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A Chorus of Footsteps

How local Deaconesses and Mrs. Franklin O'Neill helped launch Deaconess Hospital



Mrs. (Minnie Beard) Franklin Peirce O'Neill



The home donated to the Deaconesses by Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill



Mr. Franklin Pierce O'Neill

by Blythe Thimsen

GREAT SUCCESS OFTEN finds its beginnings in the small, generous deeds of one person who is willing to take their vision and act on it, taking the first step to reach their goal. True success is when those few first steps of one are joined by two and then three and so on, until a whole chorus of footsteps can be heard, pounding the ground as they race toward a goal which is eventually met.

It was Mrs. Franklin O'Neill (formerly Miss Minnie Beard) who, in 1892, took the first step toward reaching her goal of providing a hospital to the people of Spokane. It was through the generous efforts of her and her husband, and the many people who were inspired by them and who followed in their footsteps, that Deaconess Hospital came into existence in Spokane.

In 1892, when the city of Spokane was growing and rebuilding following the devastating events of the fire of 1889, two Deaconesses arrived from the Chicago Training School of the Methodist Episcopal Church to work in Spokane. Deaconesses were women, sent out by the church, to cities where they would tend to the sick and needy, as part of the mission of the church, with their chief interest being social and religious welfare. Believing the Deaconesses needed a permanent location from which to serve and in which to live, Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill donated a home to them, located at 1209 5th Avenue.

The two Deaconesses sent to Spokane, Miss Emma L. Kenyon and Miss May L. Raymond, served for almost a year before both returned to their homes in April 1893. The burden was then picked up by Miss Emily Armstrong, who worked alone until October 1895,

when a lack of support workers forced her to quit, bringing a temporary end to the Deaconesses' presence in Spokane. Seventeen months later, Miss Alice Strong and Miss Stella Miles arrived in town and resurrected the cause. The need for care overwhelmed them and they were soon unable to maintain their practice within the home. As a result, they expanded their location to rented rooms in a building located at Howard and Third.

Wanting to see the Deaconesses' work with the sick and needy expand, the O'Neills committed to tithing if Mr. O'Neill's mining ventures panned out. While he left to seek his fortune in British Columbia, Mrs. O'Neill stayed in Spokane, praying that her husband would be successful, so that they could provide funding for a hospital. Her prayers were answered. Mr. O'Neill discovered a mine in Sandon, B.C. in 1896, and sold it for

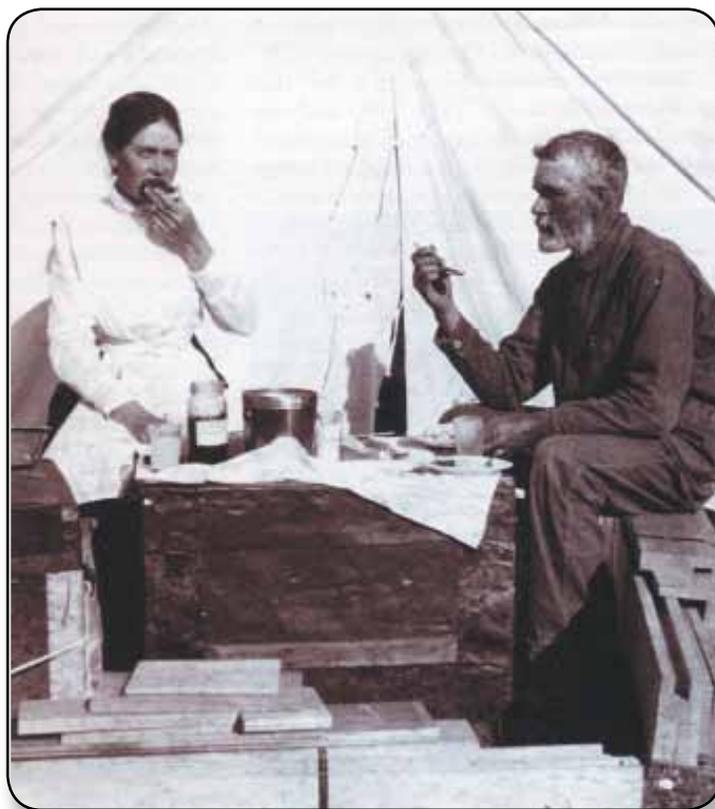
\$50,000. True to their word, the O'Neills tithed ten percent, donating \$5,000 to construct a hospital for the Deaconesses. This paid for the construction of a two-and-a-half story house with 20 rooms, which was built on Fourth Avenue, between Howard and Mill streets, and completed by the fall of 1897.

Mrs. O'Neill selected the name – Maria Beard Deaconess Home and Hospital – in honor of her mother. One half of the building was used to care for sick patients, and the other half was a rest home for the aged. According to April 25, 1896 incorporation papers of the Maria Beard Deaconess Home and Hospital. “The objects and purpose for which this Corporation is formed are to provide, through instruction in the Bible and all that pertains to Home and Foreign Mission Work, to give practical training to City Mission Work to give such aid to Missionaries as may be practicable, to employ Deaconesses, Instructors and Nurses, and, and as incidental to such objects and purposes, to establish and maintain a suitable Christian home or homes and such other auxiliary institutions as may be deemed necessary for the proper accommodations and instructions of such persons as may be under the supervision of this society.”

Before the new Home and Hospital was completed, a patient arrived in desperate need of help. According to *The Deaconess Story: Part One*, by Priscilla Gilkey, “The Deaconesses were preparing breakfast one morning in the spring of 1896, when a stranger from British Columbia arrived in need of medical care. They sent for Dr. George Libby...the kitchen table was turned into an operating table and the wash boiler and kitchen stove became the sterilization department. Dr. Libby performed an appendectomy and provided the patient with nightshirts from his personal wardrobe...This first surgery at Howard and Third launched the hospitalization work of the Deaconesses.”

On November 18, 1896, Miss Parks, the first nurse Deaconess arrived in Spokane, which was a great help to the other Deaconesses who were not trained as nurses. “It is important to remember that the early Deaconesses weren't nurses and really preferred their charity work to running a hospital,” wrote Gilkey.

Finally, on October 4, 1897, the Maria Beard Home and Hospital, located at 715 Fourth Avenue was dedicated. With medical services available, it was not long until the hospital was overwhelmed with patients. Sacred



A Deaconess lunches outside of the overflow nurse's tent.

Heart Hospital had been founded in 1886, and St. Lukes opened in 1897, yet even with all of these hospitals there was not enough room for all of the patients in Spokane who needed medical care. By 1898, there was a push for an additional building in which the Deaconesses could serve. Twenty-seven patients per month were treated in the hospital and a place where patients with contagious diseases could be housed was needed.

In August 1899, the board voted to add an “Old People's Home” onto the building, which cost \$10,000 to build and was completed in December 1899.

The many expansions meant more patients; therefore, more nurses were needed to care for them. A school of nursing, to train nurses for work in the hospital opened in 1899, with the first class graduating in 1901 with six students.

Student nurses started on the job training immediately, working 12-hour days with two hours off, six days in a row. They wore striped uniforms with aprons and small round muslin caps. Their classes were taken at night when they went to local doctors' offices for lectures. To the lectures they wore long black coats and mortarboards.

Student nurses were recruited to work and be trained at the hospital's nursing school. They were housed in the home until crowding forced them out, and many took up lodging in a nearby house.

Nurses were responsible for daily dusting and cleaning of the hospital, and were responsible for locking the five entrances to the building each night. According to the hospital rules, “A nurse is required to attend public worship in her own church at least once on a Sunday and to attend daily worship service in the hospital.” Nurses also sang hymns as they went on duty each morning and read scripture to each patient every evening.

As the size of the hospital was growing, so too was the level of medical care offered to patients. In 1899, one of the local surgeons, Dr. Thomas,

performed a hernia operation using injections in the patients' spinal column, which was a new procedure. The first use of medical gloves in Spokane took place in December 1902, an idea offered by Dr. George Libby after a trip back east in 1901, where he saw the practice was common. In 1911, the hospital purchased its first x-ray machine, thanks to a Dr. W.W. Potter, who served as secretary of the Deaconess medical staff. He donated his fees from every patient on whom he used the machine. The promise of that income spurred on the hospital to purchase the then state of the art machine, for \$1,000.

History



The first hospital, a 20-room, two-and-a-half story house, built with funds from Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill, located on 4th Ave., between Howard and Mill Streets.

Modern medicine had not fully arrived, though. Leeches were still commonly used, most often for head conditions and infections, and it was the nurses' responsibility to care for them. According to the writings of then-student nurse Clara Reedman, the leeches "were allowed to get really hungry" before being placed on the skin. She noted "the treatment caused nurses much nauseous anguish." Additionally, only ether or chloroform was used for anesthesia; although, patients were also given castor oil before surgery.

By 1899, patient numbers were up to 176 patients treated per year, and by 1903, there were 183 medical patients, 19 obstetrical patients and 188 surgical cases. According

to a report by Superintendent Mary Comstock, by 1907, a variety of surgeries were performed, including "103 appendectomies, a two year-old boy had plastic surgery resulting in a new ear, a four year-old girl received new hip sockets. A child burned in a bonfire received nine weeks of care after having gone nearly three months without his burns being tended to."

The constant increase in demand for services and space meant the hospital continually needed to expand their physical location. In March 1902, Deaconess Esther Finley left a house at 733 Fourth Avenue to the hospital. Originally it was intended as a home for retired Deaconesses, but was used for nurse quarters and exam rooms. It was called the Annex.

In 1906 or 1907, Mr. and Mrs. B J Koontz of Echo, Oregon, donated \$10,000 to the Deaconesses, which was used to construct a new three-story brick building that was built and opened by October 31, 1907. It had 50 beds and a hydraulic elevator, as well as two surgery rooms, a sterilization room and a dumb waiter in the kitchen.

By 1910 the Annex was entirely dedicated to housing for nurses, with an overflow of nurses lodging in a tent adjacent to the building. Some nurses would set up cots and stay in the rooms of patients who were very ill, allowing them to care for the patient, while also avoiding sleeping in the overflow tent.

In 1914, the space between the hospital and the house where the nurses lived was enclosed, creating a two-story building. The lower level was a ward for patients with measles, mumps and contagious diseases, and the second floor was an ironing room, where the nurses had to iron "everything but the flatware." Extra tasks like ironing were not uncommon for nurses. "At that time there was more emphasis put on personal service than the art of nursing. Nurses were the cooks and counted the laundry as well," notes Gilkey.

Increased costs and patient loads continued increasing, and by 1916 there were 1,115 patients treated. This again prompted a demand for a larger building capable of catering to more patients; additionally, it would increase revenue by allowing for more billable space.

When the Spanish Flu hit in 1918, every bed in the hospital was needed, as Spokane became overwhelmed by the deadly flu. The hospital quit accepting any maternity or surgical cases because there was limited room to care for them, and they were safer to stay away from the hospital, which became an island of illness and despair behind the shuttered doors. While providing care, five nurses became infected and died, as did Deaconess Field Secretary Mr. Asa V. Braderick (who did fundraising for the hospital) and his wife. The cost of caring for so many patients, regardless of whether they had funds to pay,



The 1912 graduating class of student nurses.

coupled with the loss of income from turned away surgeries and maternity cases, and the loss of doctors and nurses, either to death or to their service for the war effort with the Red Cross, put the hospital in a tough financial spot.

Despite the financial hardship, more space was needed to continue operating, so on September 6, 1919, the cornerstone for the third hospital was laid at Fourth and Post. It was to increase the hospital capacity by 150 beds; however, it took nearly four years until it was open.

Construction, which had begun with the laying of the cornerstone in 1919, was adding up, reaching over \$300,000 by 1920. "Estimates of the cost had been based on pre-war prices, but much of the construction had been needed [resulting in] paying war prices."

It was not until May 12, 1923, that the new hospital officially opened, three and a half years after the cornerstone was laid. Patient rooms were considered state of the art, thanks to the in-room call buttons that alerted nurses at their station. Patients with contagious diseases were sent to a city-county operated isolation hospital, though, called "the pest house."

Dr. Robert Warner, a Methodist minister who became the hospital superintendent in 1923, declared the hospital "not merely a philanthropic institution, but one where souls as well as bodies could be healed."

While all was well with the new building, some of the nurses were getting restless with the rules they had to follow. In 1924, student nurses protested. "Student nurses were required to wear their hair long in those days. A number of them, though, made arrangements with a barber in the Victoria Hotel to stay open late one evening and they all went down and had their hair bobbed in the latest style. There were deprived of their caps for several weeks and ordered to wear switches and what-nots, their punishment, comparatively slight, since banks and other businesses regularly dismissed employees for social offense."

Hospitals were changing. "Once a place where people went to have surgery or to die, a hospital was more and

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The former Women's Hotel, which was renamed Letterman Lanning Hall in 1939 and was home to nursing students.



The graduating class of 1916 was a happy bunch, ready to care for patients.



At the forefront of medical technology, Deaconess purchased their first x-ray machine in 1911, and continued to update its equipment. Shown here is the x-ray department, circa 1940.

more the center of medical care.” Another change came on June 12, 1928, when the name changed from Maria Beard Deaconess Association of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to Deaconess Hospital.

That same year, a 32-bed addition was begun, which took two years to complete. There was a push to build an additional five-story building and a one-story kitchen, funded by \$225,000 in bonds, but it never got off the ground due to the cost and the state of the economy.

One year later, in 1929, Deaconess opened an Emergency Room. First aid was provided for the community at City Hall, but if the case was severe, patients were taken to the ER.

City Hall was not the only place providing medical care outside of local hospitals. While surgeries were a source of income for the hospitals, there was new competition in the form of a hospital unit in the Paulsen Medical & Dental Building in downtown.

Not as many people were seeking medical care in early 1930 – a response to the stock market's collapse on October 29, 1929 – and it was having an effect on the hospital's income. As a result, rooms and rates were reduced, taking the cost of patient care down to \$4.55 per day, and because “money was becoming shorter, Deaconess was accepting livestock for payment.”

Despite the economy, the new 32-bed wing was completed, and it came with something new: soft mattresses. It was previously thought a hard mattress was best for someone who was ill. As advance in medicine were made, more thought and compassion went into patient care. All of this came at a price, though. The cost of expensive medical advances and needed expansions to the hospital, combined with the inability of many patients to pay, left Deaconess shouldering a financial strain.

“It is evident that the old days of medical saddle bags and horse and buggy, with kit of pills, powders, calomel and salts have all passed... while the less efficient medical and hospital methods have passed, inexpensive service has passed with it,” wrote Dr. Warner in a June 1931 report

to the trustees in which he expressed concern about the hospital's financial situation.

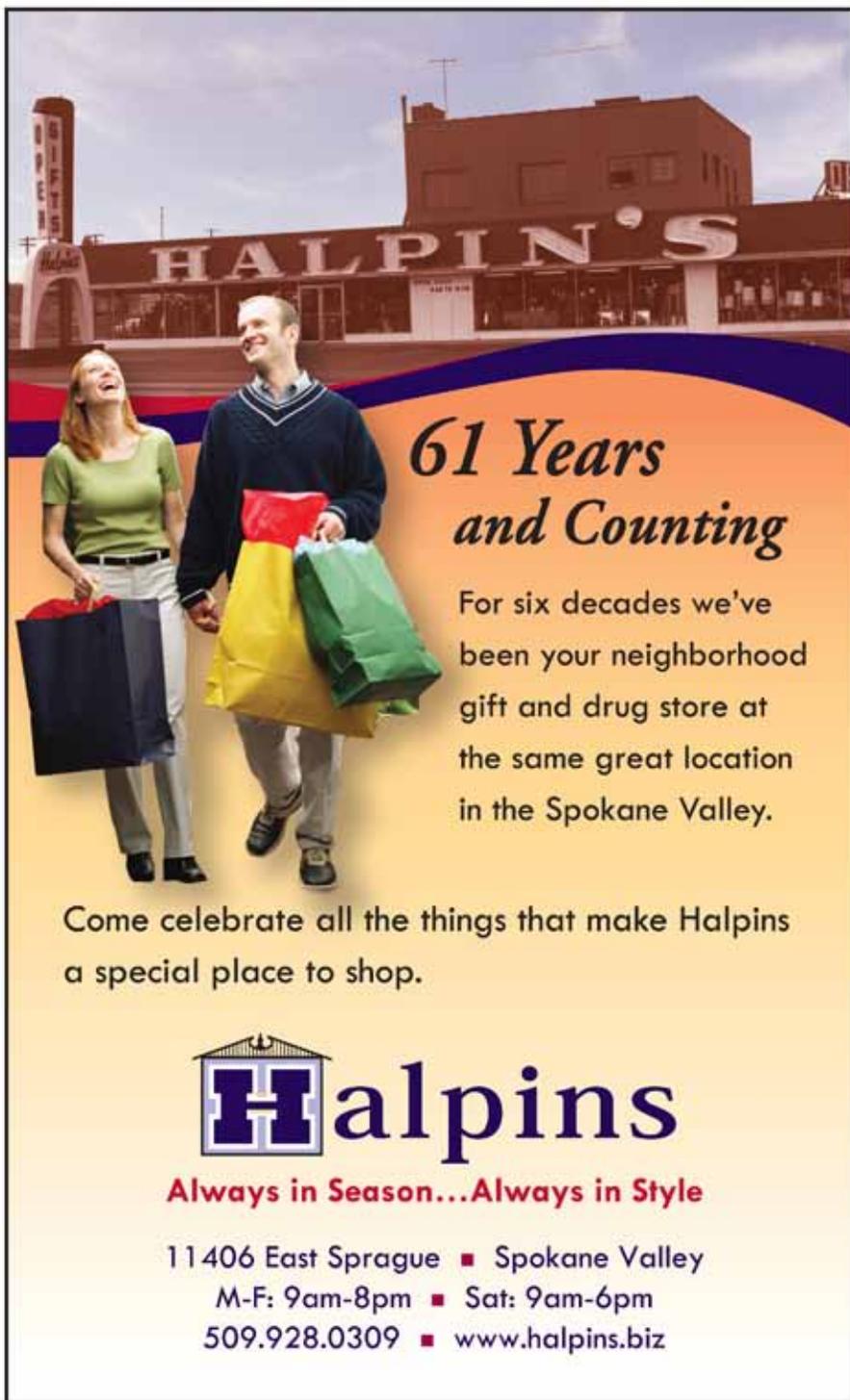
According to Gilkey, "But when finances appeared they couldn't get any worse, Dr. Warner decide to turn to God for assistance." In 1933, the Woman's Hotel building, next door to the hospital, and which the hospital had earlier tried to purchase, was given to Deaconess with the understanding they would take on the deficit. "As a result of this and other providences, our hospital actually came out of the depression better financially than when it began and very much richer in faith."

Providence was about to strike again. Mrs. Ella M Letterman Lanning had given her farmland to the hospital on a seven percent annuity basis in 1927. In 1930, she suggested, rather than receiving her monthly annuity, the money should go to the deficit on the Woman's Hotel. In 1939, the former hotel was renamed Letterman Lanning Hall, which was home to nursing students.

Financial blessings occurred again in 1939, when Dr. Theodore Chamberlain, of Concord, Massachusetts, and also a former patient, gave a permanent endowment of property in memorial to his brother, Frederick Dean Chamberlain. The value of the property was \$233,362.

Financial blessings, paired with the hard work and dedication of the staff of Deaconess helped the hospital weather the economic storms of the depression years. When WWII came there was a shortage of trained staff, as many of the doctors and nurses joined the war effort. Just as the first Deaconesses in Spokane worked hard despite the overwhelming load of patients and their understaffed team, the staff of Deaconess would not be deterred from continuing their mission of caring for the people of our community and being a strong presence in the local medical community. That mission has continued over the years and remains firm today.

What started as one woman's goal to provide a hospital and quality care for the people of Spokane, has been fortified by 118 year's worth of hard work and the dedication of people who joined her on that path; a chorus of footsteps marching toward their goal. ■



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