

HISTORY OF MEDICAL SERVICES IN REEDSPORT THRU 1988

THE WAY IT WAS

In 1951 Dr. Rick McLean came to Reedsport with two babies and an office manager wife to make a home and join Dr. Courtney and two osteopathic physicians, Dr. Amick and Dr. Howitt to serve the Reedsport area. He took a 2-year lease option from Dr. Carol Myers, who was going to Massachusetts General Hospital to specialize in surgery. She had built an isolated structure two years before in a bog across from the present County Building. It was up on short wood pillars; there were swamp willows in the entire block. We worked to the music of frogs under the office all winter because if the drainage coming off the hill didn't flood down there the tide gate would.

The nearest commercial structure was the logging supply - no Masonic hall, no bank; no county building. Between our office and the railroad was the deteriorating veterans housing now replaced by apartments. One of my most memorable-clients from veteran's housing was a two year old whose mother called me at the end of her wits. He had suddenly gone completely berserk; writhing and screaming as if he were beset with fire ants. I was perplexed that a child with normal vital signs would suddenly go nuts. I tried to reassure his mother and myself that there was nothing to do unless worse symptoms ensued. I was sure his momentum would get him through the night. The next morning his mother called me and reported that, unbeknownst to her, he had gotten into her amphetamine diet pills and generously helped himself.

Poisonings were quite common those days. I don't remember that any victims died and I'm sure I wouldn't forget. Today poisonings are much less common due to public education, tamperproof bottles and general increased awareness of the dangers.

Burns were many and severe. Due to regulations prohibiting manufacture of flammable clothing, exposed heater elements and burn prevention education severe burns seem to have nearly disappeared from office practice. The most tragic was a man in a shack above Bowman Road with a couple of children. I don't remember if he had a wife at home. People mishandled gasoline lanterns pretty often and this time the fire was quite suddenly out of control. He ran back into the house to save his small baby, unaware that someone had already

taken it out. He was fatally injured.

Like most Reedsport streets Winchester was not paved. Loads of huge logs come chattering down the washboard road built on mud. [Through trucks are banned now]. This kept the doors in the clinic misaligned.

The population then was 2,200. There were five local sawmills and many small logging operators. The firms on Smith River were still very productive and we had a creamery and cheese factory.

In those days there was no TV. Radio reception was unsatisfactory. KGO, a big station in San Francisco came in beautifully in the middle of the night but you would like as not hear an exotic interview such as with the President of the Flat Earth Society.

For local news we had to depend on the paper, telephone operators and rumor. The core functions of the city were concentrated in a big two-story building that covered the position of the present PUD building. It contained the old PBX board with about 5 operators and a backup or two. The Police department was in there. [There was no race problem because Chief McCabe wouldn't allow any colored in town]. The two osteopathic doctors worked upstairs. The tonsillectomies were always betrayed by a strong ether vapor pervading the building. Adjacent to the city and telephone offices was the local theater, which sloped down from street level some 4-1/2 feet, flooding every time the water came up.

Present day Reedsport is unrecognizable from the one that existed then. Everything north of the old highway, now Longwood Drive, going past present Highland School and west of 22nd Street was a wilderness of small second growth fir and hemlock with a little thread of primitive road going out to the Kalawatset Ranch on the Umpqua River.

Some winter days you could drive from McCullough Bridge to Reedsport without encountering another vehicle. The road to Coos Bay and hospital was paved but a virtual snake trail with only two stretches of straight road half a mile long — one on the Lakeside flat and the other this side of Hauser. Dr. Courtney and I together drove half million miles down there and wore out a great number of cars.

Complete road reconstruction began in 1954 and lasted a couple of years with mud, pothole; delays and short tempers. The swimming pool is a gift from Mr. Hinsdale's profits supplying the massive road

base and gravel. Before that drowning of children averaged about one a year. Subsequently all children were required to gain swimming proficiency and understand the rules of water safety. Since then the only water fatalities have been from uncontrollable circumstances.

Those days a lot of the population was pretty unsophisticated. Most men worked in the woods, mills or on the dairies. Higher education had a low priority. Many kids would graduate from high school without ever having been to Portland. The mill and woods workers mostly would get a week off to go hunting and another to paint or repair their houses. Drinking was so heavy that in the late 'thirties Ripley published a feature describing Reedsport as the town with the most per capita consumption of alcohol in the nation. Dr. Courtney took care of a lot of that and I know he got little sleep on payday weekends.

When I first started, fishing was a booming commerce both in Reedsport along the Discovery Center area and at Winchester Bay. A great deal of it was done by Finnish immigrants fishing the river. They used colorful covered, double ended floats virtually impossible to sink and mechanically very reliable. They were 26 feet long & powered by one-cylinder engines with a heavy flywheel. They were called "puker boats" because about 3 times a second they spurted out about a cupful of engine cooling water. This colorful fleet has one by one disappeared over the decades. The Astoria Maritime Museum may be the only examples preserved

My most memorable experiences lie in the area of obstetrics. Until Dr. Courtney started delivering babies in the late 'fifties no other doctor was delivering in hospital from Newport to Eugene and Cottage Grove to Roseburg and Coos Bay. Dr Dunn delivered a few in his upstairs office in Florence. One baby arrived on a veranda in a big log house at Westlake. Another time during a raging winter storm, I tramped through wind and mud to a tarpaper shack up Dean Creek to help a 17 year-old girl who had had no prior care. The very premature baby did not survive. I delivered quite a few in the office but by some divine intervention, never on the way to the hospital.

Telephone service is another thing we don't think much about any more. We had four digit numbers that you asked for when you called. It assured a 24-hour answering service. It didn't matter where we were those ladies could track us down with or without the complicity of our wives. It was a shock when we were suddenly confronted with those impersonal dial phones and we had to provide an effective alternative

call system.

Our ambulance service for many years was a slightly modified station wagon that Jack Unger operated most of the time in conjunction with his mortuary service. Jack was a jocular man and an unforgettable icon of the era. The ambulance carried oxygen, bandages and a few splints, an emesis basin and very little else. The post was taken out between the front and back doors on the right to accommodate the stretcher. There were a great many more spectacular disasters in the logging woods those days because of the “highballing” and poor safety regulations. The service morphed over time from the “Ungermobile” to the rolling intensive care units we are privileged to rely on today. Doctors would have little to add at a crash scene now.

STRUGGLING TOWARD THE DREAM

History of the hospital development is very sketchy. Bill Burdick came to Reedsport from Tillamook in 1912 to a store in Gardiner. In 1912 Reedsport was mostly wetland and side channels from the river. A hospital was established in the upstairs of that building. It was managed by Helen Lewis, RN. She died at Lower Umpqua Hospital at age 94.

When we first came there was a lot of talk of a hospital being established in the big Hogan [Reed] house on Schofield Drive but it never materialized.

The first Board of Directors were appointed in 1957 and were: Emma Hedden from a pioneer family in Scottsburg & Stillman [Stint] Wessela, a local merchant; Ralph Wagner, lumber inspector, Berge Borrevik, oil service; Leonard Tolman, motel proprietor. Progression was steady and vigorous from then on. The hospital district boundaries went to Elkton, Lane County Line and Lakeside. Communities included Reedsport, Gardiner, Scottsburg, Winchester Bay and Lakeside.

The first site at Scott Terrace was engineered and disqualified due to unstable blue clay. Then they were able to acquire property at the present hospital location. Funding was obtained through the Hill-Burton Act to help small communities. The total cost including a grant from International Paper and a bond issue was \$850,000, a fraction of the cost of annual operation.

The original structure was in the shape of a Maltese cross with a

solarium on the east and west corners. The laboratory was in the center of the building, very small. It was sweltering hot all the time because it was directly above the boiler. The full basement was heavy concrete. Only about half was used - kitchen, laundry, mechanical, boiler and some phone equipment. The back was a dark, spooky space that seemed useless at the time but now has every cubic inch utilized.

Dudley Ross was the first administrator. He was an affable fellow with an RN wife who was a spitfire and an excellent nurse. He planned the staff organization and selected equipment over a couple of years. He hired the personnel from all over the nation who had never worked together before. They were soon engaged in a power struggle to gain dominance. It was a pretty bad scene. Mr. Ross did what he had to do — he fired those who couldn't or wouldn't adapt and cooperate. Then at the end of six months of operation he stepped down and Edel Bryant from Roseburg was hired. He stayed only about a year, succeeded by Bob Strowbridge an accountant from the Gardiner Long-Bell Mill. Bob had a talent for organization, leadership and fair dealing. He attended a great many meetings on hospital management. After five years he arranged for the first major upgrade of the facility. Then he got a more attractive offer to manage the Ashland Hospital from which he much later retired.

THE FIRST UPGRADE

The structure was extended from the present front entrance to accommodate the big lab, a greatly enlarged and better-equipped emergency room and space for some administrative offices. The lower floor was left undeveloped for future expansion.

Dr. Bob Lewis joined my practice in 1963, a very exciting time for Reedsport. The '60s was a time of high optimism and development: Highland School, Lower Umpqua Hospital, Development by the County of extensive marina operations at Winchester Bay. It was estimated that 8000+ people would live in town by the turn of the century. LUH hospital had just been completed and International Paper started up bringing a lot of ancillary development such as the Golf course and Country Club and Ridgeway Housing tract. Logging, commercial fishing and farming were vigorous.

Dr. Lewis came at that time after I enlarged the office to accommodate two physicians. Soon after his arrival he distinguished himself by

developing the first small hospital cardiac resuscitation protocol in the northwest. The nurses courageously learned to work without a doctor on hand. The fact is that if the victim had no heart sounds and no breathing they were “dead” anyhow. One Memorial Day when Dr. Courtney and I were both unavailable, Dr. Howitt, while working on his own cardiac patient, collapsed. Nurses then directed cardioversion and saved Dr Howitt for many more years of useful life. Such a thing is no big deal now, but at the time it was of intense human interest.

Toward the end of the ‘seventies there was a vigorous campaign by older citizens to enlarge the nursing home because they had hoped to have the district serve their needs when they got old. Before financing could be arranged several good foster homes relieved the crisis for a while.

ENTER ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

About that time there arose the realization that without some available office for rental near the hospital it would be very difficult to attract more physicians. The hospital was probably the most vulnerable it had ever been and a supposition prevailed that it would soon close. None-the-less, Mr. Thompson and the board courageously, with a \$500 grant from IP and some gifts and taxes, proceeded to build the clinic. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation would not have settled a practice base upon a community without a place to house it. The medical future of Reedsport was predicated on this special event.

It was in 1977 Dr. L. J. Fagnan moved into the clinic known as Dunes Family Health Care. It was a practice model quite different from anything Reedsport had seen - a professional practice administrator, David Goldberg, a business manager, research projects etc.

It was a shock to some folks who thought it inappropriate, that the organization was being given a lot of money and that the “playing field” was not level. Reedsport has enjoyed perhaps the most amicable professional relations of any small hospital in Western Oregon, but that caused the most conflict of any in memory. The truth is that the practice was required to gain independence someday and the grant be repaid. It was, in the form of the Lower Umpqua Hospital Foundation. The foundation now has \$3 00,000+ potential from insurance annuities and \$70,000 cash value. Along the way it has funded a number of hospital assets.

In the late 'eighties the hospital made a break with the management by E. A. Brim and for a few years selected management by Bay Area Hospital. This seemed unsatisfactory and in 1991 the board and medical staff of LUH interviewed Sandra Reese, a stand-alone applicant. We all agreed that Ms. Reese had credibility and strength and was hired. The massive expansion of the physical plant, good community relations and growth of technology and outreach accomplished in these fifteen years assures us that the right decision was made by the selection committee.

The local support of the hospital has always been very strong! It has always required tax subsidy — once as much as 20 %. I recently asked Mr. John Chivers, hospital accountant about the tax support and he told me it has reduced to seven percent.