



Remembering the Late American River Hospital



By John M. Reed, MD

AMERICAN RIVER HOSPITAL admitted its first patients in 1962, and many thousands were cared for there. In 2000, American River Hospital closed its doors for good. The building and surrounding 15 acres were sold to a real estate developer who demolished the building, and built about 50 very nice homes. Today, the area is a pleasant residential neighborhood.

But sadly for those of us who spent our professional careers at American River, not a trace or a reminder of the old hospital remained. This has now been corrected - we have placed a commemorative plaque on the site where the hospital stood.

It is not hard to remember 1962. The world had just dodged a nuclear bullet in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Beatles were the rage. In the medical sphere, designations like intensive care unit, oncology unit, discharge planning, home style delivery, and ambulatory surgery had yet to appear. The 38 years of American River Hospital's existence coincided with the most explosive growth and change in medical practice ever. The hospital accepted and met this great challenge.

By the late 1950s, growth in the Carmichael and north areas of Sacramento made it apparent that a suburban hospital was needed. Many physicians maintained offices in this region, and the downtown hospitals were often short of beds. I'm told that traffic was not much better than today! So a group of seven physicians bought a 10-acre parcel in Carmichael and started planning their new hospital, American River Hospital. Eventually, it would grow into a major medical facility offering the best of care available.

The challenge for a suburban hospital is unique. It does not have the major financial resources of metropolitan hospitals, and it does not have the luxury of being the only facility available, as in small towns and rural areas. Yet it is judged and evaluated by the same standards as the larger central hospitals - and properly so. American River Hospital always accepted this, and became a major part of the Sacramento area medical community.

In those days, unlike now, almost all physicians belonged to SSVMS. Over the years, American River Hospital physicians participated fully in all the society activities, including many committee chairmanships and as CMA delegates. Between 1962 and 2000, nine society presidents were physicians with strong ARH associations.

At 180-210 beds, with a peculiar physical plant and in a very residential neighborhood, American River Hospital was nothing short of remarkable.

Usually, lists are boring. But, in addition to all the usual services expected in any hospital, here is a partial list of what American River offered at her prime: intensive care unit, cardiac care unit, psychiatric unit, pediatric unit, oncology unit, cath lab, pulmonary lab, GI lab, rehabilitation unit, ambulatory surgery, obstetrical service with 30,000 plus deliveries, home-style obstetrical service, nuclear medicine, CT scanning, geriatric unit,

total joint replacement surgery, discharge planning for home care - and much more. Always certified by the Joint Commission, as medicine forged ahead with new knowledge and technology, American River Hospital embraced it and kept pace.

American River Hospital was lucky with its owner/management partners. The physician group sold to the Eskaton organization in 1968; later in 1986 there was a merger with the Alta-Bates Health System. Mercy Healthcare Sacramento became the owner in 1991, until the hospital was closed in 2000.

Of course there were disputes and tensions, but they all provided sound, even visionary, leadership. For example, the addition in 1972 allowed for a modern laboratory, radiology unit and emergency room, all essential for subsequent growth.

By 2000 though, the continuing explosion of technology and clinical techniques, the new and ever changing reimbursement systems, and the perpetual search for funding, all took their toll on the smaller suburban hospital. Clearly, consolidation of the new expensive services and equipment was necessary. So American River Hospital closed its doors, after 38 years of service.

Of course, the physical plant, superb equipment, and state of the art technology are essential for the modern hospital. But as everyone knows, *the* key to excellence is the quality of the people who work there. And in this area, American River Hospital was unsurpassed.



American River Hospital memorial plaque.

A sense of cooperative professionalism was apparent. There was a continuous motivation toward improvement and progress, and a sense of a close knit team working together. How this feeling came about is unclear, but it was always there, and newcomers soon became a part of it. And it applied to all - physicians, nurses, technicians, clerical staff, administration, maintenance - all.

When we began contacting former employees about the memorial project, this is what we heard, again and again: "It was the best job I ever had!"

The commemorative monument was installed recently. On June 7, from noon to 3 p.m., we plan a dedication celebration. Everyone is invited, especially if you worked there, were a patient there, or were born there! The monument is located on Gibbons Drive, just across from Gibbons Park, actually on the former American River Hospital property. Please come!

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A commemorative plaque marks where American River Hospital used to stand. From the left are: Harvey Goldberg, MD; Mary Goldberg; Barbara Drysdale, RN; Patricia Pratt, RN; John Reed, MD; Dawn Reed and Diana Lenon.

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