The Old Valley Baptist Hospital on F Street and Its Doctors

Norman Rozeff, March 2006

The first widely disseminated information concerning a Baptist health facility for the Valley appears on 1/16/20. We learn that in competition with Brownsville for a site for the erection of a Baptist hospital, Harlingen pledges $75,000 according to a Brownsville Herald article on this date. This would allow the building of a $150,000 facility or twice the cost of the originally planned one. Lon C. Hill was partly instrumental in promoting this offer. 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 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 1920s are a decade when Harlingen realtors are fiercely competitive. With much real estate to offer, some lots do not move rapidly. In 1925 the Harlingen Development Company with Osco Morris as president, J.R. Roberts, vice president and S. Finley Ewing secretary-treasurer advertises it capital stock at over $100,000. More importantly it is trying to unload numerous unsold city lots. It offers 300 homesite lots east of the concrete highway with 50 foot frontages at $500 for a corner lot and $450 for an inside one. All are part of the Original Townsite of Harlingen. On 3/27/25 more than 50 lots are sold at auction by the company. Prices paid range from $271 for a lot to $675. They are located on F Street next to the new hospital being erected. The fact is that the donation of the hospital site lots may have been made in order to make adjacent property more attractive to prospective buyers. It was also a good move because the site was on the highway to San Benito and offered easy access to citizens of that city to come to Harlingen for treatment.

Under the auspices of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Baptist Association, the white stucco building, which became the Valley Baptist Hospital, is built in the 600 block of F Street (formerly Mexico Street) by W.T. Liston and Sons to designs by local leading architects Elwing and Mulhausen. Birger A. Elwing was born in Linkojsing, Sweden on 6/13/1867 and educated at Chalmera University in Gothenburg. He married Sigus Hedstrom on 12/16/1889 and settled in the Valley in 1919.
In an October 1924 report to the Association it was noted that the Harlingen building was "very incomplete, not having much more than just the outside walls and the roof." It was further stated that "After consulting the contractor as to what it would cost to complete the building the board decided to borrow $25,000 in order to complete and furnish the hospital." This loan was received from the Southern Life Insurance Company at 7% interest and as a condition it was necessary to incorporate as the Valley Baptist Hospital. The governing board soon discovered that the loan amount was still not enough to cover all expenses, so the board members gave personal notes to secure additional loan monies. By October 1925, $30,770 was owed to banks and suppliers.

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.

It is on 7/24/25 that the Valley Baptist Hospital has its formal opening. The ground floor is partially subsurface. Two additional floors rise above it with a very small fourth floor in the middle front added for aesthetic reasons. At this time it has 19 rooms in two wards and its costs to-date are $75,000, exclusive of grounds.

Just a few days over two months later (9/30/25), the School of Nursing is established at the Valley Baptist Hospital. Unfortunately the hospital lacks adequate housing for the student nurses. They occupy a ward in the basement of the facility. Eventually a large two story wooden barrack-like building will 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), report that 564 patients, of which 65 are 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 improves year-to-year. By the end of the fiscal year 8/31/27, the property is valued at $105,078. The following fiscal year receipts are $26,661 and expenses $25,415, so a modest amount remains banked. The number of treated patients has risen to 713, fully 106 above the prior fiscal year. The hospital commences 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 indicate 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.
Before this hospital came into being, doctors were moving to Harlingen. It was a rapidly growing city. In 1920 the official U.S. Census put the town's population at only 1,784, but in February 1925 a special census to change the city governmental structure put it at 5,400. By 1930 the Federal Census put the population at 12,124.

Dr. Noah Albert (Semny) Davidson and his wife Dorris Drury Davidson established themselves in the community during the year 1920. Tragedy is later to strike them when their five year old son N.A. (Sonny) born here 4/7/31 is to die after being scalded. They had daughters Barbara Davidson (Boyett) and Lella Joyce "Joy" Davidson (Judin). The latter born 11/24/29 will go on to be Harlingen High School valedictorian and be graduated from Baylor University, later to volunteer in many community activities in the Valley. She is to die 2/5/06 at age 76 leaving five children and her sister. Her mother died in November 1999 at age 96. Dr. Davidson, who was chief of surgery at the Valley Baptist Hospital, was a Rotarian and served on the school board.

Around 1920 R.E. Utley, a physician arrived in the Valley. He was born in Neveah, Wisconsin 7/29/74 and had been graduated from Loyola University. After serving in the medical corps in WWI he married Bernice Smith of Topeka, KS on 6/13/19. In Harlingen he had a general practice, and also conducted surgery, x-ray diagnoses, and therapy. He was a Mason, Elk, and a Baptist Church member. He served as City Commissioner 12/37-12/39. Their home was at 401 E. Harrison.

It is 1923 when Dr. A.C. McIamore, a physician and surgeon, comes to town where he becomes a partner in Mclamore and Utley. Born in Montgomery AL on 7/27/77, he was educated in Natchitoches with an MD degree. He married Alice Worsham of Atlanta, LA on 4/16/03. This Baptist is also a Mason. At their 420 E. Harrison home is daughter Mary Lou. He is to die in 1928.

Dr. J.C. Watkins arrives with his wife Daisy in 1925. He is to become Harlingen's first Public Health Officer and retain that position for 20 years. He had been married in 1904 in Huntsville, AL. This First Christian Church member worked in Oklahoma 1918-24 before coming here.

The Gallahers, George and Blanch Tudor, move to Harlingen in 1929. He had been graduated from the U. of Iowa in 1925, then went on to medical school in Arkansas while his wife supported them as a dietician in a veteran's hospital. Once here he became a partner with Dr. Noah Davidson. Their offices were on the 10th floor of the Baxter Building. A year later he opened his own practice with an office on the 7th floor, staying there until his death in 1971. Their daughter is Julie Gallaher Uhlhorn.

These and out-of-Valley doctors from San Antonio, Houston, Kingsville, and Austin saw yeoman service after the Labor Day Hurricane of 1933. Harlingen and San Benito sustained the worst devastation in the storm; numerous injuries had to be treated. The hospital put triage into practice and soon the less seriously injured patients were place onto cots under two large tents erected on the landscape area in front of the hospital. Other
doctors offered first aid at a makeshift facility in the Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel, where many had sought refuge because of the structure's strength.

When the staff of the Valley Baptist Hospital put together the first yearbook which would be published, it came to fruition in early 1946. The name selected was *The Valley Samaritan*. Frances Hennessee, secretary to Superintendent K. P. Waller, was the editor of the publication. It was dedicated to 82 year old Dr. Clarence M. Cash of San Benito. Proudly the hospital noted that its records showed an average of $6,000 annually in charitable work had been donated.

The year 1943 had been an important one for the institution, for in this year its size was doubled in capacity in order to serve a greater number of patients. The new construction increased the bed capacity from 36 to 82 and the infant services went from ten bassinets to twenty-nine. The following year its owners, the Lower Rio Grande Valley Baptist Association voted that the institution be given to the Texas Baptist General Convention. This offer was accepted in 1945.

In 1945 the hospital had twenty-three doctors on its staff. It boasted of modern operating rooms, a very complete genitourinary section, diagnostic x-ray service, an orthopedic department, isolation facilities, iron lung for treatment of infantile paralysis (polio), and a maternity department.

The male doctors serving in 1945 were:

- Allen, G. E.
- Amidon, Charles (chief of staff)
- Ashcraft, E. J.
- Bleakney, Phil
- Caldeira, F. D.
- Cash, C. M.
- Davidson, N. A. (chief of surgery)
- Dawson, C. D.
- Gallaher, G. L.
- Lamm, Heinrich
- La Motte, T. J.
- Letzerich, A. M.
- Lyle, C. F.
- Pilmer, Gordon A.
- Pollard, A. J.
- Shafer, Troy A.
- Sprinkle, D. L.
- Utley, R. E.
- Vinsant, J. C.
- Watkins, J. C.

The two female doctors on the staff were Vivian M. Amidon and Annie T. Lamm. The latter is an anesthetist and also delivers children. Dr. Stout was a consultant for the laboratory. With the U.S. Army Airfield still in wartime operation the yearbook also recognized four Army doctors handling obstetrics for military dependents. These were: Col. Pearson, Major Barsard, and Captains Smith and Selles. The publication also recognized two staff members who died during 1945. These were Doctors George D. Beech (3/1868-7/45) and E. T. Morris (3/1887-11/45).

Upon being discharged from the service after 1945, Dr. Hesiquio Rodriguez becomes the first Hispanic physician to join the VBH staff. He may also be the first home-grown doctor on the staff. This gentleman graduated as valedictorian of the Harlingen High School class of 1935, when he was 15. By the time he was 22 he was a practicing doctor, having
received his medical degree from the University of Texas Medical Center in 1942. While serving in the U.S. Army 1942-45 he interned in St. Louis where he met and married psychiatric nurse Annabel Alberts. His early mentor was Dr. Heinrich Lamm, a man he greatly admired. Hesiquio served on the Rio Hondo School Board 1948-51 before moving back to Harlingen in 1954. He died in 1977 at age 58. On 3/11/05 the Dr. Hesiquio Rodriguez Elementary School on Wilson Road is officially dedicated. Among 60 Rodriguez relatives present at the ribbon cutting ceremony were the doctor's widow Ann Rodriguez Guerrero, daughter Suzanne Rodriguez Jones, and his son Charles Rodriguez.

Each of these doctors obviously has a story worth telling, but space limitations prevent that here. One interesting story however deals with husband and wife doctors, the Lamms. In addition to their hospital work 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 and made their home in La Feria. La Feria's Joe Tucker while visiting the Corning Glass Museum in New York chanced upon an item connected with Heinrich. Heinrich's son had contributed a newspaper article concerning a discovery his father had 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 heretofore inaccessible. He had, in effect, created one of the first fiber optic devices if not the first.

The support staff was modest compared to today's vast manning. There were three laboratory technicians, five employed in the x-ray department, and four dieticians. The general hospital nursing staff consisted of one nursing director, two nursing supervisors, sixteen registered nurses and nineteen practical nurses. The operating rooms had two supervisory nurses over five registered nurses. In the maternity department were one supervisor, three registered nurses, and seven practical nurses.

In addition there were eleven office staff, one medical librarian and one hospital missionary. Other support came from twenty-five Red Cross nurses aids. In early 1946 there were sixty student nurses now residing in a frame structure with small rooms. There were fifteen maids and orderlies, six of whom were from Harlingen's small and nearby black community. Dr. W. W. Melton was executive secretary and Mr. W. W. Quick of Lyford was chairman and member of the 13 person governing board.

The capacity of the steel-framed structure is increased 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.