

The History of St. Helena Hospital

Chapter X

World War II and A Million Dollar Hospital Wing

The idyllic life at the St. Helena Sanitarium, so aptly described by Mr. Fred Hutchinson in his letters during the summer of 1939, came to an abrupt end when the United States entered World War II. The war began when Germany invaded Poland without warning at 4:45 a.m. on the 1st of September, 1939. World War II lasted for six long years, eventually involved every major world power, and cost the lives of 60 million people. Originally maintaining neutrality, the United States provided assistance to British troops in 1940. In his fireside chat in October of 1940, President Roosevelt suggested the drafting of 18- and 19-year-old men. The country ramped up its forces in the Pacific, but did not fully enter the war until 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States became fully involved in the conflict with the declaration of war on December 12, 1941.

In 1943, the St. Helena Sanitarium business manager, Mr. E.L. Place, presented the following report of the Sanitarium's 1942 operations at the annual stockholders meeting: "Amid the thickening problems of rationing, rising prices, manpower shortage and shortage of all kinds of supplies and equipment, the St. Helena Sanitarium during 1942 reached the highest patronage in its 64 years of service." He outlined a facilities improvement program to include a new church building, a new hospital, laundry, store and post office, remodeling of the old hospital into workers' apartments, removal of unsightly cottages and outbuildings, a new sanitarium main building and new class rooms. He concluded the report by stating that "Many factors have conspired to make 1942 a difficult year for the operation of a sanitarium. Although our government has classified hospitals as an essential business, still the draft has made steady inroads on our manpower, and rationing and priorities have forced us to get along without many things we have sorely needed. We have been fortunate, however. Our work at old St. Helena has prospered and been blessed during this most critical period in our nation's history."

The Superintendent of Nurses, Miss Irene Robson, in her report to the stockholders at the same meeting, noted that they were suffering from an extreme nursing shortage. She reported that "Patients are learning to help themselves as soon as their physical condition permits." The nursing staff at that time consisted mostly of student nurses with a few supervisors, and the nurse-to-patient ratio was one to ten. Hydrotherapy was still a big part of the program and nursing supervisors helped with the treatments.

She goes on in her report to read some excerpts from a letter written by Glen Hamilton, a graduate of the nursing class of 1938, who had been drafted into the Army. He writes: "The experience I had playing in the Sanitarium band has helped me in the Army. I belong to the division band and enjoy playing with them a great deal. At present, I am one of the division buglers and I blow the bugle at headquarters two times a week at the flag lowering ceremony.

"Our division was the first in America to become airborne. We have 8,000 men and about one-third are parachute troops. We get far more training than ordinary units as we must operate behind enemy lines and will be on our own. Our medical company has 195 men and 23 doctors. Our stretchers are made of wood and aluminum and are very light. We have a full surgical setup and can do any kind of operation. We work in small units and will operate in shell holes, caves, dugouts or in the brush. We are to treat and evacuate the wounded by plane to a general hospital a thousand miles or more away. Our hospital ships are grand, and in a few minutes they can be loaded and in the air, flying by night. Part of our work is to convert transport planes into hospital planes." "We were called together today and one of our captains read a message to us from Washington. It was a sum-

mary of methods of fighting the Japanese. They told us that from now on we were going to just about live in the woods, rain or shine.”

Miss Robson ends her report by stating that two other St. Helena graduates are also serving their country on the battle front, “Mr. Charles Ames is in England and Mr. Walter Nelson was stationed at a hospital in Africa.”

World War II ended in September of 1945, after the surrender of the Japanese troops. During the war years, work progressed at St. Helena, and in his manager’s report to the St. Helena Sanitarium stockholders in 1945, Mr. Place notes that a number of improvements had been made to the facility.

In 1947 the Sanitarium stockholders were told that they must give attention to the maintenance and rehabilitation of the physical plant. “Since our last meeting,” Mr. Place reports, “we have been almost constantly engaged in planning the first unit of a rehabilitation program which will replace our present hospital building.” Architects prepared plans and a campaign was in place for raising funds for construction of the new hospital wing. A sawmill was built on a nearby wood lot, where they expected to cut 400,000 feet of lumber, much of it to be used in the new building. The preparation of the site for this building on the hillside was not an easy matter, considering the old pipelines and wires that had to be shifted or removed. Much of the foundation and deep piers had to be blasted out of solid rock! A tunnel was built to house electric, steam, water and sewer lines to provide for easy access for purposes of repairs or maintenance.

The construction of a five-story, reinforced concrete building began in the summer of 1947. This new building provided 74,000 square feet of floor space and was completed in 1950 at a cost of \$1,067,519. Original cost estimates were much below that figure, and at the October 5, 1950, Governing Board meeting, discussion was held on whether to stop construction without finishing or try to complete the building with a skeleton crew. The Board voted to proceed with a minimum crew.

In his report to the stockholders in March of 1951, Mr. Place stated that “Opening day, May 14, 1950, really marked the beginning of a new era for us. The publicity that attended this event was truly remarkable. Our first patient for this new wing arrived by helicopter, which event, as well as other exercises of the day, were photographed and written up in large metropolitan dailies as well as in a large number of local papers. Our local paper (the *St. Helena Star*) put out a special issue devoted almost entirely to our opening day, printing 2,000 extra copies, and these were sent all over the country. For this issue the paper, the *St. Helena Star*, was awarded a prize by the State Newspapermen’s Association.”

The Nurses Training School Report of 1951 indicates that “The new hospital has done much to improve the clinical experience of the students.” The students gained experience in treating more acutely ill patients and were able to observe complex surgical procedures.

In 1953 the St. Helena Sanitarium celebrated its Diamond Jubilee—the 75th Anniversary of the facility. Relatives of the founding fathers arrived by horse and buggy, and the governor of the State of California was the honored speaker for the occasion. The nursing school graduation was held that evening on the hospital’s front lawn, with about 225 former graduates in attendance.

The county road ran through the grounds of the hospital until 1955, when a new road was built below the store and powerhouse. This was a great improvement, reports Mr. Place in his manager’s report of 1955. He also stated to the board that, “We have been told that we now have one of the most attractive, modern and convenient facilities that can be found anywhere.”

Sources: Minutes of the St. Helena Sanitarium Board and the
California Medical Missionary and Benevolent Society, 1943-1951.