



Foundations

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St. John's Hospital Edson, Alberta

History provided by the
Archives of the Sisters of Service, Toronto*

During the summer of 1914 the Town of Edson built a two-story frame building known as the Lady Minto Hospital. There is no record of the hospital being used after it was constructed. The building was used temporarily as an emergency centre during the flu epidemic of 1918. In September 1921 the name was changed to Edson General Hospital. Under an agreement with the town of Edson the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) operated the hospital for one year from October 1, 1921 to October 1, 1922. The building was then left vacant until the summer of 1926 when it was bought for the Sisters of Service of Canada by their Co-Founder, Rev. G. Daly, C.Ss.R., for the sum of \$1,500.

In August 1926 the contract was awarded for extensive repairs and renovations to the dilapidated building. Father Daly sought for funds to repair and operate the hospital; the name change to "St. John's Hospital" was owing to a gift of \$5,000 made by Mrs. T. Small in memory of her brother John Korman. Father Daly arrived in Edson November 19th to assess the work done and meet with various officials, Sister Catherine Wymbs, RN, Superior and Sister Mary Rodgers arrived with Father Daly to prepare for the opening of the hospital. The Sisters set to work with dispatch and courage. They will be ever grateful to the ladies of the town who assisted them and voluntarily organized an Auxiliary.

St. John's Hospital was opened December 8, 1925 by Archbishop Henry Joseph O'Leary, D.D., Archbishop of Edmonton. Members of the Ladies Auxiliary greeted the guests and served Tea; the Blessing took place at 4 :00

o'clock. In the evening the Town held a Reception for the Archbishop in the Veterans Hall.

The next morning, December 9th, three patients were admitted. The sisters secured a nurse for night duty until Sister Agnes Brunning, RN, and Sister Marie Anne Paradis joined the staff after Christmas. Help was hired when necessary; nursing, administration and housekeeping was done by the Sisters themselves.

Two doctors were working in Edson—Dr. McCordic and Dr. R. Johnson. Dr. M.E. Tiffin arrived shortly afterward and became Doctor *Tiff* to all who knew him. Nothing was too difficult for him—orthopaedics, surgery, obstetrics or repair of severe lacerations—all done with a great sense of humour. The town of Edson has always been most fortunate in the calibre of doctors practising in the town, the pioneer doctors and all who followed them are remembered with gratitude and affection.



The First Hospital, 1930

* This article is a reprint of an article originally published in 1992 by the Sisters of Service. Used with permission.

St. John's Hospital, Edson, Alberta

All photos courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Service, Toronto



Exterior of St. John's Hospital, 1931



Opening of second hospital, 1931



Sr. Catherine Wymbs with male patients, May 1933



Sr. Ella Ziink in children's ward, 1940



Infants in an incubator, 1955



Operating room, 1955

St. John's Hospital, Edson, Alberta

From the beginning, the 15 bed hospital was busy, frequently couches in the reception area and dining room were needed for patients. Conditions were primitive and limited space made it hard to operate. In a few years plans were under way for a new two-storey building with a full basement at a cost of \$90,000, a great debt to assume at that time. With faith and determination the Sisters decided to go ahead and work began April 8, 1931.

Sunday, April 19, about 5:45 am, Doctor Tiffin phoned the hospital to be ready for emergencies; the No 1 CNR passenger train had derailed just west of Edson and five cars had plunged down a thirty foot embankment. The hospital was full. Seven men were moved to makeshift beds and four ambulatory patients made comfortable in armchairs until they could be discharged. Doctors, nurses and emergency teams rendered first aid at the site. When sorted out twenty-nine had been injured, two very seriously. Shortly after 9 a.m. stretcher cases and the walking injured began arriving at the hospital. Health professionals rushed about looking after the needs of the victims—ten were admitted. Officials and reporters were everywhere. The telephone kept ringing, people making inquiries or offering help. The cook flew about brewing coffee and preparing food.

Twelve hours after the wreck the tracks were repaired and a special train made ready to run passengers to their destinations. The CNR Officials highly commended the medical personnel and emergency crews for their heroic work. The Sisters of Service won unstinted praise from the officials and from those cared for at the hospital,

Edson was the Divisional Point of the CNR and the business centre of a tremendous area, not only of the farms and homesteads in the vicinity but of mines served by the railroad spur known as the Coal Branch and numerous logging camps in the hinterland. Workers in the above fields and their dependents relied on St. John's when hospitalization was required. At the time of its opening St. John's was the only hospital on the main line between Edmonton and Kamloops.

The new St. John's Hospital was officially opened October 15, 1931. Father Landrigan was chairman of the event, His Excellency, Archbishop O'Leary and Mayor A.D. McMillan of Edson cut the ribbon. Also present were Dr. Braithwaite, representing the Minister of Public Health, Mr. C. Pattinson, M.L.A., Mr. A.E. MacDonald, Superintendent of the CNR, Father G. Daly C.Ss.R and the Medical staff. All speakers were



Sisters and kitchen staff, 1955

most eloquent in their praise of the new hospital. The original hospital became the Sisters' Residence.

The 38 bed hospital was adequately equipped when opened but as time progressed and more services were demanded much had to be replaced and new equipment purchased to keep updated. The hospital was often assisted in this area by donations from interested local organizations and individuals.

Winter was the busiest season in the hospital, a sudden drop in temperature heralded the opening of lumber and railway tie camps. Soon the health professionals were busy attending victims of serious accidents and a goodly quota of torn ligaments, broken limbs, bruised arms and cut fingers. Men enjoyed the camaraderie found in one of two 8-bed wards during convalescence. One busy day when a visitor was in the ward, a Sister rushed in to take temperatures during a lull. Sister gave the thermometers out all at once, the visitor opened his mouth to speak and in popped a thermometer. The nurse did not discover her mistake until she reached the last grinning patient minus a thermometer.

Dreaded road accidents were numerous and most often occurred on holidays or weekends. Spring was the Tonsillectomy season, paediatrics and obstetrics knew no season. On one occasion there were thirteen newborns in the hospital and the nursery was equipped with only nine bassinets. The sewing room staff used wooden apple boxes for their creations, leaving the original labels under the frill. One of the doctors called the lucky infants in the improvised bassinets by their 'apple' name. When the next expectant mother was wheeled into the case room, after a whiff of anaesthetic, she piteously said to the doctor "You won't call my baby *Mac* or *Duchess* will you?" "Oh no" he assured her, "We are saving *Roman Beauty* for your baby". The mother-to-be smiled her grateful thanks.

Through the years the Sisters took an active part in the civic and parish communities. From the beginning weekly religion classes were conducted during the school year. Every summer the Sisters taught religion classes in the Edson missions, instructing the children and preparing them for the reception of the sacraments.

During the twenty years 1926 to 1946 admissions increased from 243 in 1927 to 1,100 in 1946. Gradually

a great change took place in the hospital field. In 1926 a hospital was a strictly charitable institution. By 1946 charity was a social thing and a hospital was expected to be a highly efficient institution. New trends in the health care field presented new problems but the spirit of the Catholic hospital had to be maintained—caring for the sick in a Christ-like spirit of charity. The staff of St. John's Hospital took steps to keep abreast of the times in qualification, organization and management. They were recommended by the Department of Health for their standard of nursing service.

The Ladies Auxiliary of St. John's Hospital was organized in March 1957. Members of the Auxiliary were zealous, talented and of great assistance in hospital projects. In 1953 an Advisory Board was set up to assist the Sisters in their work in the health field. Great thanks are due to the endeavours and interest of the first Advisory Board and succeeding members. This group became the Governing Board of St. John's Hospital in April 1973.

Gradually the town of Edson outgrew the stately red brick hospital. In 1964 the Sisters of Service, assisted by the Advisory Board, began negotiating for a new 50 bed facility. The project was finally approved and the sod turned for the new hospital was August 18, 1968.

The official opening of St. John's Hospital took place December 8, 1969. The Architect, Stan Hodson, presented surgical scissors to the Honourable Donavon Ross who cut the ribbon. An Open House was held after the ceremony and in the evening.

The Provincial Government funded the building of the hospital. The Sisters of Service, at their own expense, erected a Sisters Residence adjacent to the new facility. Consideration was given to upgrading the former hospital with thought of converting it into a Nursing Home or Auxiliary Hospital (the building was in good repair and many Edson residents were fond of it) but remodelling was cost-prohibitive and so both former hospitals were demolished.

In operation for one year the new hospital recorded 1,485 patients admitted, 2,906 outpatients treated, 122 new arrivals, 2,662 patients X-rayed, 143 major operations and 550 minor operations. St. John's Hospital was grateful for the efforts of Sister Margaret Guest,



Sr. Dorothy Daley in hospital lab, 1976,



Front exterior view of third hospital, 1980

Registered Record Librarian, in setting up the Medical Record Department. This was a very important item in attaining Accreditation by the Canadian Hospital Association. Accreditation was granted in 1971, after the first inspection and renewed at the specified times during the following years. In 1973, for the first time, the hospital engaged a lay business manager, Albert Mercier, who in 1975 became the first lay Administrator.

It had been evident for some time that Edson needed an auxiliary hospital for the treatment of older and infirm patients who required special attention. In 1973 an Auxiliary Hospital Board was formed to investigate and offer concrete plans. After the fact finding phase this Board was amalgamated with the Governing Board for better communication and speedier decisions; (former members of the Auxiliary Board formed a Committee and retained their special mandate). The Government insisted that the new building be attached to the active treatment hospital so they could use the same facilities. After much discussion, confusion, delay and inconvenience the project was completed. This brought the total bed capacity of St. John's Health Care Complex to 106.

The beautiful Extended Care Facility was officially opened September 19, 1980. Appropriately, two "Old Timers" Mr. Andrew Fosheim and Mrs. Ivy McEvoy, cut the ribbon. The people of Edson took the new facility to their hearts. Over four hundred people toured the hospital that afternoon. As at the opening of the hospital in 1959 again many local organizations made very substantial contributions for furnishings and equipment.

In 1985 the St. John's Health Care Complex was honoured by a visit from delegates of the International Hospital Federation on a tour of Canada. The delegates praised the staff on the cleanliness, order and good spirit evident; they also said they had seen few establishments of comparable size that could equal the Complex.

The Sisters of Service had signed agreements with the Alberta Government that if they withdrew, ownership of the Health care Complex would be negotiated with the Province. The lengthy process began in 1987. The Sisters preferred to transfer administration to the Catholic Health Association of Alberta rather than to the Municipal District but there was some opposition

and the Minister of Health decided in favour of the Municipal District. The agreement was signed April 1, 1991 and took immediate effect.

The Sisters of Service are grateful that they were privileged to serve in the health field at Edson for sixty-five years. It was the missionary spirit in caring for the sick that won the respect and love of all. The Sisters pray that the "Edson and District Health Care Complex" will continue to care for patients with skill, dedication and love.

The Catholic Health Association of Alberta chose the Sisters of Service for their 1991 Recognition Award. During their Annual Convention the CHAA honoured the Sisters of Service Community for its outstanding contribution to Catholic Health Care. In his presentation Archbishop Joseph McNeil remarked that this award was given not only in recognition of past works but also for the services the Sisters are presently rendering to the people of the Province of Alberta.

**A total of
47,293 patients
were admitted to
St. John's
Hospital
in Edson, Alberta
between
1928-1970.**

APPENDIX ONE

**Sisters of Service Superiors
St. John's Hospital, Edson, Alberta**

Sister Catherine Wymbs

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior 1926

Sister Agnes Brunning

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior 1927-1932

Sister Mary Quinn

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior 1934-1942

Sister Agnes Brunning

St. John's Hospital, Edson: 1942-1945

Sister Lydia Tyler

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior 1945-1950

Sister Brigid Knopic

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior 1951-1957

Sister Mary Reansbury

St. John's Hospital, Edson. 1957-1966

Sister Martha Knechtel

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior and Administrator 1967-1969

Sister Kathleen Allen

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Superior, 1970-1991 Administrator, 1971-1989

Sister Brigid Knopic

St. John's Hospital, Edson: Director of Nursing 1969-1972

APPENDIX TWO

Board of Directors

St. John's Hospital, Edson, Alberta

In 1963, an advisory committee was created to assist the Sisters in their endeavours in the health care. The members of the first board were:

President Guy Coulombe
Vice President A. Stanton
Secretary J. Wynne
Other members Paul O'Hara
and H. Affolter

Ronald Martin, I.J. Mathers, John Hennes
and Dr. James Crawford, Lloyd Prylowski,
Lloyd Sommers.

The first lay Hospital Administrator/Business
Manager was Albert Mercier 1976-1990

Board of directors at the opening of the official
opening of St. John's Health Care Complex on
September 19, 1980:

Chairman: Les Halliwell
Vice Chair Walter Fowler
Secretary Joe Wynne
Other members: Sisters Mary Roberts,
Kathleen Allen Brigid Knopic and
Mary Harding; Dorothy Cooper, Ronald
Linford, Francis Magyar, Richard Corser,
Paul O'Hara.

Nursing Home Board Members on September 19,
1980:

Chair Les Halliwell
Vice Chair Dorothy Cooper
Other members: H.C. Schmidt. F. Wright
and Frances Ciciarelli

Present and Past Members of St. John's Hospital,
March 29, 1989 at the time of the Sisters transfer
of the hospital:

Les Halliwell, Walter Fowler,
Ronald Linford, Dorothy Cooper,
Albert Mercer, Richard Corser,
Dr. Fergus Kennedy, Dr. Trevor Morgan,
Norman Crossfield, James Ross,
James Jensen, Arthur Ciciarelli,
Joseph Wynne, Guy Columbe,
Edward Dechant, Dennis Banack,
Al Stanton, Louis Joy, Francis Magyar,
William Goode, Ernest Fahrion,



Foundations is a publication of the *The Great Canadian Catholic Hospital History Project* and the *Catholic Hospitals Digital History Books Collection* project which have as their mission the "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." When a book or booklet of a Catholic hospital or nursing school is not available for digitizing, *Foundations* provides basic historical information and dates of the organization and the ministry of the Sisters.

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