



Sacramento's First Hospitals



By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

IT WAS A TIME OF INDIAN VILLAGES, rolling hills, free-flowing rivers, and it was a time of discovery, gold for the enterprising — the fortune hunters, the rough and ready, the intellectuals. Physicians joined the pioneers and came for their portion of the treasure and found illness and debilitation. It was a time of disease and shelters for the sick.

Adventurers arrived by the hundreds. They crossed the continent. They sailed the Atlantic to the Isthmus of Panama, crossed and boarded ship up the Pacific coast to San Francisco. They trekked down from the north. They all stopped on the banks of the Sacramento River and sheltered under the trees.

One doctor from Alabama wrote that, since he knew people would be sick, here was his opportunity. He brought trunks of medicines and built a shelter of willow poles and sail duck. He put up bunks and filled bed ticks with dried grass. He raised a sign, HOME for the SICK. Men from the gold mines in the hills came for treatment and, after a few weeks, the doctor reported, *"I made money very fast...sold out my hospital and medicine"* — and left.

Most doctors practiced medicine rather than dig for gold. John Sutter had set up the first permanent living quarters built of adobe, in 1839, on a small hill near the junction of the American and Sacramento Rivers, at a popular crossing of two routes to the area, and it served as the first hospital. Indians as well as adventurers were cared for by any medical men available.

Malaria was brought in by trappers from Oregon. Typhoid was a problem. In 1849, a one-story adobe store near Sutter's Fort was converted to a hospital, *"spacious, cool, well ventilated,... (with a) well of most excellent water...good nurses and attendants and a good cook...no sick man (sic) will be refused admission because destitute of money."*¹ The fee schedule was \$16 a day for a private room, \$10 a day for the ward. Board, lodging, medicines, medical and other necessary attendance, and the washing of bed linens and towels were covered. The hospital lasted through the cholera epidemic of 1850 when the doctor in charge succumbed.

Because of the many illnesses among miners and settlers, charitable organizations opened shelters to administer relief — Odd Fellows and Freemasons, for two. Drs. Morse and Stillman ordered a special hospital built and rented it themselves for \$1,500 a month. The fee schedule here was \$20 a day for a private room and \$10 a day on the ward.

However, that hospital was unable to withstand the yearly floods and particularly the largest one, in 1850, that decimated the city. Dr. Morse wrote of moving to the top floor, leaving the dead sewed up in blankets sunk in the water on the first floor. Dr. Stillman told of the rising water. "Tents, houses, boxes, barrels, horses, mules, and cattle are sweeping by the swollen current.... I have misgivings about our fate, but sure I am we will not desert the sick, and, if we are swept away, we will all go together."

So many settlers and travelers were sick these years that several small hospitals were

opened, but they did not last long. One gold rush pioneer wrote, "Give me health and California is a pretty good place to make money. But give me sickness such as I have seen here and hell can't be far off."

There were offbeat establishments, for natural remedies, water cures, and organizations for the poor and elderly. Scurvy, diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid fever, and malaria were the common diagnoses, along with typhus, respiratory problems and pneumonia and infections in wounds incurred in the mines.

The cholera epidemic in 1850 killed 15 percent of the population in 3 weeks. Many fled Sacramento, but the physicians stayed, 30 or 40 of them, and 17 died. At the time, an emergency cholera hospital and a city dispensary were established and, later, a "pest house" for smallpox victims was opened. That year, 380 cases were recorded, along with an occasional case of leprosy.

Despite disease and floods, the population increased and a government with a city council was organized. Physicians were active in the planning and a City and County Hospital was founded, first at Sutter's Fort, then in what became Capital Park and, finally, on a tract of land on Stockton Boulevard where the University of California, Davis Medical Center now operates.

"High water" houses were built. Levees were raised and dirt fill brought to the downtown. The rivers were mastered. Knowledge of disease transmission improved, mosquito abatement was instituted. It was now a time of control and evolution.

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1. Alta, a San Francisco newspaper, August 4, 1849.

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