

Early Hospitals In The County

By Ernest D. Wichels

Sunday, March 01, 1964

Vallejo did not have a hospital until 1907!

What did Vallejoans do for surgical and medical service, and for nursing care, during the early part of the past century?

At the request of the women of the Vallejo General Hospital Guild—now assisting in a fund-raising campaign for a new institution—we did some research into the past 115 years. This was an interesting assignment. We learned a great deal and some of it will be passed on to our readers in two installments. Today, and again next Sunday, we'll tell you briefly what medical service and nursing care was available to Vallejoans who became seriously ill or suffered a major accident, in the years since 1850.

Although this community did not have a hospital—in the true meaning of the word—until 1907, our citizens did have access to them within a radius of about 50 miles. These were limited to persons with financial means and likewise able to make the journey: boat to San Francisco, steam train to St. Helena or horse and buggy to upper Solano.

BABIES BORN IN HOME

Let us recognize, first, that all babies were born at home for the first 60 or more years of our existence as a city. For most serious illnesses the patient remained at home, and some member of the family did the general nursing chores, although we shall describe the societies that helped in this field.

In 1849, in neighboring Benicia, a Doctor W. F. Peabody established a “hospital” and according to an early directory did a “capacity business caring for the returning miners” from the Sierra. His associate was W. Jones. Dr. Peabody served Benicia for some 15 years, but there is no record as to how long he conducted the hospital.

Next, in 1856, the U.S. Army built the first military hospital on the Pacific Coast in the Arsenal. It served this purpose until probably after the Spanish-American War. It subsequently served other purposes, including an Officers' Club, and is one of the buildings now proposed to be accepted by the Division of Beaches and Parks as an historical landmark.

SHIP SERVES AS CLINIC

We now retrace the years to October 1854, a month after Farragut established a navy yard at Mare Island. When the Warren came here to serve as a station ship, and later the Independence, a "sick bay" was established on board. This served as a "clinic," or for hospital care, for naval personnel.

The cornerstone of the Mare Island Naval Hospital" - was laid on October 12, 1869, and the first building was completed about a year later. This building still stands, although it suffered considerably in the earthquake of Mar. 30, 1898. About ten years ago the Naval Hospital was closed and this original structure is today the administrative headquarters of the Naval Schools Command on the island.

However, the Independence accommodations were inadequate for the demands upon it and a 12-room building was built for hospital purposes in Dublin—the town on Mare Island where so many early Vallejoans lived. Some six or eight of these Dublin homes still stand on Walnut Avenue. We know very little - about this hospital except that it was also available to certain Mare Island employees—certainly those who owned houses in Dublin. The first patient was received here on Feb. 17, 1864. With the completion of the main Naval Hospital in 1870, the Dublin building became civilian quarters No. 25.

"POOR HOUSE" USES LIQUOR

What were the neighboring facilities on which Vallejoans relied? In 1876 the Solano County Infirmary,—commonly called the Poor House—was built on 60 acres of land three miles northeast from Fairfield on what is known as the O'Connor property. The original, building, and adjoining pest house, were razed about 1940. One of the popular medicines must have been whiskey, for early county records indicate that these spirits were purchased in barrel lots. In 1920 the present Solano County Hospital was built just a mile west of Fairfield.

While we talk about Pest Houses, Vallejo had a branch pest house. It was located out on the Benicia just across the street from St. Vincent's Cemetery, where the drive-in movie is now located. It was placed out of commission about a half century ago—but any Vallejoan, regardless of station in life, who contracted smallpox or other serious communicable diseases, went there!

The early County Infirmary was the goal of many Vallejoans, and transportation by horse and buggy in the winter months was a struggle over muddy and flooded roads.

SANITARIUM AT ST. HELENA

Then came the establishment of another—and very capable—institution which in the early days received a large proportion of its patients from Vallejo. This is the St. Helena

Sanitarium at Angwin. This was built in 1878 and it was known as the Rural Health Retreat until about 1895 when its assumed its present name.

The Veterans Home in Yountville was built in 1883, with a physician in attendance—and many Civil War Veterans of Vallejo, the G.A.R., were taken to that place.

Next week we shall tell you of the volunteer nursing societies such as the Good Samaritans and the St. Vincent's Benevolents—headed by the Mmes. Hildreth, Hilton, Mallett, Halsey and others. Also of the role played by the early drugstores, with back-room operating tables. Of the “recovery” beds in the homes of such doctors as Klotz, Dempsey, Rachel Lane, etc.—dignified by the title “sanitarium.”

Also, the establishment of Hogan Hospital, the short-lived Downing Hospital on Marin Street, and the Maternity Home at 608 Florida Street.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/729>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/729/>