In the 1920s Decade 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).

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.