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FORT MYERS' LEE MEMORIAL HOSPITAL: THE EARLY YEARS

by Alberta C. Rawchuck

What did a courthouse, a hospital and a wrecking crew have in common in the annals of Fort Myers' history? That was, to be sure, an unlikely threesome, and their equally strange common denominator was lumber. Toss in a bit of determination (some would call it stubbornness) and a dash of intrigue, and you have a most interesting pot brewing. This article is about the early years of the Robert E. Lee Memorial Hospital, but first we must look into the pot to see how these strange ingredients came together to produce the desired result - a hospital.

Concerned citizens of Fort Myers had known for years that the town needed a hospital. The population had exploded. The census of 1910 counted 2,463 men, women and children, while Lee County overall totaled 6,294.¹ The "town" had become a city in 1911 by designation of the state legislature.² No longer were the few doctors, midwives, practical nurses, and people with a knowledge of herbal medicine adequate to serve the medical needs of the area. Moreover, distances were long, and transportation was difficult for the doctors in those days of "house calls." Lee County stretched from the settlements along the upper reaches of the Caloosahatchee River down to the villages dotting the beaches and islands as far south as Chokoloskee. Roads, if they existed at all, were no more than sandy trails making travel by horseback or horse and buggy uncertain. Travel by boat was at the whim of the wind in the sails. What might have been a simple emergency in Naples could be a catastrophe by the time a message reached the doctor in Fort Myers, and it could become a fatality if he were "out" on a call thirty miles upriver at LaBelle. Hence, the need for a hospital became more and more urgent.

On January 2, 1912, a group of concerned citizens from civic organizations, churches and businesses met to discuss the problem and seek a solution. These community leaders took the first step and appointed a working committee. In support of this group, the city council of Fort Myers gave \$300 for the hospital project.³ Since the need was great and civic leaders had endorsed the idea, one might suppose that the project proceeded full steam ahead to a rapid fulfillment. Sad to say, it was not so.

For many reasons, some obvious and some obscure, the 1912 proposal floundered. The city had other things on its mind. It had growing pains and was concerned with what it considered more urgent problems. Some citizens clung to the belief that a hospital was only a place to go to die, so they saw no need for one. Strange to say, even some of the doctors were lukewarm to the idea of a hospital, or too busy to offer their support. Whether the committee tried and failed or, in the time-honored way of committees, merely sat and spun its wheels, is not clear, but no more action on the hospital project was seen until October 26, 1914. Action on that memorable night produced astounding results, but before we proceed to that point we must look again into our pot. With the addition of a dash of intrigue, we find the brew coming to a full boil.

While the young city of Fort Myers faced the need for a hospital, the County of Lee grappled with the idea of a new courthouse. Fort Myers was the county seat of the young and growing Lee County, only recently separated from Monroe County. A lean budget had forced the new county to build a modest frame courthouse rather than the grandiose building which some of the civic leaders wanted. For almost twenty years the county conducted its business in the little wood building while the area continued to grow and develop. The dreamers, led by William Towles, a cattleman who was a colorful character in Fort Myers' history, continued to hold onto their vision, waiting until the time was ripe to try again. When the prosperous pre-World War I years arrived, they judged the time had come for them to make their move. And move they did. They put their plans before the county commissioners who hired an architect, and on July 5, 1914, a contract for \$74,900 was awarded to F.P. Heifner, an Atlanta contractor, for the construction of their long-awaited stately courthouse.⁴

However, this did not end the struggle over the proposed courthouse. Conservative businessmen, under the leadership of Harvie Heitman, held to the belief that there was no need for such an extravagant building since the existing one was in good condition. Never mind that the robust young county had outgrown this twenty-year-old building and that the county officials were woefully cramped for space. This conservative faction felt very strongly that the proposed step should not be taken. Therefore, in true pioneer spirit, they went into action and got an injunction from the district court in Arcadia which brought work to a screeching halt.

The halt of construction sparked another round of maneuvering and the scenario was played out again with the same results – a contract awarded, an injunction obtained, and work stopped.

Perseverance was another pioneer trait. For a third time the dreamers put their plans for a courthouse before the commissioners. Another contract was let on October 23, 1914, but with one major change – the price had gone up \$25,000 in the three months since the battle had begun. It now stood at \$100,000. Three days later the promoters heard, by whatever grapevine existed in that day, that the opposition would be on the afternoon train for Arcadia to get yet another injunction. This one would be based on the simple fact that there was no need for a new building (the first two court orders having been pegged to technicalities).

The county commissioners had had enough. They held a meeting with the contractor behind closed doors and made their plans. The instructions to the contractor were simple and to the point: tear down the old courthouse. If after that night of October 26, 1914, there were no county courthouse, then certainly there could be no question about the need for a new one.

When the Atlantic Coast Line train with its passenger cars and freight cars puffed out of the station on Monroe Street at 4:30 P.M., “the opposition” was aboard. The train rolled past the little frame courthouse, rounded the curve at Anderson Avenue, and was on its way to Arcadia and points north. The delegation settled back to enjoy the ride. They had been through this routine twice before, so they felt no concern about the outcome. The injunction would be granted. Perhaps this time “the spendthrifts” would see the futility of their efforts, and this would be the end of the tug-of-war.

The train blew its whistle to signal the drawbridge as it crossed the Caloosahatchee River. As the last sound died away, the contractor for the new courthouse and his workers appeared almost as if by magic on the grounds of the old building. They began systematically and carefully to tear it down. Not surprisingly, a crowd of onlookers gathered, and soon those in sympathy with the "courthouse gang" pitched in to help. When it became too dark to see, they built bonfires fueled by scrap lumber which could not be salvaged. The work continued into the night and on into the next morning with only occasional times out for the men to rest. Before noon, the job was finished; Lee County did indeed need a new courthouse.⁵

When the delegation returned from Arcadia in the afternoon, they saw not the familiar old courthouse, but piles of neatly stacked lumber and smoldering bonfires on the otherwise empty lot. The dreamers had won. Construction got underway, and the next year, 1915, the magnificent courthouse became a reality.⁶

Now, as promised, we come to the hospital. The wrecking crew that tore down the old courthouse had carefully stacked up piles of good used lumber which was soon transformed into a hospital. The county had all this used lumber cluttering up its courthouse construction site, and the city had a somewhat dormant but still intact hospital committee to which it had given \$300 two years previously. There seemed to be an obvious way to resolve the county's problem and at the same time help the city's committee. The county, in a move beneficial to both parties, gave the lumber to the hospital committee.⁷

This donation put new life, enthusiasm, and hope into the drive for the hospital. An anonymous donor gave land for the building on the south side of town on the corner of what is now Grand Avenue and Victoria Street (the present day site of the Greyhound Bus Terminal). Other donations came from many sources, both businesses and individuals, but they came slowly.

Finally, after two more years (four years from the time the committee came into being) the hospital was completed.⁸ Its proud supporters held the dedication ceremonies on October 3, 1916, and the Lee County Hospital opened its doors for business. Through the efforts of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the name was changed to the Robert E. Lee Memorial Hospital. Every day usage shortened this to Lee Memorial Hospital, and eventually this became its official name.

In the beginning the hospital was small. A square, two-story building with screened porches along the front on both floors, it had four rooms for patients and an operating room, but it had no delivery room, so babies were delivered in the mothers' rooms. With no elevator, patients were carried by hand from the second-floor operating room downstairs to their rooms on the first floor.

Through the untiring efforts of the board of directors and with the help of the loyal and hard-working supporters, improvements came to the hospital. During the first two years, two wings were added, making a total of sixteen rooms which could accommodate twenty-two patients. A third-floor operating room was added. A portico improved the front entrance in looks and convenience.



Lee Memorial Hospital before the north wing.

Photograph courtesy of author.



Lee Memorial Hospital after the addition was completed in 1922.

Photograph courtesy of author.

The story of how the hospital came into being makes an interesting tale, but it does not give any idea of the working conditions in such a small, primitive hospital almost seventy years ago. However, the reminiscences of two nurses who worked there in the early years provide insights into what conditions were like in the hospital during the 1920s. Over forty years later LaVeta Allen, R.N., the superintendent of the Robert E. Lee Memorial Hospital in 1922, and Theo Ellis McAfee, R.N., the hospital's first operating room nurse, who also started her career in 1922, recalled those early years in interviews.

LaVeta Allen graduated from the Mercy Hospital School of Nursing in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1920.⁹ After working for a year in Fort Scott, she came to LaBelle, thirty-nine miles east of Fort Myers, to visit her parents who had been homesteading in the area for ten years. She first came to Fort Myers on a sightseeing tour. (At that time a daily bus ran between Fort Myers and LaBelle.) One of the sights she visited was the local hospital, where Irene Gayles, the hospital superintendent, gladly showed her around, since visiting nurses were few and far between.

While on vacation, LaVeta also had time to do some private duty nursing which led to a job at Lee Memorial Hospital. She was on a case in a home "out in the woods" in the LaBelle area when the doctor decided that the patient should be put in the hospital. LaVeta brought her patient to Lee Memorial and while on duty in the hospital, she was asked by Superintendent Gayles if she would be interested in the job of hospital superintendent. Mrs. Gayles had been there only a short time, but she did not like the position and wished to leave. LaVeta was interested and sent a letter of application to the hospital board. Some of the board members were reluctant to hire her because she was a Catholic. They were in a difficult position, however, because Mrs. Gayles was leaving, and they could not operate the hospital without a registered nurse. So they hired her. Or, as LaVeta expressed it, "The Board had a difficult time in reaching a decision, but finally they selected me since I was the only applicant."



Theo Ellis, operating room nurse.

Photograph courtesy of author.



Laveta Allen, hospital superintendent.

Photograph courtesy of author.

LaVeta neglected to inquire about the duties of the superintendent but if she had, she probably would have torn up her application and gone back to Kansas. Her duties? You name it and she did it, if not regularly, at least on an emergency basis. A run-down of various areas gives some idea of her responsibilities and the operation of the hospital.

The dietary department: The kitchen was staffed with two Negro cooks. LaVeta planned the meals. She ordered supplies from C.W. Bartleson's Wholesale Grocery Company, or she personally made purchases at one of the town's retail grocery stores when she could not wait for delivery day. The nurses, including LaVeta, served the patients' trays.

The housekeeping department: Two black women were responsible for the cleaning. However, when emergencies arose and it was necessary in the interest of sanitation, LaVeta or the other nurses would be found swinging a mop or wielding a scrub brush. Not long after LaVeta started work, she upgraded the housekeeping department by hiring Cleve Cavitt, a young black man, as a combination janitor and orderly.

The bookkeeping department: LaVeta and the board of directors were the bookkeeping department. The board paid the major expenses ("what might be called capital outlay") and the nurses' salaries. LaVeta had charge of the routine expenses. The board gave her money in three funds: groceries; medicines and supplies; and staff pay (domestic help). She kept a record of all expenditures, and at the end of each month, she gave the board a financial report.

The heating system: “Now there was something to make a modern hospital administrator turn pale!” The patients’ rooms on the south wing were heated with fireplaces; those on the north wing were heated with potbellied stoves. All of these (plus the kitchen stove) burned wood. Who carried wood to the rooms and kept the fire burning? The nurses. Who chopped the wood? Primarily, that was Cleve’s job except when he was too busy with his orderly duties, then the nurses pitched in. “We did what needed to be done,” was the way LaVeta summed up her work.

LaVeta’s starting salary for this jack-of-all-trades position was \$125 a month. The second year, she received a raise which put her salary up to a whopping \$135.

The medical staff of the hospital consisted of five Fort Myers doctors and two visiting surgeons. The doctors were: Dr. M. F. Johnson, Dr. Elliot Parnell, Dr. W. B. Winkler, Dr. A. P. Hunter, and Dr. Ernest A. Brecht. The surgeons were: Dr. David McSwain who commuted from Arcadia, and Dr. Guy A. Longbrake who had come to Florida for his health.

The nursing staff consisted of LaVeta and eight (sometimes fewer) attendants who, in today’s terminology, would be classified as practical nurses or nurses’ aides. LaVeta was the only registered nurse on the staff, which meant that she worked a twelve-hour shift and was on call the other twelve hours. The private duty nursing “register” consisted of two R.N.’s: Mrs. Gayles, the former superintendent, and Blanche Bryan.

Toward the end of her second year, an emergency situation arose which caused a serious conflict between LaVeta’s obligation to the nursing profession and her obligation to hospital policy. Dr. Johnson had a black obstetrical patient who was in convulsions and needed an immediate Caesarean operation. The operation would have to be done in the patient’s home because the hospital was not allowed to treat black patients – “not even to give emergency treatment if one were brought to the door.” LaVeta knew that the difficulties of performing a Caesarean in the home were insurmountable, especially with the patient already in critical condition. Remembering the reluctance on the part of the board in hiring her and a continuing wish on the part of some members to remove her, she said to Dr. Johnson, “Bring her to the hospital and we will do the operation here. If they are looking for a reason for firing me, I might as well give them a good one.” The operation was performed; she was fired.

LaVeta continued her nursing career in Fort Myers as a private duty nurse in homes and in the hospital until she retired in 1956 at the age of sixty-five due to poor health. She died in 1971.

Theo Ellis also came to Lee Memorial in 1922.¹⁰ On April 14, 1922, LaVeta Allen and A.C. Carlton, a member of the hospital board of directors, waited on the platform as the train backed slowly along the siding as it neared the station on Monroe Street. When the passengers stepped from the train, LaVeta approached a tall young woman and said, “I am LaVeta Allen.” The new arrival answered, “I am Theo Ellis.” And so the hospital superintendent met her new registered nurse who was to serve as the operating room nurse.

All three climbed aboard Carlton’s Model-T Ford. A porter cranked the engine (no self-starters on the old Tin Lizzies) and they were off – until the motor died two blocks from the station. Carlton could not turn the crank because of a recent hernia operation; LaVeta was too exhausted;

so that left Theo. After several futile spins of the crank, the observant LaVeta said to Carlton, "Perhaps if you turn the ignition on, Theo will be able to accomplish a little more." With one more turn of the crank, they were on their way. "And that," remembered Theo, "was my introduction to Fort Myers."

Theo was recently graduated from Gordon Keller Hospital in Tampa, and this was her first job. She was so eager to start working, she had forgotten to ask about her salary or fringe benefits. When she did ask, LaVeta told her that her beginning salary would be \$85 a month. "There was no withholding then, so I got the whole \$85." Fringe benefits included room and board and uniforms laundered.

Theo started work immediately. She had arrived in town at 12:30 P.M. Dr. Longbrake had surgery scheduled for 2 P.M. When LaVeta, weary from long hours and little sleep, asked Theo if she would assist with the operation, she responded, "I'll try." She later observed, "I guess it must have gone alright because the patient lived." That night she assisted with an emergency appendectomy. The new nurse felt that she had been quickly and thoroughly initiated. When asked if he thought they should keep Theo on the staff, Dr. Longbrake's reply was a heartfelt, "I certainly do. She is fine, just fine."

Theo had a room in the nurses' home which was a small building near the south wing of the hospital. It was close enough to be within calling distance when she was needed for emergency surgery. LaVeta had a room in the central section of the hospital in order to be available to give injections at night or for any of the other numerous situations that required the attention of an R.N.

One of Theo's unusual duties was window washing. The new third floor operating room had windows on all four sides. (By contrast, today's operating room suites have NO windows.) Once a week Theo washed those windows inside and out. Washing the inside was easy, but in order to wash the outside, she sat on the window sill and pulled the top sash down to her lap. And this was three stories up! Her only comment: "Those windows were always clear and clean."

Another duty more in line with operating room procedures was sterilization of instruments and supplies. Normally a routine task, this was anything but simple given the primitive equipment available. Indeed, it was a monumental, never-ending headache. Everything that could be boiled was boiled – instruments, rubber goods, syringes – on the stove in the kitchen, an intrusion which displeased the cooks who thought the kitchen was their private domain. If they needed the whole stove while Theo's pot was on, they simply moved it off the fire. When she came down to retrieve her instruments, she would have to start the process over again. After they had boiled the proper time, she loaded the pot onto the dumbwaiter, went upstairs (two flights and no elevator yet!) and pulled them up. "Somebody had to hold the rope while I unloaded it, or the dumbwaiter went crashing back down to the kitchen."

The supplies, such as sponges, dressings, linens which could not be boiled, had to be sterilized with steam. The steam chamber which Theo had to work with was just large enough to hold one pack, one pack being all the sponges, drapes, gowns, and towels needed for one operation. This steam chamber worked on the principle of a pressure canner: put the pack in, exhaust the air, let

the chamber fill with steam, let the temperature rise to 250 degrees, and maintain this temperature for one hour. Then the steam had to be exhausted and the pack left in the chamber to cool and dry. A maddening, time-consuming chore which allowed for no shortcuts. Besides the packs which were kept ready for scheduled surgery and emergencies, small bundles of sponges and miscellaneous items were needed and had to go through the same long process. Obviously, Theo had to operate the little steam chamber almost constantly to keep the supply of sterile goods ahead of the demand. (Later, when city gas became available, the hospital purchased an autoclave which was larger and more efficient, and sterilization became less than a twenty-four-hour-a-day job.)

As we noted in LaVeta's work schedule, in the early days of the hospital, duties were not spelled out as specifically as they are today. If a job needed to be done, someone did it. Theo was the operating room nurse, but when there was a lull in her department, she helped with routine chores in other parts of the hospital. Preparing medicines for the night attendants to dispense had to be done by a registered nurse. Theo took over that job except when she was busy with emergency surgery, thus relieving LaVeta's workload.

Another unusual aspect of Theo's operating room work was that much of the routine surgery was done at night. This schedule was for the convenience of Dr. David McSwain of Arcadia, the chief surgeon for a number of years. In order not to interfere with his Arcadia practice, he travelled to Fort Myers on the 11 P.M. train and performed his operations in the middle of the night. In the morning, he caught the 7 A.M. train and returned to Arcadia.

There was no delivery room in the hospital at that time, so the patient's room became the delivery room. Theo remembered that on September 4, 1923, during the height of a hurricane, a baby was delivered in the end room on the north wing. Theo cradled the baby in her arm, covered herself and the baby with a heavy rubber sheet, and made her way along the porch to reach the nursery which was in the central section of the building. The wind howled, and water swirled ankle deep on the porch floor. She had to steady herself with a hand on the wall to keep from falling down. She made it safely to the nursery and kept the baby dry, "but water was running in sheets off my uniform."

Theo recalled another unusual experience when a Seminole Indian woman came to the hospital for surgery. Her husband sat outside the operating room door with war paint on his face and body while the operation was performed. It seemed that his squaw had better live or else. "Luckily she lived, so we didn't have to find out what the 'or else' was."

Theo continued her work as operating room nurse supervisor as the hospital expanded. Gradually the medical facility lost its pioneer flavor. When the new Lee Memorial Hospital was built on Cleveland Avenue in 1943, she worked in the updated and modernized operating rooms and later in the obstetrical wing until her retirement in 1967. Her nursing career spanned forty-seven years, all of them spent working in the Lee Memorial Hospitals. Shortly after her retirement, Theo married Kenneth McAfee and moved to north Florida. At the time of this writing, she is widowed and living with her family in Jacksonville.

Fort Myers and Lee County were proud of the original Lee Memorial Hospital. Though primitive by today's standards, it was modern in its day. It served the medical needs of the area for twenty-seven years until population growth demanded new and larger facilities.¹¹

¹ Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Printing Co., 1949), p. 257.

² Marian B. Godown and Alberta C. Rawchuck, *Yesterday's Fort Myers* (Miami: E. A. Seemann Publishing Co., 1975), p. 65.

³ Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers*, p. 201.

⁴ Florence Fritz, *Unknown Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1963), p. 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers*, p. 210.

⁷ *Fort Myers News Press, 1850-1950 Centennial Special Edition*, February 1, 1950, p. 8, Section 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Interview with LaVeta Allen, R.N., circa 1965.

¹⁰ Interview with Theo Ellis McAfee, R.N., circa 1965.

¹¹ Betty Wight, R.N., "History of Lee Memorial Hospital," in *Lee Memorial Hospital Life*, April 1975, p. 4.