The Saga of the 'Sisters Nine': Birth of St. Joseph's Hospital

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The original St. Joseph’s Hospital, on Seventh Avenue at Morgan Street, was opened October 1, 1934 by the Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, of Allegany, New York. This year was probably the least favorable, or more accurately, the worst year in the economic history of Tampa to open a hospital. Tampa, like all of the country, was struggling in the grinding depths of the Great Depression. Men stood in lines for days to get work at a dollar a day in the WPA, CCC and other
government programs. Health insurance was virtually unknown, and even money itself was a stranger in most households. In addition, Tampa was preponderantly a non-Catholic town. The vast majority of Catholics were of Latin origin and maintained their own early HMO's in private hospitals and clinics.

In his first inaugural address on March 4, 1933, President Roosevelt proclaimed, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Evidently the Sisters of St. Francis did not share that fear. They saw a need for another hospital in Tampa, and they set out to satisfy that need in difficult days.

This article by the late Dr. James M. Ingram originally appeared in the Hillsborough County Medical Association Bulletin in 1984, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of St. Joseph's Hospital.

In the Fall of 1933, the Sisters acquired the partially finished, three-story, Tampa Heights Hospital from Dr. W.H. Dyer, who for a brief period had operated a clinic on the first and second floors. Assisting them in making plans and decisions was an advisory board of Tampa physicians, Drs. John R. Boling, J. C. Dickenson, J. M. Grantham, L. B. Mitchell, Joseph W. Taylor, and J. C. Vinson.

THE "SISTERS NINE"

The "Sisters Nine," under the leadership of Mother Mary Alice Gallagher and then later under Mother Mary Assunta Leonard, spent a year of feverish activity completing the third story, adding a fourth story, and converting the building into a functioning hospital. The Sisters themselves participated in the actual physical work of these modifications. The lobby, reception area, and Pediatrics were on the first floor. The second and third floors held private and semi-private rooms. The fourth floor contained two large operating rooms, an obstetrical unit, laboratories, pharmacy and "the finest x-ray department in the state of Florida" at that time. There were accommodations for forty patients. The house adjacent to the hospital on the east was converted into a convent, and a small chapel was erected at the rear of the house. By the end of the year of building and preparation, there were forty employees.

A reception and a tour of the hospital on opening day, October 1, 1934, was well attended by the public. Four patients were admitted during the next few hours. One of the four was Mrs. Louise E. Thomas, who was admitted in labor shortly after 2 A.M.
At 5:25 A.M. she was delivered by Dr. Grantham of a daughter, Susan, who was the fifth patient admitted to the hospital. Susan is now Mrs. Robert C. Leslie of Kennersville, North Carolina.

Members of the Hillsborough County Medical Association were invited to apply for hospital privileges. Forty-four of the best qualified physicians and surgeons were accepted as members of the staff. In September 1935, the Children’s Hospital on Rome Avenue closed its doors and transferred its patients to St. Joseph’s.

WORLD WAR II CRUSH

The perceived need for the hospital proved to be quite accurate. It was soon filled to capacity. In 1938, Mother Mary Emmanuel Durkee became the first Administrator to bear that title, and she would guide the hospital for the nine years until 1947. Her chief problems were those of finding space and providing service. By 1939, it was obvious that the nation was preparing to enter World War II. MacDill and Drew Fields, other military installations, and the Tampa shipyards were being built. The population of Tampa mushroomed. With entry of the country into the war after Pearl
Harbor in 1941, there was a marked shortage of hospital space and of doctors and nurses, as medical professionals entered military service. To make room for the increase in patients, St. Joseph's Hospital converted single rooms into double rooms, and made three- and four-bed wards out of semi-private rooms. Portions of the hallways were screened off to provide additional beds. Every effort was made to take care of all who needed the hospital's services. It was impossible to expand the hospital building, for materials and labor were simply not available.

After the war, the Sisters began planning the much needed expansion of St. Joseph's. Mother Loretto Mary Ballou, who had served as business manager and assistant to the Administrator since 1940, became the second Administrator in 1947. She took over the task of the expansion, which had to progress piecemeal, as ways and means of obtaining the necessary funds could be devised. With modest support from the Hill-Burton Act, plus a large bond issue, a new wing of seventy-five beds was opened in 1951. The chapel was moved and the old convent was enlarged to provide more adequate quarters for the Sisters.

The expansion of 1951 relieved a critical problem. Few today recall that by 1949 the hospital had become so crowded that the labor and delivery suite had to be moved across Seventh Avenue to the Henderson House, which the Sisters had acquired. In this old and stately two-story wooden home, there were two delivery rooms and an assortment of labor rooms, all in the original floor plan of the building. After delivery and observation, the mothers and newborn were carried back across the street on stretchers in all kinds of weather. Such was the interesting situation that the writer found when he returned in 1950 to make plans for opening practice. This less than ideal arrangement terminated with the return of the obstetrical unit to the fourth floor of the main building in 1951.

GIFT FROM MIYARES

In 1953, the East Wing with fifty beds was added, and in 1955, another fifty-bed extension was opened. The Hospital had acquired all but two small lots of the entire block on which the main building stood, as well as a large part of the block facing the hospital on Seventh Avenue, and a quarter of the block on Morgan Street to the west of the hospital.

In November 1959, St. Joseph's celebrated its Silver Jubilee of twenty-five years of service to the community. One of Tampa's most beloved and most respected physicians, Dr. Robert G. Nelson, accepted the joint duties of General Chairman of the Anniversary Committee and master of ceremonies at the Anniversary Banquet at Tampa Yacht and Country Club. It was a happy evening, with Father John Flanagan, S.J., the Executive Director of the Catholic Hospital Association as the guest speaker. As Father Flanagan pointed out, St. Joseph's could look back with pride on its accomplishments and growth. But it was also a sentimental and bittersweet occasion,
as it marked the end of the era of the original hospital site.

With 225 beds, the hospital was still overcrowded. The one and one-half square block site could not accommodate the needed expansion. In addition, Tampa was growing rapidly to the north and west. The location on Seventh Avenue was getting farther away from the center of population. Sister Loretto Mary, the Sisters, and their advisors had decided to build a new St. Joseph's Hospital on a larger parcel of land farther to the north and west. A most generous gift of land along the Hillsborough River north of Columbus Drive had been donated for the new hospital by Mr. Joseph F. Miyares, a devout Catholic who will be mentioned later. However, the land was not considered ideal because of its size and location. The Sisters went about their search for a new location in their usual practical manner.

**COW PASTURE IS 'SPOT'**

It has long been the personal bias of this writer that one of the greatest wastes in spending for health care has been the employment of multiple feasibility studies, endless outside consultations, and other such planning activities. Sister Loretto Mary, with her brilliant and incisive mind, did not fall into that trap.

After due consideration, one day in 1959, she and Sister Ann Theresa Collins, Director of Laboratories, took one of the hospital automobiles and spent the entire day roaming in widening circles the area that was then the northwest edge of town. The Buffalo Avenue bridge did not exist, so they crossed other bridges to the area between the river and North Dale Mabry. This was an open area of cow pastures occupied sparsely by an occasional owner. They bumped along for awhile on shell-top roads until they reached the corner of Habana and what would be the completion of Buffalo Avenue. Here they parked and looked over a large 70-acre cow pasture. Sister Theresa said, "This is the spot for the new St. Joseph's Hospital." Sister Loretto Mary agreed and returned to St. Joseph's, called Dr. Joseph Cabanzo and asked him to contact the Faedo family, who were his patients and who owned the property, to arrange a purchase.

Sister Loretto Mary said that "I kept waiting for Mayor Nick Nuccio to sign the contract to put the bridge over the river. I was watching the paper, and when that was accomplished, I knew that we were on the right path; for we had to know that good traffic north, south, east and west was available." The City Planning Authority announced shortly thereafter that by 1972 the corner of Buffalo Avenue and Habana would mark the center of Buffalo Avenue and Habana would mark the center of the population of Hillsborough County. This certainly must be the most effective and the least expensive feasibility study in the history of Tampa.

**DEVELOPER SPURNED**

Although the matriarch of the Faedo family was elderly and spoke virtually no English, agreement was reached readily upon the purchase of the 70 acres of pasture. Mrs. Faedo was a remarkable woman of very modest background. Shortly after verbal agreement on the purchase was reached, she received a much better offer from a development firm. She firmly declined this offer because she wanted the Sisters to own the property as the site of the hospital.
As time was of the essence, the date of June 18, 1963 was set for the formal groundbreaking of the facility. Visiting dignitaries were invited. However, as the great day approached, the legal paper-work of the purchase was not completed. There could be no groundbreaking, as hospital attorneys advised that there could not be photographs of people digging into the ground before the hospital legally owned it. Sister Loretto Mary’s brother, Walter Ballou, S.J., who came down for the ceremony, suggested a symbolic procedure that filled the bill nicely. They brought two pails of soil from the block on Seventh Avenue and scattered this dirt over the ground. This was "symbolically transferring the love and brotherhood and service that were so important in the old hospital to the new facility." The ceremony was impressive, appropriate, and legal. A few days later the papers were signed, and construction of the hospital began.

Dedication of the new hospital was held on March 19, 1967. The hospital was officially opened with more than 400 beds, and patients were transferred from the old hospital on April second. Since that time, the facility on Seventh Avenue has been used for a domicile and for other purposes, and has been retained by the Sisters of St. Francis.

'PENTHOUSE’ FOR KIDS

The new hospital was hardly completed before expansion and addition began. Through public contribution and the generous support of Mr. Woods, the Fred J. Woods Radiation Therapy Center opened in 1969, as the most modern and complete facility of its kind on the West Coast. The demand for pediatric space was much greater than had been anticipated in the planning of the original 35-bed unit on the fourth floor. In 1970, an eighth floor "Penthouse" was added to the hospital to provide 88 beds for children of all ages. An additional 6-bed pediatric intensive care unit was established for critically ill children. The Oncology Unit moved from the seventh floor to the fourth floor area vacated by Pediatrics.

In 1970, after 23 years as administrator, Sister Loretto Mary Ballou returned to the Motherhouse and used her talents in expanding the Franciscan Sister’s Catskill Mountains Retirement Project.

She was succeeded as administrator by Sister Marie Celeste Sullivan, who had served so admirably as Assistant Administrator since 1965. The year 1970 also marked the opening of the Community Mental Health Center in the newly constructed North Wing. This 42-bed center housed complete inpatient and outpatient psychiatric services.

By the mid-1970s, it had become evident that additional space for ancillary services was needed. Supported by employees, auxiliary, medical staff, the Hospital Foundation and Development Council, a community fund drive raised $2 million for this $6 million expansion of the Radiology, Laboratory, Nuclear Medicine, Physical Therapy and Emergency departments, Administration and Outpatient Registration.

MORE IMPROVEMENTS

In 1977, the hospital opened a new Coronary Care Unit with 8 beds, a special procedures room and a noninvasive laboratory. Surgicare also began that year, allowing surgical procedures to be done on an outpatient basis.
The Jack Pendola Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory opened in 1979. That same year the hospital initiated use of its hospital-wide computer information system, which provided quality and cost-effective patient care from admission to discharge.

The St. Joseph’s Community Cancer Center, which had been under consideration and in the planning stage for several years, opened with 60 beds in March, 1983. This facility expanded the oncology services from a 19-bed unit to much larger quarters with combined inpatient and outpatient care. More than $2 million of the building’s construction cost was raised through another successful community fund drive. As always, parking had become a problem, and a tri-level parking garage was completed in 1982. The addition of the Cancer Center gave the hospital a total capacity of 649 beds.

The most recent addition to the services provided by the hospital was the Cardiac Surgery Unit, which opened in October 1983. This unit provided facilities for open cardiac surgery as well as for the newly developed technique of angioplasty. The opening program for this unit included famous speakers such as Dr. Christiaan Barnard, who performed the world’s first human heart transplant, and Dr. Robert Jarvik, the inventor of the mechanical heart.

Foremost of these, of course, are the Sisters of St. Francis and the three successive Administrators who have led St. Joseph’s Hospital for a total of fifty-six years. Mother Mary Emmanuel Durkee (1938-1947) was the founding Administrator. Sister Loretto Mary Ballou (1947-1970) was her assistant for seven years, and held the post as Administrator for the longest period of any of the three. Sister Marie Celeste Sullivan (1970-Present) served under Sister Loretto Mary until she became the present superb Administrator. Probably the greatest factor in the success of the hospital has been the continuity of leadership of these three devoted, highly intelligent, perceptive, and compassionate Sisters.

In 1971, the Third Order of St. Francis recognized the complexity of administering the multiple institutions within the Order. The decision was made to add certain lay-members to the Sisters who comprised the Board of Trustees of each hospital, and this was implemented at St. Joseph’s. While the lay-trustees were intent in their work and were hopeful that they added to the decision making of the hospital, they have shared one common conclusion: they have learned much more than they have contributed by their association with the Sisters of St. Francis in their activities as Trustees.

**THE PEOPLE OF ST. JOSEPH’S**

While it would be both impossible and impractical to identify all of those who have contributed to the accomplishments of St. Joseph’s Hospital, the recognition of a few who have provided leadership, service, and humanistic qualities of various kinds seems appropriate.

**WRITER’S MEMORIES**

Although all of the Sisters who have served during the 33 years of professional life of the writer are remembered with deep admiration and affection, the memories of a certain few are indelible.

Sister Loretto Mary Ballou was a fascinating combination of qualities. She entered the Franciscan order with the intent of serving as a teacher. For her, hospitals were
frightening places, and she readily admitted, "I couldn't even visit anyone in a hospital."
Encouraged and guided by Dr. John Boling, she observed him performing surgery, and gradually overcame her fear, changing the entire course of her life. She was an avid football fan, with an encyclopedic knowledge of teams, scores, records and players. In the hospital, few, if any, details escaped her eye. While still at Seventh Avenue, she learned that the hospital had been billed $1,000 for some lawn work that nurserymen estimated should have cost $60. She sent the lawn men a check for $100 with a note that they "could collect the rest from the Sheriff." The incident was closed.

Sister Cor Immaculata Sharkey was the spirited, energetic Assistant Administrator who left St. Joseph's to become Administrator of St. Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg. Sister Ann Delores DiCamillo, the creative genius of the kitchen and food service for 21 years, ending in 1969, was the master raconteur with a hearty laugh, the able tennis player, and the psychotherapist to downcast doctors. Sister Rose Francis Dunn was the diminutive, bright blue-eyed supervisor of the business and admission offices, a professional "troubleshooter" of unfailing cheery disposition.

'PRESSING EMERGENCY'

And finally, there was Sister Michaeleen Brady, a registered nurse who could sense an emergency three floors away. This writer will never forget an experience with her during the small hours of the morning in 1955. While resting on a couch of the doctor's room awaiting a delivery, he was summoned in haste by the late Dr. Edward Smoak to examine a patient in labor with a possible prolapsed umbilical cord. Springing off the couch, he entered the labor room, found the cord to be prolapsed but still pulsating well, and pushing the baby's head upward to protect the cord. Even at that hour, Sister Michaeleen materialized out of thin air, and was informed that preparations were underway for immediate Caesarian section. It was at that moment that the two of us glanced downward, and noticed that the writer, in his haste to get off the couch, had opened the knot of the drawstring of his scrub trousers and that this garment was lying around his ankles on the floor. It was impossible for me to move, as pressure had to be maintained on the baby's head to insure survival. Sister Michaeleen, unflappable as ever, commented, "Now that you have the first emergency organized, I shall take care of the next most pressing emergency." With total composure and perfect feminine grace she adjusted my scrub trousers to the appropriate altitude and tied the drawstring in a secure knot. Both the patient and the baby recovered much faster from this episode than did the obstetrician. Such are but a few of the happy memories of the Sisters.

No history of St. Joseph's would be complete without the inclusion of the life, times, and many gifts, both material and spiritual, of Mr. Joseph F. Miyares, who is best known for his devotion to the Catholic church and to St. Joseph's Hospital, and for his role as Tampa's prime host. A Tampa native and life-long bachelor, Joe practiced law from 1918 until his death at the age of seventy in 1968. Despite the fact that he served at various times as municipal judge, special master of chancery and as a member of numerous draft and ration boards in World War II, the hospital was his home and the church was his life. He served as an acolyte at early morning mass as the hospital and again at noon mass at Sacred Heart Church for more than thirty years. His large
estate on the river, Villa del Rio, was open to youth and other groups and for an entertainment center, a practice he kept up for twenty years before deeding the home to St. Joseph’s Hospital. Joe took all of his meals for years at St. Joseph’s. When the "Penthouse" was added as the eighth floor, he became a permanent resident there for the remainder of his life. He was a kind, gentle, and generous man.

The same terms must be remembered for Mrs. Lucile T. Knauf, wife and then widow of urologist Dr. Arthur R. Knauf. She as a life-long voluntary servant and supporter of St. Joseph’s. Lucile was a very perceptive and skilled writer. Among her many activities were her frequent and significant articles as the first Editor and later contributor to *The Developer* and other hospital periodicals. She kept an accurate historical scrapbook which she described as "not intended as a work of art, nor yet as a souvenir, but rather what is hoped will in future years prove a worthy reference."

From this "worthy reference" many of the facts and figures of time, place, and person of this article were taken. The author is deeply grateful to her, and to the many others who have contributed so generously to their brief history.