snakebites and gunshot and knife wounds. Lastly there were always accidents associated with the building and industrial trades.

While the community of Harlingen was established in 1904, it did not formally become a governmental entity until 1910. Even so, it had already attracted doctors to serve the growing population of the community and its surrounds. The physician brothers Casper W. and Alfred M. Letzerich had erected a two story office building at the corner of Commerce and Main (Jackson) Streets in 1909. The former was a general practitioner; the latter a surgeon. Dr. D. B. McGehee also came to Harlingen in 1909. Unfortunately those needing long-term or intensive care were not well-served in the town. The nearest suitable facility was the Catholic Devine Providence Hospital in Brownsville, 26 miles away over poor roads.

The second wife of Irrigation District employee Frank H. Brown was Katherine Clarey Brown, a native of Cincinnati. They had married in 1907 sometime after death of his first wife. They honeymooned and lived in Alaska for six months before returning stateside. She had been a doctor in Hopkinville, Kentucky and St. Louis, Missouri. They came to Harlingen in 1911. While not a practicing physician here she realized the need for a nursing facility and opened her spacious home at 1222 West Harrison Street to patients requiring extended care.

It was Miss Marie (Mary) Yeager of Chicago who would move to fulfill a community need. She had purchased uncleared land north of Harlingen and came south to personally view the property. Having expended her life savings to purchase the site, she was in need of funds and took employment assisting local doctors. She was rooming at the Gilbert House, a 20 room stucco building constructed in 1920 at 110 West Van Buren Street. Seeking relief for an asthmatic condition Ida Gilbert and her husband, Louis, had first come to Electra, Texas from Linn, Missouri. With a grocery store, they did well in this oil boom town just west of Wichita Falls but decided the warm climate of South Texas might
be even more suitable. In 1919 they moved to McAllen and a year later to Harlingen where they erected their rooming house. While the rooms were nicely furnished the facility lacked any boarding. Mrs. Gilbert did not initiate cooking until 1933 when workmen, repairing and reconstructing the great damages of the 1933 Hurricane, had a need for eating facilities. The room and board then continued until 1943 when Mrs. Gilbert sold the structure, which by 1930 was called the Gilbert Hotel. Mr. Gilbert by 1930 was supplementing family income as a mail carrier. He was to pass on in 1940. Having realized the great need to care for the sick in and around Harlingen, Miss Yeager sought the advice of Ida Gilbert. When she broached the subject of establishing a hospital in a rented structure, Mrs. Gilbert told her it would be better to have one which was wholly owned. The two women then formed a partnership to move forward in creating a hospital.

The Implementation

It was on 3/26/23 that the Gilberts purchased lots on the east side of Mexico (now F) Street between Tyler and Harrison Streets. The sellers were L.L. and Rose Alaniz who had only 16 days earlier had bought the property. Mrs. Gilbert then secured two former army barracks from the Rangerville area. They had been used in 1915-16 by soldiers policing the border to quell "Bandit Era" unrest and then during World War I. Once moved to the lots the three room buildings were set apart and parallel to one another with plans to connect them with a new structure in order to form a u-shaped complex. Initially George Day and a Mr. Volkart, often working ten hours a day, were hired to do the carpentry at 50 cents per hour. Then L.E. Hawkins was contracted to do the job. He hired as carpenters and helpers J.A. Sing and his son L.E. Sing, Don Drake, and Henry Murphy. All walls were of single wall, box construction but apparently strong enough to have withstood hurricane force winds over the years. Wooden battens were nailed on the outside seams to keep out the elements. A porch was added to tie all the elements together. On each side, where the former barracks met the tie-in, was a bathroom. Each room had three windows to afford cross ventilation, an absolute necessity with the South Texas summer climate. The roof was of wooden shingles. Across the back of the building a kitchen was fabricated and attached. Here, in addition to the cooking, water was stored and boiled for sterilization. Thus came into physical existence the hospital at 315 South F Street.

The Hospital and Staff

With the erection of the facility, Miss Yeager wrote her dietician friend Miss Julia Bassart of Chicago to come join her in the new venture. Julia consented to do so. A 16' by 17' building was built on the property to house the two women. Mrs. Gilbert acted as business manager and owner of the enterprise. Miss Yeager was in charge of floor duties and Miss Bassart was household manager and also assisted in the hospital that apparently opened before the summer of 1923. The facility had seven patient rooms for which the charge for each was five dollars a day. Two patient rooms were in each wing and three in the connecting unit. In addition there was a surgery room, reception room, and a storage and preparation room. Doctors who
staffed the hospital included, among others, the Letzerich brothers, Casper and Alfred, and Noah A. (Semny) Davidson. Miss Teresa Montalvo was a nurse's aid employed by the hospital in 1924.

After a year in operation Miss Yeager told the newspaper "that it still lacks equipment and is actually an emergency hospital. The foundation stone of the institution has been a desire to help the stranger." She went on to say that the desire was to put the hospital to use as a memorial training school for young women, fitting them for better citizenship and to develop high standard mothers and wives as an affiliate of the well-known Lucy Meyer Training School in Chicago. Lucy Meyer was a Methodist deaconess renowned for her social work.

Organizations came to the aid of the under-funded hospital. The Rotarians and Kiwanis at the suggestion of C. Wunderman donated an efficient bell system for the patients. The local Ku Klux Klan, which was quickly losing political power and public approval by the mid-1920s here in Texas, donated a large roll of sheeting.

The first patient treated at the hospital was one of carpenter George Day's two sons. Robert cut his finger while his father was working there. Among better known individuals who the hospital served were E.C. Bennett, long time fire chief and manager of Harlingen utilities, M. B. (Bill) House, and Cage Johnson. All three had appendectomies. The latter was also an earlier patient. Constable Cage Johnson while on an investigation at 1217 W. Polk in the early summer of 1923 entered a shootout with Abilano Sanchez. Both were wounded and quickly transported in honking cars to the nearby hospital where they were placed in opposite wings. While Johnson recovered Sanchez was to succumb to his wounds. Another individual who ran afoul the law was a black man, J.R. King. Shot by City Marshall Arthur Goolsby, he died in the hospital in late January 1925.

Joe Gavito, Jr., age 11 and later of La Feria, was to be treated for diphtheria in July 1924 at the hospital. He remembered his sense of isolation. Jose E. Lozano, father of Harlingen Police Captain Abe Lozano was to die in the hospital from long-l Darling complications after being gassed during World War I action.

On a happier note are some births occurring at the hospital. Mrs. Winston Harwood, whose husband is retail manager for CPL's ice operations, gives birth to Cordelia Brown Harwood on 11/4/25. Dr. W. J. Vinsant attended. She is so happy with the care given that she convinces Georgiana Hill, wife of Lon C. Hill, Jr., to use the hospital. The Hills' son Owsley is born there 12/7/25. Robert Campos, later to be assistant fire chief in the city, is born there 2/1/26 to Ventura G. and Antonio J. Campos.

Part II: The Demise and Disposition of the Hospital

The little hospital, unbeknown to those striving to make a success of it, was about to face formidable competition. In competition with Brownsville for the site on which to erect a Baptist hospital, Harlingen pledges $75,000 according to a Brownsville Herald article on 1/16/20. This would allow the building of a $150,000 facility or twice the cost of the originally planned one.

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 local 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, and Hill pledged $15,000 toward the building. Short of cash, the 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). Incorporators were Dr. N.A. Davidson, G.S. Stringer, and Judge Fred Bennett of Mercedes. When the Baptist Sanitarium of Harlingen was not built within this time frame, the lots were reconveyed 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.

The white stucco building, which became the Valley Baptist Hospital, is built in the 600 block of F Street by W.T. Liston and Sons to designs by local architects Elwing and Mulhausen. Birger A. Elwing was born in Linkojsing, Sweden on 6/13/67 and educated at Chalmera University in Gothenburg. He married Sigus Hedstrom on 12/16/89 and settled in the Valley in 1919. The 35 bed facility opens in part 1/22/25 and fully in May 1925. Its charter members are 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. The capacity of the steel-framed structure is increased in 1943, and again in 1946, so that by 1956 it is equipped to care for 135 people. The facility closes in 1957 with the erection of a new hospital complex near S. Ed Carey Drive. Dr. David Nickell, who came to work in the F Street hospital in 1947, is the last of the F Street doctors to retire when he does so at age 73 on 10/29/84.

Once this major hospital came on the scene, just a few blocks away on the same street, the little, privately-funded F Street hospital was doomed. Mrs. Gilbert, sharp business woman that she was, closed the hospital sometime in 1926. She then converted the structure into a room and board facility. Three of the four center rooms were converted into a spacious dining area. When Miss Bassart left Harlingen is unknown, but she is not listed in the 1930 telephone directory. Mary Yeager was to die July 22, 1928 and is buried in the Harlingen Cemetery in a donated plot, part of the Dearing family lot. The building which once housed the women was apparently used in 1931-32 by Alice "Tommie" Gilbert, later Mrs. Dunn. The rooming house in 1937-38 was called the Tavern Hotel but then took on the name Gilbert House No. 2 the next four years. With two locations to care for Mrs. Gilbert hired Jack Phillips in 1937 to manage the first Gilbert House and then Mrs. D.H. Schellhammer for the position in 1939. After selling her Van Buren business site in 1943, Mrs. Gilbert moved to the F Street one with her daughter Dorothy. The latter was an employee of the air base in 1945 and would marry Vance Harold Glick, a carpenter by trade. By 1946 the newlyweds were also living in the rooming house which by now had no particular name and appeared to have more or less permanent tenants by 1956. In 1958 it became Gilbert House again and carried this designation until 1962 or so. Perhaps trying to cash in on the travel business Mrs. Gilbert listed herself as owner of cabins, only to resume the Gilbert House nomenclature in 1966. While living in the house Dorothy handled S & H Green Stamp matters and later became the distributor for out-of-town newspapers. By 1967 the Glicks were to move elsewhere. Without advertising, Mrs. Gilbert, who lived at the address until1974, perhaps had some paid occupants. She passed away on November 26, 1974.
Before the property was sold to Lewis Levine in 1978, he sought a useful way of disposing of the structures on it. He consulted Betty N. Murray who was a Harlingen contact person when it came to history. She in turn contacted the Rio Grande Museum Board to ascertain if they were interested in obtaining the historic structure as a donation from Levine, moving it to the museum complex, and restoring it. Initially the board refused the offer. Although Levine had started action in the summer of 1978 and had hoped for results in six weeks, it wasn't until December 1978 that results were manifested. The Museum Board, and Mr. Ebbage its president, reconsidered the earlier decision. They were aided by city manager Bill Synder who allowed that the city would move only the ten-room section and leave the kitchen part behind. The city would pay for the movement if it would later be reimbursed. Synder was to leave shortly before the actual movement occurred, but assistant city manager Harry Savio, who would move up to the full position, followed through. Mrs. Murray spearheaded a group of civic-minded individuals who raised funds from foundation grants, individuals, and organizations to pay for the transportation then the restoration and furnishing of the structure.

C. P. "Butch" These helped to reattach the three sections after they arrived. With the guidance of Corpus Christi architect James G. Rome, who was recommended by the Texas Historical Commission, the center section was authentically restored to three rooms. Other restoration was made to the original appearance and state. This was accomplished by a fortuitous circumstance. The 1910-1920-era wood frame Verser Rooming House on the 100 block of W. Monroe Street had been largely abandoned. It owner, Jack Verser, assisted by realtor Bonnie Bahnman, offered the museum the house for whatever it wished to salvage. This allowed the retrieval of doors, windows, ceiling lumber, floor boards, and bathroom fixtures. This was accomplished in the nick of time, for vandals commenced setting fires in the derelict Verser house.

As momentum and enthusiasm grew, the little hospital sprang back to life with equipment and furnishings reflecting the period in which it was utilized. C. W. Phillips, a master craftsman, was to restore and refinish much of the furniture and shelving including the reception desk and its chair, a small bookcase, five fruitwood office chairs, and a library table. Jack Skagg's donated his father L.L.'s 1920 dental equipment, sofa, two upholstered chairs a desk and filing cabinet, all having been used in San Antonio. T.H. Morrison, former chairman of the board of the Valley Baptist Hospital, supplemented this by furnishing a dentist chair and a Ritter Dental X-ray Machine. Harry and Ann Nigro donated doctor's equipment including an operating table, washstand, examining table, two kitchen tables, an adjustable table, and bedside table. All of these were once owned by Dr. Nelson Wise Haas of San Benito. Julie Gallagher Uhlhorn donated her father's books and her father George's complete office including diplomas and pictures. His office had been in the Baxter Building. In 1929 Dr. Gallagher had in turn acquired some of these items from the estate of Dr. A. C. McLamore who had died in 1928, the year before Gallagher arrived in Harlingen. A former nurse, Mrs. Myra George, knew of an original bed from the hospital. It was owned by the American Legion Auxiliary of La Feria which loaned it to needy individuals. The Auxiliary donated it, and it was placed in the "birthing room" on the right side of the building. In addition, Zora Mae MacPherson's hospital bed was donated
by her daughter Helen Thompson. This went into the "isolation room" on the left side of
the building.
An old x-ray unit was found in the Bethel Mission in Roma and obtained. Dr. Margo of
Rio Grande City furnished a period mortar, pestle and measuring glass while a
pharmacist in Brownsville provided bottled items to place in the old display cabinet
purchased from a Harlingen antique store.
Monetary donations, too numerous to specify individually, helped to flesh out the
museum's requirements. In the spring of 1981 the hospital opened its doors to the public.
It is and will remain a little treasure for the community it once served.

In 2010 considerable restoration work was completed on the old hospital, including a new
roof, and its inside exhibits were refurbished and re-arranged.

This item came to light on September 13, 2011:

I came across the history of Harlingen site noted below and was particularly interested in
the first hospital article.

My first wife was Carol Kay (Katie) Glick, daughter of Dorothy (Gilbert) Glick. I began
courting Katie in 1967 and we were married in 1974. She continued to live at 315 South
F Street until our marriage. I often helped Dorothy with her route and when I became
circulation manager of the Valley Citizen tabloid in 1972, she ran several routes for the
paper. I knew Ida Gilbert, Katie’s grandmother fairly well. She died in Valley Baptist
Hospital either shortly before or shortly after Katie and I wed. She was WELL into her
90’s.

The Glicks did not move out until the property was sold to Levine. Dorothy Glick lived
there her youngest son Bruce. I believe her other son Richard married and moved out
before the sale and the eldest son – Robert – had already moved away before I met Katie.
Dorothy purchased and moved into a house on Graham Road n Harlingen.

Just thought I’d add a couple of points of clarification.

Thanks,

Jack McNally