



The *Great* Canadian Catholic Hospital History Project

Documenting the legacy and contribution of the
Congregations of Religious Women in Canada,
their mission in health care, and the founding and operation of Catholic hospitals.



Projet de la *Grande* Histoire des hôpitaux catholiques au Canada

Retracer l'héritage et la contribution des
congrégations de religieuses au Canada,
leur mission en matière de soins de santé ainsi que la fondation et l'exploitation des hôpitaux catholiques.

The History of St. Mary's Hospital Camrose, Alberta ~ 75th Anniversary 1999

Source: Anna Radchenko
Volunteer and Foundation Coordinator
St. Mary's Hospital, Camrose

Copyright: Public Domain

Digitized: June 2017



The History of St. Mary's Hospital



History of St. Mary's Hospital Camrose, Alberta

It is hard to believe that the Province of Alberta was formed less than a century ago and that a 125 years ago, no health facilities of any kind existed in our Province.

First came the Royal North West Mounted Police and with the building of the railway system, the country was opened up. With the formation of the Province of Alberta in 1905, settlers were soon attracted to the possibilities of a new life in this wide open, sparsely populated area in Western Canada.

Limited health care was provided by women without training or supervision in homes. A doctor's office was in his home, his instruments consisting of one pair of scissors, one probe, and one dressing forcep, which the doctor had to supply along with antiseptic solutions and suturing material required.

The first hospitals in Alberta were built and staffed by Mounted Police along the construction of the railways, to treat the accidents and illness of the construction workers and their families. Thus the population of the Prairie Provinces increased rapidly during the first quarter of the century. Camrose which served a wide expanse of fertile farmland, attracted the most rapid growth of surrounding villages.

Legend has it that the first homesteader of this district, a certain Norwegian, Ole Baken was informed either through a dream or by a fortune teller that he would migrate to Canada and take up a homestead with a stream running through it and that on his farm a city would arise. However true the legend may be, Ole did come to Canada and staked out a homestead with a creek crossing it's southwest corner, and on the banks of this Stoney Creek has grown up the city of Camrose.

There is another interesting legend on how Camrose got it's name. It too relates to a first settler, a Scandinavian who had a cow which he called Rose. After the early morning milking, Rose was free to roam and feed freely on the wide expanse of the fertile homestead. After the day of foraging, he would beckon his cow home by cupping his hands around his mouth and calling loudly in his Scandinavian accent, "Cam Rose" "Cam Rose" and Rose came home for milking.

By 1914 Camrose was connected with Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton and Regina with twelve passenger trains passing through daily.

Around the turn of the century, indications were that the area around the village of Daysland was populating rapidly and because of it's location, might very soon become a large centre. A hospital was a necessity and the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul were asked to establish one. Thus, Providence Hospital, Daysland was opened in 1908. However, it soon became evident, that the area around the town of Camrose, 25 miles farther west was growing even more rapidly.

The town of Camrose soon realized the need for a hospital as well. The town already had a small fourteen bed hospital, however the need for a larger facility was evident. In the early Annuals we read: "Late January 1918 or 1919 at a regular ratepayers' meeting, Mr. O.B. Olson, Mayor of Camrose, reaffirmed the need for a larger and better hospital be considered." Because of the cost and strapped financial resources, it was suggested "Why not invite hospital Sisters of a religious community to come here and build a fifty-bed hospital and provide that efficient service such as Edmonton is now providing?" Dr. F.A. Nordbye endorsed the suggestion and the meeting adjourned hopefully! Knowing of the Sisters in Daysland, our Sisters were approached to build and operate a fifty bed hospital in Camrose.

However, it was not until 1922 when Sister M. Angel Guardian, affectionately called "the foundress of the West," was sent to look into the matter of building a hospital in Camrose, as she had done for a number of other health-related facilities in the West. In Sister's own words "The winter of 1923 was a busy time, securing a loan and drawing up suitable plans for a 65 bed hospital." That being completed, the contract was given to Pool Construction Company for a fire-proof building which commenced in May. The town of Camrose generously donated the land and the contributions of people of Camrose supplemented the loan taken out by the Sisters.

On October 24, 1924 Archbishop O'Leary blessed and officially opened St. Mary's Hospital. The 50 bed facility, costing \$100,000, was built to serve the people of Camrose and area regardless of race, color or creed. The 12 bed hospital which had served Camrose and area well since 1912, was closed.

The early records provide a glimpse into the many challenges the Sisters had to be prepared to cope with, especially financially. Like Abraham Lincoln, they were frequently forced on their knees because there was nowhere else to go. Their deep faith, their commitment to Mission, supported by a lively sense of humor kept them afloat.

The weather that winter was very severe. The snow was so deep that the doctors were forced to make their house calls on foot. Trains were snowbound, with temperatures dropping to 54° below zero, frozen and bursting pipes were a common occurrence - another expenditure which the Sisters could ill afford! Lack of drinking water was an ongoing problem. Twice a week, a truck containing a huge tank of artesian well water filled large containers for drinking, by passing a hose through the kitchen window. Water for washing and other purposes was also limited. Frequently, a call would come from the town advising the Sisters that the water would be turned off for a period of time. Surgeries were canceled, not for bed-shortages but for lack of water.

In the Golden Trail published by the Camrose Canadian in 1955 we read about the Calgary Power Company, in the twenties, deepening the natural outlet heading from the Southwest Corner of Miquelon Lake to draw the water into Stoney Creek and Camrose Reservoirs, thus providing an additional water supply for the town. Stoney Creek was eventually dammed up to make the beautiful Mirror Lake easily viewed from the hospital.

On opening of St. Mary's Hospital, we were blessed with four doctors on Staff. Dr. F.A. Nordbye, Dr. W.H. Craig, who taught school long enough to be able to finance his medical education, Dr. W.A. Lamb and Dr. P.F. Smith, who later gave two sons, Dr. F.M. Smith and Dr. C.H. Smith and a grandson, our present Dr. Alan Smith, to serve the hospital. Dr. Alan Smith has since been joined by his wife Dr. Suna Smith and their daughter-in-law Dr. Valerie Smith, who joined the Camrose Medical Staff in 1998. This represents 75 years of continuous Medical Service at St. Mary's Hospital by the Smith family.

Sister Mary Pulcharia was the first Superior of the new hospital. Her staff of five Sisters and two Nurses, was soon joined by another two Sisters. When Dr. Craig called the Hospital on November 12, 1924 to say he had a patient coming in for emergency surgery with a ruptured appendix, all was in readiness - or nearly so. With the generous help from the Sisters in Daysland and the Community of Camrose, St. Mary's was able to meet this first emergency. Booked surgeries and scheduled admissions soon became a routine procedure. There were two tours of duty, day and night shifts, each lasting until the patients were suitably and safely attended to before booking off duty.

A Hospital Guild was organized on November 3, 1924, less than one month after the official opening. The President Mrs. U. Cunningham, with her capable working crew, worked tirelessly to aid both Sisters and patients in every possible way for over 20 years.

On November 19th, 1924, at a Civic opening, the foundation of a Training School for nurses was launched. The Grondberg twins were the first to enter the school. The last students to be accepted on July 6, 1932 were sisters Margaret and Agnes Shea, for a total of 44 students in the eight year period of the school. The school was closed due to limited learning opportunities in a fifty bed hospital, with the intention of re-opening the School once the planned 50 bed addition was completed. However, it did not come about when the anticipated expansion was realized 17 years later.

The first Maternity case was admitted November 16, 1924. Twin girls were born, but only one survived. Before too long the six bassinets proved inadequate and more were required. The sunny and bright spot did a thriving business. By July of 1925, there were 26 patients in the hospital, 7 student nurses, 2 graduates and 5 Sisters. The little hospital buzzed quietly with activity.

Mr. Mullins a handyman known to the Sisters in the East, came to give a helping hand. He was a welcome asset, but his voluntary exile proved too much for him. When seeing the heavy snowfall so early in October he declared "Look at that! There's a different God out here!" However Mr. Mullins who was a treasure to the hospital, returned home at the earliest opportunity. How some of the Sisters wished they could be returning home. They too experienced loneliness and minded the "strangeness" of their new western home.

People showed their increasing appreciation for the hospital. One day a fourteen year old boy was brought in from the country. Emergency surgery was immediately performed, but the boy died. The grieving father said "Sisters, this hospital is a Godsend, it didn't save my boy but it will save many others." He soon experienced the truth of his words! Two weeks later his sixteen year old son was brought in with the same condition as the younger son, but this time, the surgery was successful.

Periodically, hospital inspectors came from Edmonton to St. Mary's Hospital. It was a gratifying experience, but the most rewarding was in 1933, when St. Mary's for the second time was awarded full Accreditation status. Of the 98 hospitals in Alberta, St. Mary's was one of the 14 receiving Accreditation Status.

St. Mary's has maintained this coveted award to the present day and was able to maintain the standards demanded until the war years when the medical staff was depleted to one doctor. Standards required an organized Medical Staff organization. This was not possible with one remaining physician. In order to carry on the full load of caring for the sick of Camrose in the hospital and surrounding district, Dr. Mac Smith snatched whatever rest he could, while his wife Irene, drove him to his house calls in the country.

When the debt on the hospital was finally cleared, the Sisters made several attempts to secure the deed to the property from the Town Hall. Each time for some reason or other they were forced to wait. One day in February of 1936, the Sisters decided to wait no longer. When the two Sisters were again asked "Would they mind waiting"? "We've been waiting now for some time" Sister replied with her sweetest smile and a twinkle in her eyes "so we have decided to wait right here until we get it". Needless to say, the Sisters left happy, deed in hand.

After the war years, St. Mary's was once again inadequate to serve the population of Camrose and district. A new wing was added in 1949 bringing the bed capacity to one 117 adult beds and 18 bassinets, the hospital staff consisting of 10 Sisters, 8 doctors and 100 full-time personnel.

Camrose has always been known for its generous people. The Hospital Guild which was disbanded after 20 years of invaluable service to the pioneer hospital, was revived with renewed vigor in 1948 under the capable leadership of one of St. Mary's own graduates Mrs. Ralph Byers (nee Irene Lotzer). In 1961 the Guild was reorganized under the title of St. Mary's Hospital Auxiliary and is known by that name to this day. Words are inadequate to acknowledge the contributions of this group of dedicated ladies in providing comforts for the patients and contributing most generously toward funding for the ever-present need for new equipment.

After years of negotiations with the Health Authorities for a greatly needed addition to St. Mary's Hospital, approval was finally granted by the Alberta Hospitalization Benefit Plan. The new addition was officially opened May 14, 1969 maintaining the bed capacity at 117 beds.

By 1974, the Camrose city gave promise of rapid expansion. In the June 20th, 1989 edition of the Camrose Booster we read "As early as 1980, rumblings began to indicate that St. Mary's Hospital was over crowded. The condition of the 1924 wing was such that no part of it could be used for patient care, nor in the view of advisors, could it be feasibly renovated to comply with today's standards. After lengthy consideration and many discussions with governments at both municipal and provincial levels, it was decided to demolish the old hospital (the 1924, 1949 and 1969 wings) and erect a completely new hospital.

Construction was officially started on August 4, 1987, with the Honorable Ken Rostad, then Solicitor General and M.L.A. of the Camrose Constituency, turning the first sod." The official opening was planned for June 23, 1989 at 2:00 p.m. Sister Sheila Langton, Executive Director, remarked that "with the official opening on June 23, 1989 and the subsequent move to the new facility, a new chapter will begin in the illustrious history of quality health care at St. Mary's Hospital. Serving those entrusted to our Care, knowing that God will provide all that we need is the Mission which motivated the pioneer Sisters to begin their ministry to the sick at St. Mary's in 1924." Archbishop J. N. MacNeil, described this new St. Mary's Hospital as "deeply rooted in the past, alive to modern needs and leading people to new concepts of health care."

Victor Laskosky, Chairman St. Mary's Hospital Board of Governors had this to say "This new Hospital was built by a team effort. To supplement the funding by the Government of Alberta, generous contributions of monies were received from the Sisters of Providence, the City of Camrose, the County of Camrose, the business and corporations of Camrose, the Service Clubs of Camrose and District and the general public. Such tremendous support deserves the highest accolades and congratulations. We now will have one of the finest hospitals in Alberta. The citizens of Camrose and District should be justly proud of their united effort."

Since the pioneering days of 1924, the new supplemented the old, as with the former additions of 1949 and 1969. The time however had come for the new to replace the old - the building we had grown to love with it's many shared experiences and memories.

We welcome the new St. Mary's with its' many amenities and conveniences unknown in the past, as we minister to those entrusted to our care in the unchanging spirit of our pioneering Sisters and Staff, which has been the distinguishing feature of St. Mary's Hospital over the past 75 years.

In the spirit of "Care, Concern and Compassion toward one another and our patients"
Trusting in Providence, we walk in Hope.