



Foundations

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St. Joseph's General Hospital, Blind River, Ontario Community Based Health Care

by Greg J. Humbert

BLIND RIVER

Blind River was incorporated as a town in 1906 and is located at the mouth of the Mississagi River on the North Channel of Lake Huron about 132 kilometers east of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Named by early voyageurs because it was difficult to detect from Lake Huron, the site became important for the fur trade from the mid-17th to the mid-19th century.

Around 1853, the first sawmill was built at the location which is now Blind River. At that time the settlement was called *Le Petit Moulin*, meaning *The Little Mill* in English. It was an inauspicious beginning of a white settlement made up of Joseph Salvail's mill and a few buildings for the workers. It started to be called Blind River in the late 1800s with the streets being named at around the same time. The town became the base of the McFadden Lumber Company, once the largest white pine mill east of the Rockies. Until its closure in 1969,

lumbering had been the main economic activity of the community.

In 1903 another serendipitous event in medical history occurred in Blind River when a new Presbyterian minister arrived. The Reverend Malcolm Nicolson Bethune would later be described as an ambitious, somewhat vain, rigidly determined, and frequently outspoken man. He arrived with his wife Elizabeth Ann, described as an intelligent, strong-willed woman, whose fervent evangelism had converted her worldly and errant husband. Malcolm renounced his planned business career and instead became a clergyman. The family would reside in Blind River until 1905. Their family consisted of their three children: 14 year old Janet Louise, Malcolm Goodwin who was 11, and the 13 year old Henry Norman, who would grow up to be the famous doctor known for mending soldiers in the Spanish Civil War where he devised a mobile blood transfusion service by which he could take blood donated by civilians in bottles to wounded soldiers near the front lines. To this day he remains revered in China for his work with the Communist forces under Mao Zedong.¹ He had worked in China from January 1938 until he ironically died on November 12, 1939 of septicaemia, a form of blood poisoning.

In more recent times Blind River has benefited from the mining boom in nearby Elliot Lake, with the establishment of the CAMECO uranium refinery and from the continuing growth of tourism.²



This "Lake Huron Drainage Basin" map is courtesy of Environment Canada.

THE ROBB HOSPITAL

Dr. John Morrow Robb was the son of Samuel Robb and Margaret Morrow. Born in Downie Township, Perth County, he was educated in Stratford, Ontario and

at the University of Toronto. He taught school for three years in Middlesex County. During this time he married Olive R. Kidd and had two sons.

When he moved to northern Ontario he served on the school board for Blind River and then held the position of Medical Officer of Health in Blind River for over 20 years. His tenure as Medical Officer earned him a mention in *This is Public Health: A Canadian History* published by The Canadian Public Health Association in 2010.

According to Ontario Member of Provincial Parliament, Dr. John Robb, the province's high rate of maternal mortality in 1930 could be attributed to the part-time arrangement for most medical officers of health. Thus, as the Canadian Public Health Journal reported, "it was his opinion that a full-time health official, assisted by nurses and sanitary inspectors to supervise a county or part of same, would not only be a great factor in the reduction of the maternal mortality rate, but also be of extreme value in the larger field of preventive medicine."³

As a Member of Parliament, Dr. Robb served as



Dr. John Morrow Robb, Minister of Health for Ontario (1929-1934) and founder of the Robb Hospital in 1928, later to become St. Joseph's Hospital.



Cornerstone of the Robb Hospital.

Minister of Health from 1929 to 1934 and as Ministry of Labour in 1934.

Prior to his political career, Dr. Robb worked with Dr. Burd in providing health services to workers in the logging camps. He bought the Bayview Clinic from Dr. Burd, then went on to build the first hospital in Blind River that opened in 1928 as the 25-bed Robb Hospital. The hospital had cost \$36,600 to construct and the adjoining building \$1,000.⁴ He turned the operation of the hospital over to the Canadian Red Cross after he was named Minister of Health in 1930.

In 1935 he returned to Blind River and reopened his practice, locating his office in the hospital. Dr. Robb died on December 11, 1942 in Blind River at the age of 66 after a one-week illness.⁵

THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH

In a little village in Le Puy, France, the Sisters of St. Joseph began as a small nucleus of six women gathered to alleviate the suffering caused by civil and religious strife. A travelling Jesuit missionary, Father Jean Pierre Médaille, SJ, became associated with them and by 1650, these women were recognized as a congregation of Religious Women—The Sisters of St. Joseph. During the French Revolution several Sisters were guillotined which forced the others to go into hiding, but finally in 1794 they were free to return to their works of mercy. The congregation was re-established in 1807 as The Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon. Thirty years after surviving the French Revolution, the congregation spread to North America when six Sisters landed in St. Louis, Missouri in 1836. From there they established themselves in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Then in 1851, at the bequest of the bishop, the congregation came to Toronto, Ontario which was in the midst of an epidemic of fever. Thus began the Canadian Federation.⁶

Within 40 years, the congregation established other independent branches in the dioceses of Hamilton, London, Peterborough and Pembroke where Sisters founded and operated orphanages, schools and hospitals. In 1881, four Sisters travelled by steamboat from Toronto to Prince Arthur's Landing (the present day city of Thunder Bay) at the head of Lake Superior and began ministry in Northern Ontario.

By 1936, Bishop R.H. Dignan, bishop of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, invited the Peterborough Sisters working within his diocese to form a new independent congregation for his vast and fast growing diocese which consisted mainly of immigrants and a large indigenous population. One hundred and twenty one Sisters working in Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, North Bay and Sault Ste. Marie responded. The new Congregation assumed responsibility for St. Joseph's Hospital (1884) in Port Arthur and St. Joseph's Hospital (1931) in North Bay and was soon sending Sisters off for further studies in nursing instruction and hospital administration. Soon they opened a hospital in Little Current in 1944, in Sudbury in 1950, and later in Elliot Lake in 1959.

Carrying on the tradition of all the Sisters of St. Joseph, this youngest group, with its Motherhouse in North Bay, began to reach out to the small communities around Lake Superior and on Manitoulin Island. The Sisters opened separate schools in the province and established hospitals where no one had gone before. They cared for orphans and the aged and also brought with them the gift of music, which they taught instrumentally and in choirs.⁷

THE SISTERS NEGOTIATE⁸

Word that the Robb Hospital was up for sale came to the attention of Bishop Ralph Hubert Dignan, bishop of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie in the spring of 1940. He was a central figure in acquiring the hospital for the Sisters by negotiating with Dr. Robb in a series of letters between himself and the doctor. It was the former parish priest, Father Origène Dufresne, who informed him of the offer. Father Dufresne, who was ordained in Montreal, had been a pastor in Blind River

for 18 years, and upon his retirement from pastoral life became chaplain of St. Joseph's Villa in Blind River in April 1943.⁹ But he always kept his ear to the ground in his beloved Blind River, so when he discovered that Dr. Robb was selling the hospital he immediately informed Bishop Dignan about the sale.

It made sense that the Sisters would consider purchasing the hospital. In many ways the health care philosophy and values of Dr. Robb were quite similar to the Sisters. At the time of Dr. Robb's death, an obituary in the Canadian Medical Association Journal remarked: "A man of strong sympathy for the underdog, Dr. Robb brought the benefits of medicine to rough and lonely sections of Northern Ontario. His hospital was the only institution of its kind within a radius of 40 miles."¹⁰

Bishop Dignan met with the General Council of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie on June 6, 1940 to discuss with them the advisability of purchasing the Red Cross Hospital in Blind River from its owner, Dr. J.M. Robb, who was asking \$27,500 for the hospital. The Council investigated all of their options, taking into special consideration the health care needs of the people on the North Shore. As a result they voted in favour of this project and requested the Bishop to negotiate with Dr. Robb on their behalf and to make him an offer of \$22,500. However, before agreeing to this the members of the Council did their homework, carefully scrutinizing the financial statements of the hospital.

Financial statement for the year 1938

Income	\$6,859.52
Government grants	\$1,076.85
Total	\$7,936.37
Statement of Expenses to Ministry of Health	
Food	\$1,627.26
Furnishings	\$299.10
Drugs, x-ray, medical	\$490.16
Salamis and wages	\$5,114.84
Head administration	\$955.65
Miscellaneous	\$1,342.96
Unpaid accounts	\$232.85
Deficit made up by the Red Cross	\$3,990.04
Taken from Ontario Government Blue Book 1939	
Operating costs	\$9,539.71
Government Grants	\$2,089.35
Revenue from other sources	\$6,859.52
Deficit	\$590.84

St. Joseph's General Hospital, Blind River, Ontario ~ Community Based Health Care

Negotiations between Bishop Dignan and Dr. Robb on a purchase price went back and forth. At first Dr. Robb held out for \$27,000, but then lowered it to \$25,000. However, the Bishop was equally firm on behalf of the Sisters. In the end, Dr. Robb finally agreed to accept \$22,500 with a down payment of \$7,500 and a mortgage for the remaining \$15,000 which would be paid off each August 31st with \$1,000 per year for 15 years with an interest rate of 4½%. The deal was concluded on June 27, 1940. A few years later in August 1942, Bishop Dignan graciously offered to lend the Sisters of St. Joseph \$13,000 at 4½% to pay off the remainder of the mortgage on the hospital. The offer was gratefully accepted. As a result the final payment in full of the balance of \$13,390 was acknowledged by Dr. Robb on August 21, 1942.

Although owned by Dr. Robb the hospital was operated at the time by the Canadian Red Cross Society. Robb felt it necessary to apprise them of the sale and receive from them their willingness let go of the operation of the hospital. A formal acknowledgment of full cooperation for the sale to the Sisters came from the Canadian Red

Cross Society in a letter dated August 7, 1940.

The sale included not only the hospital but also the adjoining house and the contents of the hospital with certain reservations. The Sisters agreed to replace the Red Cross nurses and to retain, temporarily and perhaps permanently, the services of the cook, laundress and janitor.

THE SISTERS TAKE OVER OPERATION

In finalizing the deed, there was considerable discussion about a Memorial Stone carved with the words “Robb Hospital” which had been placed on the building like a corner stone. Dr. Robb wanted it to remain in place for as long as the building stood. While Bishop Dignan was agreeable to this condition (a sentiment he expressed in a letter dated August 2, 1940) he was more inclined to keep the stone in place by a “gentlemen’s agreement” rather than to have it enshrined in the deed. However, Dr. Robb and his lawyers insisted that the permanence of the memorial stone be part of the deed.¹¹



St. Joseph's Hospital, Blind River ~ With cottage roof prior to 1955.

The deed, (registered # 3349) dated July 18, 1940 was eventually handed over to the Sisters of St. Joseph. The operation of the hospital was transferred from the Red Cross Society to the Sisters of St. Joseph by an Order-in-Council approved by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario upon the recommendation of the Minister of Health, the Honourable Harold J. Kirby, K.C., and effective as of August 17, 1940 signed by C.H. Bulmer, Clerk of Executive Council.

The Sisters of St. Joseph took possession of the hospital building on August 17, 1940 and renovations began immediately. The building was freshly painted and varnished throughout. Blankets, bed linens and pillows were replaced, and since there were only beds remaining when they took over the building, a great deal of furniture was needed and purchased. The name of the hospital was then officially changed to St. Joseph's Hospital.

While all this was transpiring patients arrived and were cared for by Sister Reginald, R.N., Sister Celesta, R.N. and by Mrs. M.A. St. Eloi, R.N., who had been on the original staff when the hospital was built in 1928. Dr. Jean Pigeon and Dr. F.H. Hamill were the doctors in Blind River and surrounding area in 1940.

On September 17, 1940 there were 12 patients and the numbers gradually increased. While there were actually only 23 active beds and 12 nursery cubicles, nonetheless, at peak times some 40 patients were cared for.

Bishop (Dignan) blesses St. Joseph's Hospital, Blind River and offers the first Mass in the hospital Chapel—also erects the Stations of the Cross. Among those present were the Rev. F.A. Isabelle, Sisters St. Reginald, St. Jude, Celesta and Bernadette of the Sisters of St. Joseph, and Mother St. Edmond and Sr. Isadore of the Daughters of Wisdom.¹²

The report of Bishop Dignan's remarks during the official opening recounts: "Like the Apostles who were bitten by Our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, that in whatsoever house they should enter they should invoke His peace upon it, his Excellency prayed that this hospital, destined to care for the sick and aged poor, might be filled with the abundance of God's peace and benediction, and that God's Holy Angels might guard it as a sacred place and repel therefrom all power of the

evil spirit. He likewise expressed the fervent hope that those conducting the hospital by their virtues and good works would be a spiritual inspiration to their patients and a means of winning souls to Christ."¹³

Shortly after taking over the hospital, an issue arose about the necessity to pay taxes on the Nurses' Residence which was attached to the hospital. The Sisters brought the ruling to arbitration and on December 11, 1941¹⁴ Judge McDonald of Sault Ste. Marie ruled that the Nurses' Residence in Blind River was not subject to taxes. Because two teachers resided in the residence, the town of Blind River judged the property to be taxable. However, in the judge's written decision he stated that the Nurses' Residence was a necessary adjunct of the hospital proper and that the prime purpose of the building was not defeated by the presence of two teachers.¹⁵

1955 ADDITION TO THE HOSPITAL

By the end of WWII an extension to the hospital became an urgent need. By the summer of 1946 negotiations began with the Department of Health for grants, with the Department of Municipal Affairs and with the Town Council of Blind River in the hopes of acquiring a strip of land adjoining the hospital in order to build an addition to the hospital building. However, it was not until August 31, 1954 that the Hon. Dr. MacKinnon Phillips, Minister of Health at the time, came to Blind River to announce the go-ahead for the construction of an additional wing to St. Joseph's Hospital and the addition of a 3rd storey that would replace the cottage roof on the existing hospital.

The Minister of Health announced the approval of a \$158,000 grant of which \$100,000 would be for



Cornerstone of the 1955 addition.

construction. Dr. Phillips stated he had experienced a “terrific surprise while flying over the area Sunday morning as to the actual expansion of this town and the surrounding area. While Blind River, according to the latest assessment, shows a population of 2,443, the floating population, plus 2,656, in the town site and 600 employed in the logging during the Winter (the latter figure supplied by C.E. Smith, General Manager of the J.J. McFadden Lumber Company) as well as the expected mining population, will bring it close to the 8,000 mark.”

In expressing his gratitude to the minister, J. A. Fullerton, MPP for Algoma East, also thanked Dr. Jean Pigeon, President of the Chamber of Commerce, Mayor Louis Berthelot and Sister Dympna (Superior) of St. Joseph's Hospital who had been actively involved in gaining the approval for the extension.

The new extension to St. Joseph's Hospital was blessed by Bishop Dignan on Saturday October 22, 1955.¹⁶

The local newspaper, *The Leader Spectator*¹⁷ reported the event in this way.

October 27, 1955 marked another chapter in the story of a hospital that has operated at full capacity, through the long hours of day and night since 1928. A giant wheel of efficiency and comfort, it has been the answer to pain, suffering and heartache, not only for the people of the town, but for those in the far flung “surrounding” districts, including Elliot Lake, Thessalon and Espanola, the two nearest hospitals. Planned as a modern and efficient unit the older wing has been completely redecorated, combining small hospital informality and a big hospital efficiency. The Sisters of St. Joseph and their corps of highly trained nurses and technicians, the doctors and others on the staff are justifiably proud of the many modern features necessary to the saving of lives, and to the comfort of the sick and maimed.¹⁸

DOCTOR FRANK CYRIL HAMILL

Dr. Frank Hamill, in many ways, is a fitting example of the dedication and commitment often exhibited by the doctors who choose to serve in northern communities. Dr. Hamill gave almost 70 years of service to the Town of Blind River.¹⁹ He hailed from Meaford, Ontario and was born there on November 11, 1895, the youngest of

six children, his father being a local dentist. His older brother Harry had also graduated from medical school almost 10 years before him and had moved to Manitoba to practice. Sadly, he became a victim of diabetes long before the life-saving treatment of insulin was invented and subsequently died at the young age of 32. Dr. Frank Hamill arrived in Blind River in 1923 shortly after he graduated from the University of Toronto's Medical School in 1922.

He began his medical career in 1923 with a salary of \$50.00 a month as part of Dr. Robb's practice that had a contract with the McFadden and Malloy Lumber Company. He gave himself fully to the health of the community immunizing all the school children from Massey to Dayton without pay. He was known to travel from Spanish to Sowerby by horse and buggy or sleigh to visit ill patients.



Dr. Frank Hamill immunized all the school children from Massey to Dayton.

He briefly returned to Toronto during the years 1924-25 to upgrade his skills in an internship at the hospital for Sick Children. At another point he left the community to work three years doctoring in the bush camps north of Wawa in the late 1920s. On another occasion he travelled to Ottawa to gain experience at a clinic for diabetics and arthritics (no doubt as a result of the personal experience of losing his brother) but in 1935

he returned to Blind River never to leave again until just before his death.

In 1938, at the age of 42, he married Evelyn Shepley. They had one adopted son, Robert, who was tragically killed in a traffic accident in 1977. He took on the position of the Medical Officer of Health from 1948-1968. Over the years of his professional career he occasionally practiced dentistry for the local hockey team. He also convinced the town to start water fluoridation to save people's teeth. He was forced to slow down in 1966 due to a heart condition, but he continued assisting and doing consultations for obstetrics until 1975. In his career he delivered over 2000 babies.

In 1983 he became the first recipient of the *Dr. William Hutchings Award for Distinguished Service in Health Care in Algoma*. In 1984 he was honoured by the community as "Citizen of the Year." The Objibwa First Nations of the Serpent River Band made him a full blood brother and honorary chief with the title *Wabageesic* meaning "dawn or morning light." Laurentian University granted him another honour by bestowing him with the honorary degree of Doctor of Sacred Letters (D. Litt.S).

His community involvement was wide spread from active membership in his faith community, St. Andrew's United Church, to membership on the Striker Board of Education, the Library Board, the Horticultural Society, the Masonic Lodge, and the Cancer Society. Dr. Hamill was remembered as having a very generous nature, a relaxed and humble man who worked hard and well with other doctors, and as having a great skill for delivering babies.

Dr. Frank Hamill was honoured by the citizens of Blind River at the Legion Hall in 1965 for having served the community for almost 40 years.²⁰ Chairman of the event and chief organizer, was the Rev. E.M. Skillen, pastor of St. James the Greater Roman Catholic Church. Mayor Joseph Hagger set the tone for the evening when he declared "we are here this evening to testify to the value of one man in developing the welfare of Blind River." Dr. Jean Pigeon, Chief of the Medical Staff at the time, expressed his own pride in having been associated with Dr. Hamill. "Our friend has looked after the health of rich and poor and is dedicated to the highest ideals of our profession." Mrs. Ray Thompson spoke on behalf

of all the nurses when she remarked, "he realizes that by giving we all get more from life, and he has found great happiness in serving others."

In response, Dr. Hamill gave witness to what motivated him and brought him joy in his medical profession, and indeed, all of his life. "I like people and I think that has been the reason for my getting along. I like getting into the homes and watching generations grow. I have enjoyed my life, but could not have done anything without my wife, Evelyn. I am not retiring; I will still do some anaesthetic work and look after the babies, but I have to help a little around the home. And when my usefulness is done, I will never, never forget tonight."

Evelyn died in 1980. Dr. Hamill returned to his hometown of Meaford in 1991 where he died in the hospital on November 7, 1993, days before his 98th birthday. He is buried in the Lakeview Cemetery in Meaford.

DOCTOR JEAN PIGEON

Doctor Jean Pigeon²¹ was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec in 1912. He graduated with honours from Laval University in 1937, receiving the Governor General's Award for the highest marks of all students from across Canada. He interned at l'Hôpital de Ste-Anne-de-Monts from June 10, 1937 to October 15, 1937, then at the



Doctor Jean Pigeon

Ottawa General Hospital. In April 1939, he attended the New York Polyclinic Medical School for post graduate studies in surgery.

Dr. Pigeon practiced medicine for one year in the Gaspé Bay before coming to Blind River in 1938 to be the assistant to Dr. Langlois. He was married to Marguerite Laroque and together they had seven children: André, Gisele, Monique, Michel, Carmen, Jean-Marc and Jean-Luc. Throughout his professional career he worked as a general practitioner and surgeon, an acting coroner, the Medical Officer of Health, and Chief of Staff for the hospital. Along with Dr. Whang, he performed surgeries, autopsies, and even tooth extractions at the hospital.

He was a versatile and gifted man who performed experiments in his basement. He discovered that amniotic membranes were an effective treatment for burns, and was hailed as a great medical contributor. He also invented a resuscitator for infants. He was working on treatments for coronary patients to reduce viscosity at the time of his death. During fourteen years of experimentation, he lost only one of fourteen patients.

Dr. Pigeon was also interested in art, pottery, carpentry, and was an accomplished silversmith. He was the president of the Liberal Association, vice-president of the Liberal Riding Association, and president of the Chamber of Commerce. He also served as the chairman of the Roman Catholic Separate School Board.

At the age of fifty-eight, he died in an Ottawa hospital after a short illness.

The relationship between the hospital and the nearby Mississauga First Nations peoples was aptly described by Basil Johnston in his book *Indian School Days*. In it, he honours the compassionate care of the doctors and Sisters. "To Blind River went the unwell and the wounded and the pregnant, to be repaired or attended to by either Dr. Hamill or Dr. Pigeon at Saint Joseph's Hospital."²²

1969 ADDITION

A new wing was added again in 1969, costing approximately \$140,000. The major part of this expense was the cost of a new boiler room, storage facilities, and certain renovations and improvements

required by the Fire Marshall. Improved lighting and an intercommunication system was also added.

One third of the cost was paid for by the Federal Government, one third by the Provincial Government and the remaining one third was assumed by the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Gregory Cameron, who chaired the hospital board meeting in the absence of Joseph Hagger, held a press conference and stated: "It is obvious by the large amount of money being paid out by the Order, that the Sisters of St. Joseph and the board members have faith in the community of Blind River. Every effort is being made to ensure the fact that the St. Joseph's General Hospital in Blind River is providing the best possible service for this area. A good bed average for occupancy is 84 percent across the province, but Blind River has been operating on 100 percent occupancy, and there is one doctor alone who has a list of 30 patients waiting for a bed."²³

A further service was added to the hospital by the Ontario Hospital Service Commission in the form of providing an ambulance.

In 1970, the 55 bed active treatment hospital employed 126 persons from the community and district.

In 1974, Mr. Gus Purzner was appointed the first lay administrator in the hospital.



St. Joseph's General Hospital, Blind River
in the 1970s.

Sister's Convent Home

Sister Winnifred McLoughlin (Sr. St. Martin) recalls that the Sisters had originally lived in the house next to the hospital that had also been used as a home for unwed mothers. In 1966, when she was Administrator, the Sisters were moved into part of the third floor of the hospital. Eventually two trailers were bought and placed behind the hospital close to the shore of Georgian Bay.

Sister Phyllis O'Connor remembers living in the trailer residence. "We were living on the 3rd floor of the hospital at the end of Obstetrics next to the Delivery room. It was not an ideal situation, so it was exciting when two trailers were purchased and joined together to make a residence for the Sisters. The trailer-home was very comfortable and provided adequate living space for everyone. I understood that because trailers were placed on the shores of Georgian Bay they had to rest on some kind of "flooring collars". One night there was a big storm and the water came over the break wall and surrounded the trailers. The Sisters all had to "walk the plank" to get out in the morning to go to work. People were driving by to see if we had been washed out into the lake!"



The comfortable "Trailer Convent."

FURTHER UPGRADES

In 1979, a contract in excess of \$280,000 was awarded to address safety issues and provide new safety features, including an enclosed rear fire escape and a new fire alarm system. Alterations were also made to the front entrance of the hospital, enlarging the office space and boardroom, as well as changes to the nurses' station on the second floor. Again in 1980, and additional \$150,000 was required to update the medical gas system.

A NEW ST. JOSEPH'S HEALTH CENTRE

With economic growth, residents saw the need for expansion and renewal. In 1987, the Urgent Care fund-raising campaign was launched to raise funds to replace the aging old hospital facility. A new 66,000 square-foot building was constructed on Causley Street in 1992, the same year the facility's name was changed to St. Joseph's Health Centre.



Drawing of the front entrance of the new hospital.

The new hospital building was a larger facility that allowed for additional services to be provided to the community. The health centre operated 16 acute care beds, 10 complex continuing care beds and 10 Elderly Capital Assistance Program beds for long-term care patients.

In 2000, a 5,000-square-foot family medical clinic was also opened adjacent to the health centre, allowing for most of the community physicians to relocate to this site.²⁴

The old hospital on Lakeside Avenue was retired in August 1995. It was sold with all its contents to Phil Stanghetta and Dan Roy. Memories of the old hospital

will be around for years to come because these gentlemen held a gigantic yard sale where citizens were invited to buy everything from hospital beds to typewriters. These men had hoped to remodel the building into offices and apartments. However, after consultants studied the building and proposals, it was determined to be too expensive to do anything other than to demolish it. Another yard sale was organized by the owners allowing anyone to retrieve, for a minimal cost, any equipment or furniture attached to the building such as cabinets, shelves, sinks, plumbing and electrical supplies. Since there was no electricity in the building, people had to bring flashlights and their own tools, labour and transportation to salvage anything remaining.²⁵

A NEW ERA

On June 13, 2000 The Blind River Sentinel published a "News Release" announcing that the Sisters of St. Joseph would relinquish sponsorship of St. Joseph's Hospital in Blind River.

Over the past number of years, the Board of St. Joseph's Health Centre and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie have been involved in discussions with regard to separate incorporation of the Health Centre. As a result of these discussions, they have agreed to change the sponsorship of the Health Centre from the Sisters to the community of Blind River and North Shore areas. The change will require the formation of a new non-denominational health centre corporation with a new name and having a community-based Board of Directors.²⁶

After prayerful consideration and reflection, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie felt that due to the financial strength of the organization and values based approach to the delivery of health care, this was the most appropriate time to withdraw sponsorship.

The final transition was completed on Tuesday July 3, 2001 at the first annual meeting of the new board. The new Board chair Pete Hutchings presented Sister Norah Murphy, General Councillor of the Sisters leadership team, with the crest of the congregation that had hung on the wall in the hospital for 61 years. Sister Norah, (who represented Sister Mildred Connelly who was the Congregational Leader) quoted their founder, Rev J.P. Medaille, SJ at the ceremony. "Continue the good works you have begun until they are near completion, and then, if you can so, let them be finished by someone else."²⁷

With the Sisters of St. Joseph divesting their interest in the hospital, the new name adopted by the corporation in 2001 was the Blind River District Health Centre. A 22-bed long-term care unit was added to the health centre, creating a long-term care pod of 42 beds.²⁸

Sister Dianne Bottos, who had been part of the hospital staff for twenty years, was the last Sister to work in the hospital, holding the position of Executive Director of Clinical Services until September 30, 2001. However she continues to remain in Blind River as a religious Sister finding ways to serve the community that she "considers home." Her hope was to "look at the local needs of the community and be involved in some of these needs such as Meals on Wheels, the Dorcas House and the local literacy program" to name a few.²⁹ In reflecting on the change in sponsorship, she commented, "While there is a certain sense of grief around the withdrawal of sponsorship, I think the people here are prepared to carry on and will continue providing quality, compassionate care. It is a tribute to the Sisters who have been here over the years that there is a real sense of dedication among the staff. The Sisters will have a lasting influence because they have communicated their values of respect, compassion and concern for others. That is our legacy as a congregation."³⁰

St. Joseph's General Hospital, Blind River, Ontario ~ Community Based Health Care

These photos courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, Ontario



Sr. Cecilia Mary Fitzpatrick, CSJ (Sr. St. Reginald)
First Superior and Administrator (1940-19430
of St. Joseph's Hospital, Blind River



Sr. Winnifred McLoughlin, CSJ (Sr. St. Martin)



Sr. Phyllis O'Connor, CSJ



Sr. Dianne Bottos, CSJ

APPENDIX ONE

Saint Joseph's Villa³¹

In 1940, when the Sisters purchased the Robb Hospital, they also acquired a small log house which had previously been the town's Custom and Excise Office. Dr. Robb had been using it as a home for elderly retired lumbermen who had been discharged from the hospital but had nowhere else to go.

Then in June 1941, Captain Charles Low of Killarney donated his thirteen-room home to the Sisters of St. Joseph. When the house was repaired, the second floor was used for a Community Room and sleeping accommodations for the Sisters. At the time it was named St. Charles Manor. For a short time the Sisters looked after unwed mothers there. These girls would work at the hospital until they were able to leave. But soon the elderly men were moved in.

The Sisters continued to look after the men at the small log house, but on January 6, 1942 the old Custom and Excise Office building, which was home to 12 elderly men at the time, burned to the ground. "While no one was injured, one old man died afterwards in the hospital from the shock." The fire occurred shortly after midnight and was extinguished by 4:00 a.m. An insurance settlement of \$3,200 was received.³² The men were temporarily housed in the hospital.

On April 28, 1942 the Sisters decided to purchase the American Hotel, operated by Mr. Chenier, across the street from the hospital. It came complete with



The American Hotel, 1930s

furnishings for \$7,500 and was bought with an interest-free loan from Bishop Dignan.

The American Hotel already had a long and colourful history. Built in the 1890's it had been a hotel from 1902 until the Sisters purchased it. On May 11, 1942 Reverend Mother Cecilia and Sister St. Reginald went through the Hotel and found it very clean and well kept. Since the building was already fifty years old there were many problems that needed to be faced, not least of which were staffing problems on account of Blind River being so isolated.

With the purchase of the American Hotel a more established home for the aged was created and St. Joseph's Villa was born. Early on Bishop Dignan suggested the name "St. Joseph's Villa" in an insightful and somewhat humorous comment when looking at it from today's standpoint. In a letter to Sr. St. Reginald on March 7, 1941 he makes the comment: "Regarding a name for the home, I would suggest St. Joseph's Villa or Villa Joseph. There is no use reminding people that they are old and destitute by such names as Home of the Aged, Home of the Friendless, etc."³³

St. Joseph's Villa could accommodate 50 residents, although occasionally there were as many as 52. St. Joseph's Villa boasted a much "homier" atmosphere than most institutions for the elderly. The rambling old building was once the scene of a great deal of "rowdy good times" when shanty men hit the town in early spring after a winter of logging in the bush camps. Now it was a comfortable home to some of these same men from the bush, most of whom were still active enough to visit their favorite haunts in Blind River, or the railroad station, or their friends. Many an hour was spent on the long front veranda, just "*a-rockin' and a-smokin'*".

The men always outnumbered the women residents which is the opposite of the demographics in most long term care facilities today. The men had the run of the first floor while the women had their sitting room and balcony on the second floor.

As soon as the Sisters had possession of the hotel, they set about cleaning the building, then painting and varnishing, and finally doing the finishing touches by making curtains and preparing the linens in order to have all things ready for moving day on June 24, 1942.

On this day they moved the 12 elderly men into St. Joseph's Villa who had been temporarily housed at St. Charles Manner since January 6, 1942.

According to Sister St. Thomas, in her diary entry, dated Wednesday June 24:

The flitting began. The old men were going with their bundles before we had our breakfast. Sister Paula had to go out to stop them. Cold and cloudy—the thermometer at the Villa registered 58°F—Sister Paula helped to move them and it took us all day to get them settled, moving beds, dressers, cabinets, clothes put away etc. There were 10 men.

Once moved in, it was soon discovered that the Villa needed more than cleaning and painting. Five days later on Monday, June 29, 1942 Sister St. Thomas wrote this entry in her journal.

Blue Monday indeed! Mr. Lamontange (the cook) told me he was leaving tomorrow. Shortly afterwards, Erelida the maid, told me she was going too. We did our first wash here. Had to carry all the water for the washer in pails, and empty it the same way. In the afternoon it poured rain and came down in many places in the attic and down to second floor. It also came through the lower dormitory and wet one of the beds through.

Father Vandriessch, SJ was the first Chaplain. Bishop Dignan came to bless the building to its new purpose (along with the Nurses' Residence) on September 21, 1942.³⁴

So, within one week, three perennial problems became very clear — a scarcity of good help, a need for major repairs, and of course, sustainable financing. For 16 years the Villa struggled with these challenges while providing a home for increasing numbers of residents many of whom would help out now and then with the furnace, the grass, the wash, or handy work around the buildings. But this kind of labour was strictly voluntary, and did not relieve the long term problem.

On July 13, 1942 three rooms on the second floor were cleared out so the carpenter could renovate them into a Chapel. In August the Villa was officially opened. Sister Thomasina was appointed as Superior, with Sisters St. John, St. Lawrence, Emerentia, Afra, St. Thomas, and Sister St. Jerome on staff.

On March 21, 1943, Father Vandriessch SJ, the Chaplain, died. Father Dufresne followed soon after.

On July 29, 1943 work was begun to convert the old stable into a laundry.

Since the Villa was listed as a “charitable institution” and not as an “old-age home” it received minimal funding from the government. This meant that most of the pension money of the residents had to be used for their room and board, and very little was allowed them for spending purposes. So while most of the residents appreciated the homey atmosphere, very few of them were happy about their personal financial situation.

In the end, however, the repairs and the upkeep were to prove too much of a burden for the Sisters to bear. On June 15, 1959 Sister St. Jude, Superior, and Sister Anna Teresa went to Sault Ste. Marie to meet Mr. Ludlow at the Davey Home for the Aged. Sister St. Andrew, Superior of Mount St. Joseph, accompanied them. The Sisters informed Mr. Ludlow that they were closing the Villa in Blind River, because it was a fire hazard and almost beyond repair.

Sad days followed. On June 17, 1959 the Ladies Auxiliary met to disband. They turned over the remaining balance in their bank account to get the residents ready to move, to pay for their fares to their new homes, and to provide a gift for each person. On June 21st the Harmonic Ball Players, sponsored by the Hotel Association, treated the elderly residents to a Turkey Dinner.

On June 25th Father Skillen, the pastor of St. James Parish in Blind River removed the Blessed Sacrament from the Villa Chapel. The Altar was donated to Father O'Flaherty for the Jesuit Missions.

In July of 1959 the Villa closed its doors for the last time with the five remaining men leaving for Sault Ste. Marie. Prior to this date, 34 other residents had found places to stay in Sudbury, Chelmsford or Thunder Bay, with a few returning to their own homes. A newspaper clipping shows Sister St. Basil with two elderly men, one 78 years old and the other 88, the last to leave the Villa. The 34 residents had previously found placement, some at St. Joseph's Manor, Port Arthur, some to St. Joseph's Home in Chelmsford, others to Pembroke, some to Sudbury, and others to private homes.

For 18 years the Villa had served large numbers of elderly people for whom facilities had been otherwise unavailable. Over those years, the Sisters had been aided by an energetic Ladies' Auxiliary and by the Sudbury Community Club. This latter group had donated radios, furniture and a fluorescent light system. The former group, through their teas and bake sales, had raised money for beds and linens and other items to make the living quarters as attractive as possible.

The Superiors of St. Joseph's Villa in Blind River were noted as the following:

1941-1943	Sister Thomasina
1943-1949	Sister Afra
1949-1954	Sister Clara
1954-1957	Sister Bertille
1957-1959	Sister St. Jude

APPENDIX TWO

Sisters of Saint Joseph that Served in Blind River in the Hospital and the School

1940*

Sister St. Reginald
Sister St. Lawrence
Sister St. Jude
Sister Bernadette

1941

Sister St. Reginald
Sister Affra
Sister St. Lawrence
Sister Lorena
Sister St. Jude
Sister St. Jerome
Sister Louis Joseph
Sister Bernadette
Sister Paula

1942

Sister St. Reginald
Sister Columba
Sister Lorena
Sister Benadette
Sister Paula
Sister Mary Alice

1943

Sister St. Reginald
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Lorena
Sister Bernadette
Sister Paula
Sister Andrea
Sister Bertha

* This list of names is from the annual Directory list prepared by the Sisters of St. Joseph for each Sister's use and posted also in each Congregational House and Institution. As a general rule, the first name that appears on the list for each year represents the Superior of the Sisters convent and the Administrator of the hospital. The list only goes to 1985 although the Sisters remained as operators of the hospital until 2000.

1944

Sister Celesta
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Louis Joseph
Sister Bernadette
Sister St. Peter

1945

Sister Afra
Sister St. Alban
Sister St. Lawrence
Sister Columba
Sister St. Stephen
Sister Evelyn
Sister Euphrasia
Sister St. Matthew

1946

Sister Celesta
Sister Melanie
Sister Elmyra
Sister Eleanor
Sister St. Peter
Sister M. Benedict
Sister Michaela

1947

Sister Celesta
Sister Melanie
Sister Elmyra
Sister Mary Grace
Sister Noella
Sister Eleanor
Sister St. Leo
Sister Benedict

1948

Sister Celesta
Sister Elmyra
Sister Mary Grace
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Louis Joseph
Sister Noella
Sister Benedict
Sister St. James
Sister St. Albert

1949

Sister Joan of Arc
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Elmyra
Sister Mary Grace
Sister Margaret Anne
Sister Noella
Sister St. James

1950

Sister Joan of Arc
Sister Elmrya
Sister St. Irma
Sister Mary Grace
Sister Margaret Anne
Sister Macrina
Sister Benedict
Sister Adele
Sister St. James

1951

Sister Dympna
Sister Irma
Sister Elmyra
Sister Macrina
Sister Benedict
Sister Adele

1952

Sister Dympna
Sister St. Irma
Sister Elmyra
Sister Monica
Sister Macrina
Sister Josepha

1953

Sister Dympna
Sister Monica
Sister Elmyra
Sister St. Luke
Sister Josepha
Sister St. James

1954

Sister Dympna
Sister Irma
Sister St. Luke
Sister St. Gerald
Sister St. James

Sister St. Catherine
Sister Celine

1955

Sister Dympna
Sister Irma
Sister St. Reginald
Sister St. Luke
Sister Eugene
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Celine

1956

Sister Dympna
Sister Irma
Sister Monica Marie
Sister St. Luke
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Eugene
Sister Gertrude
Sister Gerard
Sister Celine

1957

Sister Anna Teresa
Sister Irma
Sister St. Luke
Sister St. Alban
Sister Mary Grace
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Eugene
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Gertrude
Sister Gerard

1958

Sister Anna Teresa
Sister St. Alban
Sister St. Luke
Sister Monica Marie
Sister Mary Grace
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Eugene
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Gertrude
Sister Gerard

1959

Sister Anna Teresa
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Mary Grace
Sister St. Luke
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Gertrude
Sister Gerard
Sister Delores
Sister Anita
Sister St. Owen

1960

Sister Anna Teresa
Sister Rose Marie
Sister Mary Grace
Sister St. Luke
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Gerard
Sister Dolores
Sister Anita
Sister St. Owen

1961

Sister Josephine
Sister Beatrice
Sister St. Luke
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Dolores
Sister Alma
Sister St. Owen
Sister Jacinta

1962

Sister Josephine
Sister St. Luke
Sister St. Gerald
Sister Gerard
Sister St. Owen
Sister Muriel
Sister Mary Frederick
Sister Jacinta

1963

Sister Josephine
Sister Eleanor
Sister St. Thomas
Sister Noella
Sister Gerard
Sister St. Stanislaus

Sister Muriel
Sister Mary Frederick
Sister Cecily

1964

Sister Josephine
Sister Eleanor
Sister St. Thomas
Sister St. Basil
Sister Adeline
Sister Muriel
Sister Mary Frederick
Sister Cecily

1965

Sister St. Martin
Sister Michelle
Sister St. Kenneth
Sister St. Thomas
Sister St. Gregory
Sister Edna
Sister Adeline

1966

Sister St. Martin
Sister Antoinette
Sister Michelle
Sister St. Thomas
Sister St. Kenneth
Sister Adeline
Sister St. Donald
Sister Francis Marie

1967

Sister Rose Marie
Sister Antoinette
Sister Michelle
Sister St. Kenneth
Sister Adeline
Sister St. Donald
Sister Francis Marie

1968

Sister Rose Marie
Sister Eugene
Sister Edwina
Sister St. Basil
Sister St. Kenneth

1969

Sister Miriam (half-time)
Sister Eugene
Sister Paula
Sister St. Basil
Sister St. Kenneth
Sister Rosella

1970

Sister Sheila
Sister Paula
Sister Dallas Roach
Sister Margaret Cushman
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Miriam (part-time)
Sister Marilyn Gotro (part-time)

1971

Sister Elizabeth McCann
Sister Sheila
Sister Dallas Roach
Sister Margaret Cushman
Sister Marilyn Gotro
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Shirley McNulty
Sister Miriam (part-time)

1972

Sister Elizabeth McCann
Sister Sheila
Sister Dallas Roach
Sister Margaret Cushman
Sister Phyllis O'Connor
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Jennie Maciejewski
Sister Shirley McNulty

1973

Sister Elizabeth McCann
Sister Sheila
Sister Margaret Cushman
Sister Phyllis O'Connor
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Gail Beda
Sister Jennie Maciejewski
Sister Catherine Dillon

1974

Sister June McNamara
Sister Sheila
Sister Louise Rioux
Sister Margaret Cushman
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Gail Beda
Sister Jennie Maciejewski
Sister Catherine Dillon

1975

Sister June McNamara
Sister Sheila
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Gail Beda
Sister Jennie Maciejewski
Sister Catherine Dillon
Sister Bonnie Anne MacLellan

1976

Sister June McNamara
Sister Sheila
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Gail Beda
Sister Catherine Dillon
Sister Bonnie Anne MacLellan

1977

Sister June McNamara
Sister Sheila
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Catherine Beaton
Sister Catherine Dillon
Sister Bonnie Anne MacLellan

1978

Sister Mary Jakubo
Sister Frederica Lalonde
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Bonnie Anne MacLellan

1979

Sister Mary Jakubo
Sister Elizabeth McCann
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac

Sister Bonnie Anne MacLellan

1980

Sister Mary Jakubo
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Bonnie Anne MacLellan

1981

Sister Dianne Bottos
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Edith Arsenault
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac

1982

Sister Dianne Bottos
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Edith Arsenault
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac

1983

Sister Dianne Bottos
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Edith Arsenault
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Mildred Connelly
Sister Nancy Berdusco

1984

Sister Dianne Bottos
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Edith Arsenault
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Mildred Connelly

1985

Sister Dianne Bottos
Sister Frances Gavin
Sister Jeannette MacIsaac
Sister Mildred Connelly

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Jean-Luc Pigeon, son of Dr. Jean Pigeon.

PHOTO CREDITS:

Photos courtesy of Timber Village Museum, owned and operated by the Town of Blind River: Dr. John Robb and 1928 cornerstone (page 2); 1955 cornerstone (page 5); Dr. Hamill immunizing children (page 6).

Photos courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie (North Bay): Hospital prior to 1954 (page 4); Trailer convent (page 9); Sisters (page 11).

Photos of Doctor Jean Pigeon courtesy of his son Jean-Luc Pigeon (page 7).

ENDNOTES

1. *The Elliot Lake Standard*. "The doctor famous for mending soldiers in the Spanish Civil War and revered in China for his work with the communist forces under Mao Tse-tung, spent some of his teen years in Blind River, where his father was rector at the United Church." by Tom Haddow. July 5, 1994.
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3. Christopher Rutt, PhD, and Sue C. Sullivan. *This is Public Health: A Canadian History*. Chapter 4: "1930–1939: A Period of Decline", Section 4.3 "Child and Maternal Welfare". Published by The Canadian Public Health Association, 2010.
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7. Various documents found in the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie.
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9. *Dignan, Ralph Hubert. Sources*. Humbert, Greg J. editor. Archives, Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, 1995. pages 224, 417.
10. Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) News, Jan. 1943, vol. 48, page 80.
11. A series of correspondence between Bishop Dignan and Dr. Robb found in the administrative files of "St. Joseph's Hospital, Blind River." Generalate of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie.
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15. *Dignan, Ralph Hubert. Sources*. Humbert, Greg J. editor. Archives, Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, 1995. page 212. Bishop Dignan notes the date of this judgement as December 17, 1941 rather than 11.
16. *Dignan, Ralph Hubert. Sources*. Humbert, Greg J. editor. Archives, Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, 1995. page 332.
17. Regarding the local papers quoted in this article, there was a *Blind River Leader* that operated throughout the 1950s. There is no verification with The Timber Museum whether it was ever called *The Leader Spectator*. Additionally, *The Sentinel* quoted is presumably *The North Shore Sentinel*. Records indicate it was in operation from the 1970s through to the 1990s. *The North Shore Sentinel* was not necessarily a "local Blind River paper" but it would have been considered a regional newspaper.
18. A quote found in a document in the archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie. "St. Joseph's General Hospital, Blind River, Ontario: Historical Records."

19. Most of this information comes from online resources of the Blind River Digital Collection of the Blind River Public Library and the Timber Village Museum.
20. *The Sudbury Star*, May 10, 1965. page 3.
21. Much of this material comes from a biography prepared by the Timber Museum for an exhibit on health care.
22. Basil H. Johnston. *Indian School Days*. Key Porter Books Limited Canada, 1988. page 4.
23. A quote found in a document in the archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie. "St. Joseph's General Hospital, Blind River, Ontario: Historical Records."
24. *Community Hospitals and Health Care in Northeastern Ontario: Transforming the Patient Experience*. North East Local Integration Network, October 2014, pages 40-41.
25. *The Blind River Bugle*, Thursday August 10, 1995. page 1-2.
26. *The Blind River Sentinel*, June 13, 2000.
27. *The Blind River Sentinel*, July 3, 2001.
28. *Community Hospitals and Health Care in Northeastern Ontario: Transforming the Patient Experience*. North East Local Integration Network, October 2014, pages 40-41.
29. *The Elliot Lake Standard*. July 4, 2001.
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34. *Dignan, Ralph Hubert. Sources*. Humbert, Greg J. editor. Archives, Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, 1995. Page 220.



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