

*SISTER GRACE here presents a revised version of a paper read at St. Cloud on May 14, 1952, before a meeting of the Stearns County Historical Society. She is on the history faculty of the College of St. Benedict at St. Joseph.*

# *The* BENEDICTINE SISTERS *and the* ST. CLOUD HOSPITAL

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THAT ST. CLOUD had no regular hospital until thirty or more years after it was founded is not surprising. Although the site of the future city attracted settlers as early as 1851, the place remained a frontier settlement until after the Civil War. Only in the late 1870s and early 1880s did it become a city. As long as the settlement remained a small village, where neighbor knew neighbor and the people were united by bonds of friendship and charity, the sick were cared for in their homes with the help of family and neighbors. There probably was no need for hospital care of the sick. Furthermore, there was a strong prejudice against hospitals as places of cold charity.

By 1880 a change came over the settlement—a change which brought about a need for a hospital. After the railroad reached St. Cloud, its population and that of the surrounding territory increased rapidly. St. Cloud itself grew to such an extent that the charitable neighborliness of early days became dimmed. The settlement changed not only in size but in character. The population was more transient. Unmarried men and women without established homes had no

one to care for them in times of illness or accident. If travelers bound for points farther west or soldiers en route to frontier military forts became ill or met with accidents, they were sometimes left in St. Cloud, ultimately to become problems for the local officials.

The change in the character of the population was only one reason why the need for a hospital became acute about 1880. A second, and probably a more positive one, was the fact that young doctors, trained in the best medical schools of the East, were beginning to find their way into the new community. Unlike their predecessors, they were not content to operate on kitchen tables in the homes of their patients. The medical world of the 1880s had become fully aware of the dangers of infection, and the best doctors were beginning to advocate the “ceremony” of antiseptics. This consisted of sloshing boiled water and disinfectants over patient and table before an operation—a thing which could not be done effectively in private homes.

One young physician, Dr. A. C. Lamothe Ramsay, lately graduated from Rush Medi-

cal College in Chicago, began practice in St. Cloud in 1882. He was anxious to put the latest methods into use and soon after his arrival he started agitating for a regular hospital. Whether it was he who interested the Sisters of St. Benedict in this project or whether the sisters themselves saw the need for a hospital is not known, but the records of the local Benedictine convent, now in the archives at St. Joseph, and of the city council for 1882 show that the nuns decided to go into hospital work provided the city would help finance such a project.

To this end in 1882 the sisters and Dr. Ramsay petitioned the city council for funds to help them erect a three-story hospital building. At a meeting on August 26 the council appointed a committee of three to look into the matter and to report on it. The minutes of the next council meeting, held on September 30, show that the committee asked for an extension of time, and it did the same at the two meetings that followed. Then the matter was mentioned no more.

The council records for August 25, 1883, however, reveal that the city rented the Mitchell Building at \$14.00 a month for use as a hospital where a pauper, sick with diphtheria, could be given care. The city also paid a man \$3.00 a day to nurse the patient. Further progress is revealed in the council records for June 30, 1884, which show that St. Cloud paid \$238.00 to a Mr. Kropp and a Mr. Delaney for building a "city hospital and outhouse," and \$140.00 to Dr. Warren L. Beebe for caring for the sick poor for one year. This so-called hospital, of course, was nothing more than a nursing home, and not what Dr. Ramsay was advocating. It was the type of institution that created in the public mind the idea that hospitals were largely for the homeless and the shiftless and the unfortunate.

In desperation, Dr. Ramsay decided to open a hospital of his own. A contemporary newspaper reports that he purchased a newly erected house from Joseph Pendel and opened it to the public as a hospital late in September, 1885.<sup>1</sup> He soon found that he

could not run the institution and at the same time care for his regular practice. He then persuaded the sisters to take over the hospital work so that he might be free to carry on his own practice. In December the sisters purchased a newly erected residence in which to house their hospital. They soon announced its opening for February 25, 1886, under the name of St. Benedict's Hospital. This cream-colored brick building is still standing next to St. Raphael's Rest Home on Ninth Avenue.

The new hospital could boast of a modern heating system, an operating room, two private rooms, wards, a kitchen, and a morgue. One newspaper gave the following account of its facilities: "Proud as a castle this edifice stands. The main part of the building is 34' x 36' and is three stories high. . . . If the

THE second St. Raphael's Hospital



exterior of the building is such a delight to the eye, our wonder is heightened when we view the interior. At the left of the main entrance is the reception room; the next adjoining room which is especially lighted by a bay window serves as an operating room. Back of this is a patient's room. To the right of the main entrance is a large room used as a ward for those not dangerously ill. A door from this room leads into a dining room, and next to this is the kitchen. . . . The entire building is heated by hot air. . . . The front of the building has a porch and the back of the building is a morgue. The patients will be under the care of four Sisters."<sup>2</sup>

This glowing report did not, however, attract patients. Perhaps the mention of a morgue in connection with the hospital

frightened some people. Perhaps the following frank account of the patients' ills, published with the intent of praising the hospital's work, turned others away. It reads: "St. Benedict Hospital has already received four patients. One is Mr. Joseph Schmidt, of Melrose, who recently underwent a severe surgical operation, in which six of his ribs were removed. Another is a gentleman from Perham, to be operated upon for cataract; another from Little Falls, from whom an eye is to be removed; and the fourth from Melrose, a medical case. . . . The medical and surgical staff, and the attendant Sisters, too, are not likely to want for occupation, it seems."<sup>3</sup> Despite such encouraging publicity, only two patients were received the first month and eight the second. The sisters feared their new project was to be a failure.

There is a story that the sisters, worried about the venture, decided to pray together for nine successive days, asking for divine help in deciding whether or not to close their hospital. On the fifth day the answer came! A cyclone swept over the city and neighboring towns on April 14, 1886, injuring hundreds and killing many. It made a path through the city, wrecking all in its wake save the hospital, which was left intact. It thus became the center of rescue work. For forty-eight hours the sisters toiled, until finally relief came from near-by towns and from the Twin Cities. As a result the nuns gained unstinted praise from the public. This catastrophe did much to break down local prejudice against hospitals in general and against nuns as nurses.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, the hospital did not lack patients.

Training schools for nurses were practically unknown in the early 1880s. Nurses learned by experience only. In fact, the med-

er, with nurses' tennis court, 1914



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<sup>1</sup> *Der Nordstern*, September 30, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Translated from *Der Nordstern*, February 10, 1886.

<sup>3</sup> *St. Cloud Times*, March 3, 1886.

<sup>4</sup> *St. Cloud Times*, April 21, 1886. In addition to the patients taken to the hospital, some fifty-four were carried to the school and convent of St. Mary's Church, where teaching sisters served as nurses.

ical profession did not think that formal training was as important as cheerfulness and willingness to obey orders. One physician complained: "What are we coming to, Lady nurses writing articles for medical journals! Training only makes lady nurses puffed up and quite useless as practical nurses." The same attitude is reflected in an item published by a medical journal in 1888. It reported that "Lady nurses write queries to medical journals and express doubts as to the proper treatment of cases." The writer expressed the opinion that "Trained nurses know just enough to make them dangerous when they attempt to practice in our absence."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, as might be expected, the early St. Cloud nurses were without formal training. It was up to Dr. Ramsay and the other doctors to train the nurses as they went about their work from day to day. To the superioress, Sister Anselma, was assigned the then dangerous and ticklish work of administering anesthetics.

The equipment used in the Benedictine sisters' first hospital was of the simplest. The surgical table was made of wood by a local carpenter under Dr. Ramsay's direction. It differed little from the kitchen tables in the patients' homes, but the doctor could be sure that the hospital table was clean and sterile. Although other items of equipment were just as primitive, it must not be inferred that members of the medical profession in St. Cloud were old-fashioned and unaware of the latest developments in the field of medicine. Such men as Dr. Ramsay, Dr. Beebe, Dr. Albert O. Gilman, Dr. George S. Brigham, and Dr. William T. Stone received their degrees from some of the country's best medical schools, and several went East from time to time for graduate courses. Some local doctors had such wide and substantial professional reputations that they became officers of the Minnesota State Medical Society. Dr. Beebe, for example, was its president in 1890-91.<sup>6</sup> Others were invited to read papers before meetings of Twin City and Rochester doctors.

One innovation introduced in this pioneer St. Cloud hospital anticipated such modern hospitalization plans as the Blue Cross. In 1888 the sisters initiated a system of selling at ten dollars each tickets which would entitle the purchaser to hospital treatment and care at any time for a year. According to the *St. Cloud Times* of May 30, 1888, "There are three hospitals now in operation under direction and care of the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict, one in St. Cloud, one at Duluth and the third at Bismarck, D.T. The Sisters have adopted a system of admission to these hospitals (in addition to the usual one by payment of stated weekly amounts), which is received with much favor. They have issued and are selling 'Hospital Admission' tickets at \$10 each. A purchaser is entitled, without further pay, to admission and treatment, subsistence and nursing at the three hospitals named, at any time during one year from the date of the ticket, in consequence of wounds, injury, or illness received or contracted, disabling him from manual labor. Insanity, contagious, infectious, vener[e]al diseases, or injury received before the date of the ticket, or arising from the use of intoxicating drink or fighting, are excluded from the benefits of the ticket."

BY THE END of the third year, in 1889, the number of patients using St. Benedict's Hospital had increased to such an extent that the sisters were faced with the need for larger quarters. As soon as this became known, local real-estate dealers immediately began offering sites for a new building. A suitable one was considered, but was rejected because the price was prohibitive. Then John Coates and Daniel H. Freeman offered the sisters as a gift five acres of land on the east side of the Mississippi near the state reformatory, where their firm owned a large tract.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the *Medical Press* in the *Northwestern Lancet*, 8:108 (April 15, 1888).

<sup>6</sup> For biographical sketches of these pioneer St. Cloud physicians, see William B. Mitchell, *History of Stearns County*, 1:381, 395-397 (Chicago, 1915).



Partly because they wished to see St. Cloud expand in the direction of their holdings, and partly because they also owned a local transfer and livery business, Coates and Freeman were eager to encourage the development of an area two and a half miles from the heart of the city. No public transportation system connected the site with St. Cloud proper, and there was not even a foot bridge across the Mississippi at this point. The sisters were assured that if they selected the site, a bridge and a road to connect it with the main community west of the river would soon be built. City officials and local businessmen alike encouraged the nuns to make the move, giving them every assurance that they would be wise to build their hospital in this new district. Unfortunately, however, transportation facilities did not materialize. After accepting the land, the sisters met with one disappointment after another, and from the first the location proved unsatisfactory.

Work on the new building, which was named St. Raphael's Hospital, was completed in May, 1890. Contemporary papers praised the up-to-date establishment, which had a large basement and was equipped

with dumb-waiters, bathrooms, and toilets. The new operating room was the pride and joy of the medical staff. The surgical table, designed by Dr. Ramsay and constructed of iron and steel, cost thirty-one dollars.

The room itself, however, was designed for the use of the wet antiseptic, or Listerian, method, which was first used in Minnesota in 1886. Because boiled water or a carbolic acid solution was poured over wounds, instruments, and practically everything in the room, it had a concrete floor with a drain in the center. Steam atomizers kept the air humid, and the nursing sisters were hard put to it to keep their coifs or wimples from wilting. Although the method made slow headway outside the Twin Cities and Rochester, in St. Cloud Doctors Brigham, Stone, and Gilman used it regularly. It was, however, soon to be outmoded by a new method of asepsis, achieved simply by sterilizing everything which was to come in contact with a wound. This method reached St. Cloud in 1893, when Dr. John B. Dunn arrived in the city. He had studied surgery both in Germany and in the eastern United States, and it was not long before he introduced in St. Cloud radical new medical methods learned

*A patient's room  
in the second  
St. Raphael's Hospital*



elsewhere. They made useless much of the surgical equipment of the new hospital.

Despite modern equipment and up-to-date doctors, the first St. Raphael's Hospital never had more than seven patients at a time, and it accommodated only ninety-four patients during its entire first year.<sup>7</sup> The lack of patronage can be accounted for largely by the inconvenient location of the institution. Visitors, patients, and staff who did not have conveyances of their own were forced to hire them or trudge two and a half miles on a muddy road. Doctors found it difficult to get through the snowbound roads in winter. After seven years of vainly waiting for the promised transportation facilities and more patients, the nurses and doctors decided that the hospital must be moved back into the city proper. It was hoped that the state would buy the hospital for use as a women's reformatory, but nothing came of this dream.

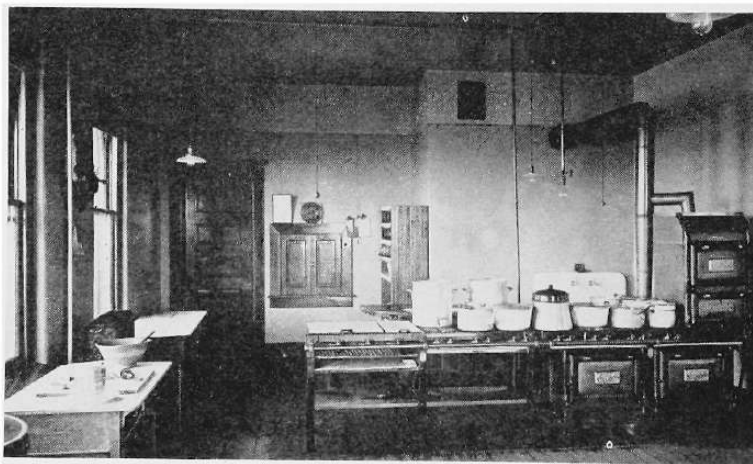
FOR THE third time the sisters took up the burden of financing a hospital building without help from the territory they served. Restricted finances caused them to use once more the old site of the first hospital on Ninth Avenue. There in 1900 they erected a plain brick structure large enough to accommodate fifty patients. This building had two operating rooms, one of which was equipped with the latest type of surgical table and all the newest gadgets. The old steam sterilizers

were replaced by a new copper Rochester sterilizer. As pictured on old photographs, this hospital shows little resemblance to the present building, now St. Raphael's Rest Home.

Originally the structure was two and a half stories high with a mansard roof. Certain changes, however, were made after the two upper floors were destroyed by fire in the fall of 1905. The fire started in the garret, where a small motor used to operate a food elevator must have become overheated. Splendid work was done in carrying the fifty-three patients to safety. Four had been operated on only the day previous, and a dozen or more typhoid cases were in the contagious ward. All recovered from the shock, and no lives were lost. The people of St. Cloud opened their homes to patients, and it was said that every available hack and carriage in the city was hurried to the scene. The work of rebuilding began at once, despite the fact that the insurance did not cover half the loss. A flat roof replaced the old dormer type roof, and fire escapes and iron porches were placed across the front, sides, and back with safety rather than beauty in mind.

Although schools for nurses had been established in Duluth as early as 1887 and in St. Paul in 1894, St. Cloud was slow in following their example. St. Raphael's school

<sup>7</sup> Records of St. Raphael's Hospital, 1890-91.



*THE diet kitchen  
in the second  
St. Raphael's Hospital*

*AN operating room  
of 1912 in  
St. Raphael's Hospital*



did not open until 1907, when a superintendent from Chicago was placed in charge.<sup>8</sup> About the same time the hospital improved its method of keeping case records. Earlier, patients' records were gathered by the head nurse, who copied them in a large notebook. The pages were ruled off into columns, with spaces for the patient's name, dates of entry and dismissal, the nature of the case, and comments on methods of treatment. Unfortunately the data gathered was vague, too brief, and at times unreliable. After the arrival of Dr. C. B. Lewis in 1905, he took the matter into his own hands, making the rounds each Sunday morning, interviewing patients and doctors, and recording data. He did this for some years until the modern system of case recording came into use.

Twenty-six years after the second St. Raphael's Hospital opened in 1900 with fifty beds, it had again become inadequate to serve St. Cloud and the surrounding territory, despite the fact that twenty beds had been added. To provide space for them, nurses, laborers, and laundry were moved out of the main structure and housed in a service building. The public had become hospital-minded, and people no longer used

hospitals only as a last resort. Automobiles and good roads enabled residents of near-by towns and rural areas to take their sick to St. Cloud for care. So a hospital which in 1900 was sufficient for the city, was in 1926 wholly inadequate for the broadened area. St. Raphael's no longer supplied emergency needs only. To meet the new and expanded needs, the sisters set about erecting their fourth local hospital building. With fear and anxiety they shouldered a prospective debt of two million dollars to finance the handsome structure occupied since 1928 and known simply as the St. Cloud Hospital.

In February, 1953, St. Cloud marked the completion of sixty-nine years of hospital work, during sixty-six of which the Benedictine sisters were leaders. Their record of accomplishment is well reflected in the hospital itself. Though the sisters began with a building that cost only \$2,880, their present hospital represents an initial investment of \$2,000,000, and it is currently appraised at almost twice that figure. During the same period, the accommodations increased from 20 to 276 beds, and the staff grew in numbers from 4 to 373. The St. Cloud Hospital has kept pace with the community in which it is located, as well as with medical progress in the state and the nation.

<sup>8</sup> Records of St. Raphael's Hospital, 1907.



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