



Foundations

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Our Lady's Hospital Vilna, Alberta

History provided by the
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Some ninety miles east and north of Edmonton on the CNR line to St. Paul, Alberta, lay Vilna, a village of 200 people. As its very name attests the first settlers were of middle European stock. The Church, represented by the intrepid missionary, Father Peter Hughes, saw the need to provide these newcomers with education and health care opportunities. With the consent of Archbishop H.J. O'Leary, D.D., Archbishop of Edmonton, Father Hughes approached Father George Daly, C.Ss.R., co-founder of the Sisters of Service to found a hospital in the Village.

Father Daly visited Vilna in September of 1925 and arranged to buy a one and one-half story frame building on Main Street, owned by the Canadian Bank of Commerce, for \$1,500, to take possession November 1st. Sister Wymbs was appointed the first Superior. A graduate of St. Boniface Hospital, Sister Wymbs had served overseas during World War I. She was awarded the Bronze Medal of Honour by the French Republic in thanks for 'noble deeds bestowed on the wounded of France'.

Sister Wymbs arrived in Edmonton November 2nd. The Sisters called on the Archbishop and at the Department of Health on November 10th. Father Hughes motored Sisters Wymbs and Geraghty to Vilna to view the future hospital. They found the building much as the bank had left it with built in teller's cages, counters and desk. The party took time to visit the hospitals at Radway and Smoky Lake en route, At Smoky Lake they met Dr. Morish who agreed to assist at Vilna until a resident doctor could be procured.

Tuesday, November 17, 1925, three Sisters of Service, Sisters Catherine Wymbs, Ann Geraghty and Mary Rodgers arrived in Vilna by train at 8 p.m., to prepare the 'Vilna General Hospital' for occupancy. While the Sisters had supper at the Royal Cafe, Mr. Bell with two helpful young men, started the furnace, transported the baggage from the Depot and set up the beds; Mrs. Sanderson loaned the Sisters a lamp and saucepan. The hospital furniture, equipment and range had not arrived but water could be heated on the camp stove loaned by Mr. Bell; the Sisters were ready for tomorrow.

The Sisters approached the task of cleaning and renovations with courage and determination, knowing that all worthwhile projects have their share of confusion and difficulty. The next morning Mr. Anderson arrived with the carpenter (whose wage would be 65¢ per hour). Mr. Anderson thought it would take two weeks to do the work. The necessary repairs were almost complete by December 2nd, when the furnishings arrived so they were placed immediately.

For the first year the Sisters had to rely on visiting priests for Mass and they were generous in coming. The first Sunday in Vilna the Sisters were driven to the Moric farm where Reverend Father Prott, OMI, stationed at Sacred Heart School in the Saddle Lake Reserve, offered Mass. Father welcomed the Sisters and informed the people of the work they would be doing among them. The congregation consisted of the family, two neighbouring families and the group from Vilna—all were invited to partake of a delicious dinner. On Father Hughes next visit November 30th, he drove the Sisters to families who cared for ill members in their homes. It was on this occasion that Mr. and Mrs. Flynn of Hamlin presented

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Our Lady's Hospital, Vilna, Alberta



Exterior of Our Lady's Hospital, 1931

the Sisters with a generous donation of \$110, collected in that area to assist the Sisters to establish the hospital.

The first patient, Mr. Mike Gordey, was admitted December 12, 1925. Mr. Austin was admitted the following day. Mrs. Anne Pawliek, an outpatient, called for the daily dressing of an infected eye. Dr. Morish attended the first maternity case January 3, 1926.

Father O'Reilly, came from Edmonton to celebrate three Masses in the school Christmas Day, a large congregation attended. After the last Mass, Father brought the Blessed Sacrament to the small Chapel prepared in the hospital—the best possible Christmas present—for which the Sisters were most grateful.

Dr. W.W. Eadie and Mrs. Eadie moved to Vilna May 19, 1926. Doctor Eadie soon won the confidence of the people and his practise grew. It was a memorable day when Mr. L. Lawlor, Deputy Minister of Health, came to inspect the hospital. It's report, dated June 26, 1926 reads as follows:

“The little hospital has nine beds. The staff consists of one Registered Nurse and three assistants. The wards are clean and in excellent condition. Water is obtained from a well on the grounds and there is gasoline light. Dressings are sterilized by means of a gasoline autoclave which is controlled by a Dyack. There was no special operating room but they did have one Buchanan table placed in a side room which is adequate for surgical procedures. Doctor Eadie, a recent graduate from the university of Alberta, is practising medicine here. Case records are kept and order books signed.”

Mr. Lawlor was pleased with the hospital and the care which was being given to the people of the district. The first records show that 118 patients were admitted in 1926.

“Sickness” says St. Gregory “is the knock on the door which often awakes the soul from deep and prolonged slumber.” The care of the body is but a means to care for the soul. The Catholic Hospital is essentially a missionary endeavour, which helps make it an efficient and up-to-date institution.

It was perceived that a new hospital with adequate facilities must be built as soon as possible. February 28, 1928 the Sisters procured four acres of land, just east of the town site for \$300. Mr. Charles Gordon of Vegreville, Contractor, was retained to build 1 cottage hospital for the sum of \$25,000. Father Daly was able to obtain donations from various sources including a cheque of \$1,500 from the Catholic Church Extension. Before construction could begin, a well had to be drilled at a cost of \$5,000. To finish the project it was necessary for the Sisters of Service to borrow \$20,000. Actual work on the site began May 14th, the hospital was ready for occupancy Christmas Eve.

It was appropriate that Father Hughes arrived to celebrate Christmas in Vilna. After celebrating the beautiful Christmas liturgy with a large congregation the Sisters opened their gifts, receiving many lovely and useful electrical ones from the people of Vilna. The Sisters of the Precious Blood, Edmonton, hearing that the new facility was to be dedicated to our Blessed Mother sent a beautiful statue. December 26th Father Hughes blessed the new 14 bed facility. He also blessed



Front exterior of Our Lady's Hospital, 1944

Our Lady's Hospital, Vilna, Alberta

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



Sisters in open wooden cutter, 1931



Infant care, 1956

Our Lady's Hospital, Vilna, Alberta

the statue and placed it in the window above the entrance where "Our Lady" remained until the building was demolished.

The Sisters of Service moved into "Our Lady's Hospital" December 27, 1928. Generous farmers came with horses and wagons, moved the patients and equipment. It was hectic but all very pleasant and good natured. The men set up the stove, placed the furniture and left everything in good order. The whole operation took five hours. The next morning all was in place when Doctor Eadie made his rounds. Space and the new facilities made care much easier and pleasant for both staff and patients. In the spring of 1929 landscaping was completed with the planting of the avenue of spruce trees leading to the hospital.

One day a young man from Denmark, who was working his way across Canada rang the doorbell. He came to the hospital as he was running a high temperature and had a rash. He asked the nurse to recommend some treatment. It was found he had scarlet fever. He was isolated immediately. When Bill Chritensen was discharged he requested permission to work off his hospital account as he had little money. The Sisters found Bill knowledgeable about machinery so they hired him. He remained at the hospital for many years as the engineer, maintenance man, a trusted employee and friend.

It was difficult to operate a hospital in the 1930's, money was scarce, The Sisters had acquired twenty acres adjacent to the hospital and gradually developed a small farm to become as self sufficient as possible. Some patients paid their bills in kind— produce, grain, wood and occasional lumber was brought in "on account" When extra hands were required, men often paid with labour.

Much of the success of the little hospital was undoubtedly due to the wise and devoted services of Dr. W.W. Eadie, a good dignostician, excellent in surgery and orthopaedics. At one time there were 28 patients including six children in hospital, beds had to be borrowed from downtown. It was a great loss to Vilna when Doctor Eadie decided to move on to Edmonton in January 1942.

During the years, when Vilna was without a doctor, the Sisters did what they could to minister to the sick who came for assistance. The doctor from Smoky Lake

arranged to spend one day a week in Vilna to attend to outpatients and emergencies. He was very good about travelling the twenty odd miles to care for maternity patients who insisted on remaining in Vilna. The telephone was a very valuable instrument which was used extensively between the nurse and doctor in caring for the sick. The Sisters did some home visiting, giving care and comfort. During this period the Sisters took advantage of attending advance courses to obtain their degrees as x-Ray and Laboratory technicians as well as courses in midwifery. The Sisters of Service owe a great debt of gratitude to the Sisters in the Edmonton hospitals who made this possible.

From the beginning the Sisters of Service found time to participate in and promote parish life. They taught religion in the parish and for many years conducted Religious Vacation Schools in the surrounding areas, preparing children for the reception of the sacraments and instructing them in their faith. From 1961 to 1970 two Sisters and two staff members, on their hours off, taught religion classes weekly during the noon hour, in the village school.

There was a day of great rejoicing in August 1946 when Dr. P.W. Frobb, who had been in service, decided



Sisters and children on front steps, 1949

to set up his medical practise in Vilna. Many physical improvements took place at the hospital, The electrical plant became obsolete when in October 1951 the hospital was linked to Canadian Utilities. The hospital farm was phased out in 1952 and integration was complete when the hospital was connected with the town water system in 1955.

The ladies of Vilna always aided the hospital; they raised funds to help open the first hospital and to assist furnishing the new. In the Fall of 1944 Sister Brunning chaired a meeting for the purpose of organizing “Our Lady’s Hospital Auxiliary”. Sister outlined the benefits of such an organization to the hospital and to the community. Led by an active executive and with the cooperation of many auxiliary members over the years, many fund-raising projects have been held. The singular most popular function has been the annual “Strawberry Tea” held on the hospital grounds since 1952. Doctor Frobb was always Master of Ceremonies. All monies raised were used for improving facilities or purchasing new equipment. The Sisters were ever grateful to the auxiliary for their devoted assistance.

Doctor Frobb won the hearts of the people. He was great with obstetrics, orthopaedics and an excellent diagnostician—a dedicated man. Those were busy, happy years for the Sisters and staff working with Doctor Frobb. Because Vilna is a farming community with a fixed population there is a family tie which unites the doctor, patients, Sisters, priest and personnel into that unit which forms the hospital family.

From the mid 1940’s it became evident that government would become more involved with the finances of the hospital. The Sisters recognized the need of better: communication between the hospital, community and the Department of Health. An Advisory Board was formed in 1945. The members were most interested and kept abreast of developments. They were of immense help to the Sisters during the time of adjustment.

During the 1960’s it became apparent that the physical plant was inadequate. It was not possible to obtain financial aid from the department to build or adequately renovate.

Late in 1969 the Sisters of Service Administration informed the Advisory Board it had decided to

withdraw the Sisters from Our Lady’s Hospital . The Administration regretted the move but did not have sufficient personnel to continue to staff the hospital. There was shock and dismay. The people of Vilna wished the hospital to continue and the Sisters worked with the Board and Department of Health to that end. Eventually the Advisory Board became the Governing Board of Our Lady’s Hospital, and it was to this Governing Board that administration of the hospital was transferred when the Sisters of Service left Vilna on June 30,1970.

The Vilna community thanked the Sisters with a beautiful farewell gathering. The Sisters who had lived in Vilna left a bit of their heart behind but were happy to know that the tradition of patient care, established during their 45 years of service would be carried on. The Sisters of Service rejoiced with the Board, Staff, and citizens of Vilna, when their splendid new prototypical 15 bed “Our Lady’s Hospital” was opened in 1980.

**A total of
16,730 patients
were admitted to
Our Lady’s
Hospital
in Vilna, Alberta
between
1925-1970.**

APPENDIX ONE

**Sisters of Service Superiors
Our Lady's Hospital, Vilna, Alberta**

Sister Catherine Wymbs*
Superior, 1925; 1927-1931

Sister Mary Quinn
Superior, 1932-1934

Sister Agnes Brunning
Superior, 1934-1937

Sister Kathleen Falkland
Superior, 1937-1942

Sister Mary Quinn
Superior, 1942-1943

Sister Beatrice DeMarsh
Superior, 1943-1944

Sister Agnes Brunning
Superior, 1945-1946

Sister Stella Dube
Superior 1946-1951

Sister Ella Zink
Superior 1951-1954

Sister Mary Roberts
Superior 1954-1960

Sister Brigid Knopic
Superior 1960-1967

Sister Kathleen Allen**
Superior 1967-1970

* The Superior of Our Lady's Hospital, Vilna, was also the Administrator.

**The Alberta government purchased the hospital and the administration was transferred to the Governing Board. While the transfer was effective on July 1, 1970, Sister Kathleen Allen remained until December 1970.

APPENDIX TWO

Small Rural Hospitals*

~ Sister of Service Speaks at Alberta Nurses' Convention

At the Alberta Nurses' Convention held in Calgary last November Sister Stella Dube, Superior of our Vilna Hospital, was invited to give a paper on "The Nurse and the Rural Community." We believe the following extracts from this paper will be of interest to all of our readers and in particular to those who have at heart the subject of rural nursing.

It has been my good fortune to have been stationed for a number of years in a small rural hospital and to have had the enlightening experience of seeing the influence such a hospital can have on the surrounding district.

The small rural hospital belongs to the Community which is fortunate to possess one. It soon becomes an integral part of the village or town where it happens to be. The local interest it creates can develop, among the residents of the district, that characteristic quality known as a good community spirit. Whether that community spirit will continue to deserve the descriptive word 'good' will depend in a large measure on the nursing personnel of the small rural hospital.

In speaking of a hospital, I am considering its soul as well as its body. In this age the tendency is often to give first attention to the body. We are often more concerned with the type of building, the furnishing and the equipment than we are with the soul of the hospital—the doctor and nurses who operate it. Stone and wood and metal can bring small comfort to the sick and the weary unless their use is directed by fully developed human personalities. It is that human personality—the nurse—who is the subject of this paper.

What is the position of the nurse in the rural Community? First of all, she is a leader. In what

does her leadership consist? Not necessarily in appearing on public platform or in the public press. Her leadership generally will consist in the influence she exerts on the little world with which she is in contact. If her influence is to be of value to those with whom she deals she will have to develop and maintain the fine Christian qualities of a true woman—kindness, mercy, generosity, sympathy, zeal “ for her work, nobility of thought and act. If these are lacking, all the professional skills in the world will not make of her a nurse in the ideal sense of the word. She may be able to heal the wounded limb, but she will not be able to soothe the over-wrought mind of the worried nor awaken the flagging courage of the depressed, nor bring back the smile of contentment to the face of a frightened child.

A nurse is more than a soulless expert at making beds and applying medications. She must show by the radiance of her virtues that she is a complete woman, spirit as well as flesh.

The nurse must learn to be satisfied with less of the material in order to enjoy more of the goods of the spirit. The greatest thing the nurse needs is zeal in the carrying on of her chosen profession. It is easy for the spirit to lag and after a while die out. Most of us know how close is the border line beyond which our work becomes a chore. Conditions are not always (I should be honest and say never) perfect. If the doctor proves to be a model of his profession, then the handy man is 'like a long headache on a noisy street. If these two important members of the hospital, the doctor and the handy man, are all that can be desired, then there remains the maid problem, or the shingling problem, or the lighting problem, etc. In the midst of all these human upsets, the flame of inspiration must be kept alight; the ideal must not be allowed to die down.

* An excerpt from the Sisters of Service quarterly magazine *Field at Home S.O.S.* Vol. XXV, No. 1, January 1949, p 13.

In a rural district it can hardly be otherwise than that nearly every member of the Community, at some time or other, has been inside the walls of the hospital. How much fear is disguised by the patients and relatives—fear of the unknown.

To establish the patient in quiet of mind is a task confronting the nurse. This will not be difficult if she has cultivated a warmth in her heart and a cordiality in her manner of greeting. When the newcomers are met with the friendliness and sympathy that the welcoming nurse knows how to extend, their instinctive dread of the hospital, as a place of bleakness, coldness and aloofness, disappears.

In the small hospital the doctor and nurses form a unit for the common care of the patient. The family spirit, the informality and personal interest in each patient as a member of the same small community create a relationship between staff and patient that does not weaken when the patient is discharged as cured.

In the small hospital the nurse has an excellent opportunity for giving psychological help to a soul tried by sorrow as well as physical pain. All spiritual values seem to have dissolved and disappeared. The nagging thought that nobody cares can worry a patient into a greater than physical illness. The nurse can be an escape valve for the pent-up emotions of the patient. If she is a wise and well-developed personality, she can offer constructive advice and consolation.

Every need is an opportunity and every opportunity is a responsibility. There is created between a good nurse and a patient, a bond of understanding which makes for sympathy and a desire to be helpful on the one hand, and an eagerness to share one's troubles and receive advice and help on the other.



Sr. Martha Knechtel with patient, 1956



Sr. Mary Roberts soothing infant, 1956



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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