In the beginning.....

In February 1891, Father Roman Scholter, pastor of St. Mary's Parish, Oshkosh, a man of imposing personality, resolute and earnest in all his endeavors, called upon Mother Frances, the Superior General of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, who was at the Community's new hospital at Marshfield. He explained that the city of Oshkosh, with a population of over 17,000 and the third largest city in the state of Wisconsin, should have a general hospital conducted by Sisters.

Mother Frances, listened, then explained that the three hospitals the Sisters had established in the previous two years were still struggling for their very existence and that the Community had neither enough Sisters nor the money to begin a fourth hospital.

But Father Scholter, a person of indomitable will, continued to plead his cause and assured Mother Frances that he would secure the four lots opposite St. Mary's School, on which stood an old two-story building, which formerly had been used as a store and saloon. The Sisters paid $6,074.71 for the land and building. For the beginning it was planned to convert the building into a temporary hospital. The building was scrubbed and remodeled and a hot-air furnace, a water system, and bathrooms were installed. The Sisters bought furniture and beds at a cost of $2,980, paid for with loans and collections. The building could accommodate about 15 patients and was named St. Mary's Hospital.

Not being used to hospitals, the sick people in Oshkosh were slow in coming for help. Since the patients did not come to the hospital, the Sisters, as was the case in the beginning of their other hospitals, nursed the sick in private homes. The Sisters were generally expected to do other work besides nursing, such as the cooking, housework and taking care of the children. In order to pay the debts accumulated when buying and remodeling the property, the Sisters were forced to beg for alms.

Because several doctors conducted small hospitals of their own in Oshkosh, they were slow to begin using St. Mary's Hospital, but gradually the doctors began admitting patients. By 1894, the small 15 bed makeshift hospital had become too small; and although there was no money, it was decided to build a new hospital. On September 4, 1894, ground was broken and eight days later the first stone was laid. The new building cost $24,355, which, at that time, was considered a large sum of money.

In the basement of the new hospital was the laundry, kitchen, pantry, dining room, boiler room and a large bathroom where the Kneipp water cure was given. On the first floor were the office, the large parlors and some patient rooms. The second floor had minor and major operating rooms, the drug room and Chapel. The third floor was devoted to both private rooms and wards, including the babies ward. The fourth floor was the Sisters dormitory. There was an elevator and a dumbwaiter running from the basement kitchen to the top story. At this time there were nine on the medical staff and ten Sisters who were nurses. Thirty-five patients could be housed in the new building.

By the beginning of 1902, St. Mary's had treated 2,300 patients and had the record breaking number of 51 in-patients. For the second time the building had become too small and the adjoining property was acquired in order to build a new Chapel and an addition to the hospital. The new addition cost $56,000 and was a structure twice as large as the existing hospital. The bed capacity was increased to 85 and the project was completed in 1905.

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The business of running the hospital continued smoothly until 1912, when Dr. M. E. Corbett, who had practiced for several years at St. Mary's built his own hospital, Lakeside Hospital, at a cost of $150,000 with beds for 45 patients. Because many of the doctors were stockholders in Lakeside Hospital, they directed their patients there instead of to St. Mary's Hospital. With the loss of patients, things were not going well for the Sisters.

In the summer of 1914, St. Mary's Hospital officially opened its three-year professional school of nursing with an enrollment of 12 Sisters. In 1917, these 12 Sisters received their diplomas and wrote their state board examinations. That summer of 1917, the school of nursing was transferred from St. Mary's Hospital, Oshkosh, to Marshfield, under the title of St. Joseph's School of Nursing.

In the meantime, things were not proceeding well at Lakeside Hospital – the institution was not successful financially. In 1917, Dr. Corbett and the other doctors began negotiations with the Sisters of the Sorowful Mother concerning their take over of Lakeside Hospital. After repeated urging, the Sisters assumed the administration of the hospital and changed the name to Mercy Hospital. Gradually, over the years, St. Mary's patients were transferred over to Mercy Hospital. The last patients, the obstetrical cases, were transferred in 1934.

As patients were transferred to Mercy Hospital, St. Mary's gradually became a home for the aged. St. Mary's Home for the Aged was remodeled in 1956 at a cost of over $1,000,000. The name was changed to Marian Home in 1961 and to Mercy Extended Care Center in 1968. The Mercy Extended Care Center was phased out in 1976 after new and expanded nursing homes in Oshkosh eliminated the serious need for nursing home beds in the area. A new 120 apartment complex for low-income elderly has been erected on the site by the Oshkosh Housing Authority. The complex is named Marian Manor, continuing the name identification of the site.

Returning to 1918 and Mercy Hospital, the Sisters bought the Lakeside Hospital for about half of the amount of the building cost. The new Mercy Hospital was closed for cleaning and modifications and all patients were transferred to St. Mary's. In June, Mercy Hospital was opened only for medical cases. All major surgical cases were taken to St. Mary's. For the first few years, the two hospitals supplemented each other.

Dr. Corbett had started his own school of nursing in 1906, and this was continued by the Sisters, who engaged a lay teacher for the first few years. The class of 1918 consisted of nine students. The student nurses were required to go back and forth between St. Mary's and Mercy Hospitals for their practical training in the different departments.

In June 1922, four years after the Sisters had taken over Mercy Hospital, work was begun on the much needed expansion of the institution. In December 1922, the Chapel was completed and by June 1923, the Sisters moved into the new convent. During 1923, the new north wing containing the powerhouse and laundry was under construction and this portion was completed in late 1924. With this addition, the services at Mercy were extended to include the surgical department and these patients were transferred from St. Mary's.

1931 saw the construction of the school of nursing building north of the hospital. The five story structure had 80 private rooms for the students, lecture and demonstration rooms, an auditorium, gymnasium and lobby area. Previously, the students had been housed in three different locations.

In 1938, preparations were made to add a four-story wing to the south side of Mercy Hospital. On May 18, 1939, the new addition was dedicated. The new wing increased the bed capacity to 225. Between 1918 and 1939, Mercy grew from a 45 bed hospital into a large, modern hospital.

In 1943, a sixth floor was added to the school of nursing building, which could now accommodate 120 nurses. New classrooms, a new library and conference room were added.

By 1951, it had become evident that within the near future Mercy Hospital would need to be expanded and extensively remodeled to eliminate the fire hazards of earlier constructions. The remodeling and expansion started in 1955 and took two years to complete. In the Spring of 1957, three new wings, which included modern operating rooms, patients rooms, administration facility and a rehabilitation center were completed. The number of patient beds was increased to 260. (continued next page)
The Cleveland Street wing cost $500,00 and included 24 new patient rooms and five new operating rooms on the fifth floor. The first floor contained a new cafeteria, the pharmacy, a doctors library, the morgue and central supply. Across the front of the hospital a new $750,000 five-story administration wing replaced the former two-story entrance. This new wing included the entrance, information desk, switchboard, offices, private and double rooms, X-ray and film rooms, therapy facilities, pathologist offices, bacteriology laboratory and waiting rooms. At this time the Rehabilitation Center was an entirely new department added to the hospital.

In addition to the School of Nursing, training schools in X-ray were added in 1945, Anesthesia in 1956, and Medical Technology in 1958. These schools were established primarily to supply Mercy with these needed technologists, because of the growing shortage in these fields.

On April 1, 1958, the Mercy Hospital Auxiliary, stemming from the Women's Auxiliary Board of the Mercy Hospital School of Nursing, was organized, and was the first Auxiliary formed solely for the purpose of serving Mercy Hospital. The Gray Ladies of Mercy Hospital were also serving and had been since the Gray Lady Service of the Red Cross was organized to serve at Mercy in 1943.

Because of the need for additional patient rooms, Mercy was again expanded, starting in 1965. Funds for the four-story addition above the Rehabilitation Center were raised partially by public subscription of funds. The expansion also included the one-story administration wing on the southeast corner. On April 5, 1968, the new name of Mercy Medical Center was announced and on October 6, 1968, the $6.5 million expansion and renovation program was completed and dedicated. Mercy was now a 400 bed hospital.

On October 28, 1968, the articles of incorporation and by-laws of Mercy Medical Center were amended to include community representatives on the board of directors, and a revised administrative structure. The new board of directors replaced the former advisory board and became responsible for making major policy decisions for the hospital and was given ultimate responsibility for effective management and the continuity of quality care. At this time the first lay administrator was appointed to head Mercy Medical Center.

August of 1969 once again brought the sights and sounds of construction to Mercy as the $100,000 remodeling of the outpatient, surgery area and radiology department began. Major remodeling was also done in 1977 to provide space for the new CT Scanner.

In September 1971, the board of directors established the Mercy Medical Center Foundation, which was incorporated on November 22, 1971. The purpose of the Foundation is to raise, manage and invest money and to assure the donor that his money is being spent for the purpose it was given. The Foundation has raised thousands of dollars over the years to provide medical equipment, health education programs, additions to the Medical Library, and to aid in the building programs at Mercy.

Phase I of a proposed three phase building program was started at Mercy in 1978. Phase I provides an expansive two-story structure which will serve as the foundation for future vertical construction. The addition provides expanded space for the Emergency Room, Outpatients, Laboratory, Medical Records, Radiology, Intensive Care, Business and Admitting Offices. The $14 million Phase I portion will be completed soon and the dedication will be in the Spring of 1980.

Phases II and III will provide additional patient rooms and the eventual demolition of the north wing and the older center portion of the present building.

Today, Mercy Medical Center is a 350 bed general hospital with four training schools and numerous affiliations with other educational institutions. Mercy has a Medical Staff of 94 with specialists in Allergy, Anesthesia, Cardiology, Emergency Service, Dermatology, Family Practice, General Practice, General Surgery, Internal Medicine, Neurology, Neurosurgery, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Ophthalmology, Oral Surgery, Orthopedic Surgery, Otolaryngology, Pathology, Pediatrics, Plastic Surgery, Psychiatry, Radiology and Urology. The Dental Staff numbers 20 in addition to the Oral Surgery Department. Approximately 900 employees provide health care to Mercy's patients.

As Mercy continues to grow and progress, services will continue to expand to meet the comprehensive health care needs of the people it serves.