



"Where There is Need, There is Mercy"



By Sister Katherine Doyle, RSM

The author is an archivist and historian for the Sisters of Mercy. This paper stems from her talk at the Sierra Sacramento Valley Museum of Medical History about the 150th anniversary of the Sisters' arrival in Sacramento.

BUILDING A LEGACY of healthcare in the city of Sacramento was not part of the plan for the five Sisters of Mercy arriving in Sacramento at dawn on October 2, 1857. They came to teach and to care for the city's orphans. The same plan brought them to San Francisco only three years earlier. Circumstances wrote a different history.

"Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, had special concern for the sick. In her own lifetime she attended the sickbeds of dying family members, young consumptive members of her community, and cholera victims in Dublin. Her sisters did no less. They moved out into the homes of the sick and dying. They answered the call in 1854 to become nurses in the army hospitals of Crimea. They went where they were needed regardless of the risk to their own health and safety. It was this legacy of care and compassion that the first California Sisters of Mercy brought to San Francisco and Sacramento.

When the Sisters arrived in San Francisco, the city had no health regulations to confine disease. Within days of their arrival, cholera came and later small pox. Using skills learned from experience, the Sisters offered their services. They were granted administration of the county hospital, thereby gaining the respect of friend and foe alike. They lived the instructions of Catherine McAuley: "great tenderness must be employed and when death is not immediately expected it will be well to relieve the distress first and to endeavor by every practicable means to promote the cleanliness, ease and comfort of the patient..."



While the Sacramento Sisters engaged primarily in education, each day after school they would walk to the homes of the sick, becoming Sacramento's first visiting nurses. In early Sacramento, there was the Railroad Hospital and the County Hospital, but neither served what would be termed "private pay" patients. Sacramentans had to journey to San Francisco for major surgeries.

By the 1890s the situation was serious. The doctors of the city, knowing the level of excellence provided by the Sisters at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco, repeatedly asked the Sisters to open a similar facility in Sacramento. Due to lack of personnel and money, the Sisters had to decline their request.

Recognizing the serious gap in available healthcare in Sacramento, Dr. Thomas

Huntington, chief surgeon of the Southern Pacific Railroad Hospital, approached the Sisters once more and, this time, succeeding in securing a "Yes." Dr. Simmons, owner of a small sanitarium called Ridge Home, sold it to the Sisters, who took possession on August 1, 1895. At the time it had two patients.

The Sisters quickly recognized that the facility was inadequate and began plans to build a new hospital on the property. The new hospital, Mater Misericordiae, celebrated its groundbreaking on November 26, 1896 and open for business on May 9, 1897.



Starting with a capacity of 30 beds, the hospital soon doubled in size to accommodate Sacramento's growing population. A surgical suite was added and the Sisters sponsored a thriving nursing school. Even though Mater Misericordiae expanded once more, bringing its capacity to 90 beds, it was evident by 1912 that it was too small and that the wood frame building was too vulnerable to fire.

As early as 1914, the Sisters began to look for a new location. The site owned by the Inderkum family was selected even though it was swampy at the outset. Benefactors and medical community alike began planning for the new hospital, but plans were put on hold by the outbreak of World War I. The limits of available space challenged the Sisters during the flu epidemic of 1918. There simply was not enough space for the sick. The Sisters transferred all the infants to their orphanage at Stanford Home to make room for more patients.

It was not until 1925 that a new Mater Misericordiae would open at 40th and J Streets. Mother Mary Carmel McNaughten oversaw the move from 23rd and R Streets to the new building. Everyone helped, including boys from Christian Brothers who lent their muscle to carry beds and equipment out of the old building into their new home.

Since 1925 Mercy Hospital has been the heart of Mercy healing in the city of Sacramento. From there the Sisters reached out to other communities in need of healthcare: Redding in the 1940s; the northern suburbs through Mercy San Juan in the late 1960s; and Folsom in the early 1980s. Prior to Medicare and Medi-Cal programs, Mercy offered a free clinic for children and opened a Children's Hospital. Mercy trained nurse cadets for service during World War II, provided long term care for patients unable to stay in their homes, established a nationally honored cardiac program and reached out to the economically poor through clinics and community service.

Such a tradition never comes from one source, yet it has been shaped by the vision of Catherine McAuley. That vision has been kept alive by many, such as Sister Mary Peter Carew, Sister Mary Kevin Redmond, Sister Mary Ligouri Madden.

It has been shared by dozens of dedicated physicians, healthcare workers, student nurses trained by the sisters, and by all who have worked to ensure that Sacramento sick have a medical facility in which they experience not only healing of the body but solace of the heart and spirit.

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