Hail the Sisters

“Prayer and work must go hand in hand and like twin sisters, strive to remedy the spiritual and social misery of humankind, teaching it again what it means to pray and work.” - Sister Petra. Mercy Medical Center’s aspiration is to treat all patients with the best medical and spiritual care. On February 25, 1891 Father Roman Scholter asked Mother M. Frances, along with Sister M. Scholastica Demer, and Sister M. Alphonse Boell, who arrived from Marshfield to open St. Mary’s Hospital in Oshkosh (Mercy News). The Sisters paid $6,074.71 for the building and the property (Mercy News). St. Mary’s hospital would eventually evolve to be what Mercy Medical Center is today. Mercy Medical Center has been caring for the Oshkosh community for more than a century and has kept the community safe and healthy with their many services and units (Mercy Medical). Today, the Mercy Medical Center Hospital has 172 beds and around 300 medical staff (Mercy Medical). Mercy offers all general care, but specializes in cardiology, oncology, orthopedics, emergency, neurosurgery, intensive care, and obstetrics (Mercy Medical). However, it took time for Mercy to transform into an excellent and beneficial hospital that specializes in these areas. Oshkosh owes a great debt to sisters and physicians of the early 1890’s who started this incredible hospital.

Mercy Medical Center began in February of 1891 when Father Roman Scholter, pastor of St. Mary’s Parish in Oshkosh, called upon Mother Frances, the Superior General of the Sisters of
the Sorrowful Mother, to help him start a hospital for the Oshkosh community (“Sisters”).

Mother Frances explained to Father Scholter that the sisters were still struggling to run the three hospitals in Marshfield that they established within two years; nor did Oshkosh have enough sisters and money to run a hospital (Mercy News). With will and determination, Father Roman Scholter continued to plead his cause. Finally, Mother Frances agreed. Oshkosh’s first hospital was located on the corner of Merritt and Boyd Streets (“Buildings” 1). This original hospital was used until a permanent hospital could be built. At a point in time, it had served as a home, later remodeled into a store, and lastly, before the sisters took over, operated as a saloon (1). The first building could accommodate about 15 patients and was named St. Mary’s Hospital, most likely named after Father Roman Scholter’s St. Mary’s church (Mercy News). Even though all these beneficial changes were brought to the Oshkosh citizens, they were not used to having such care. At first, the citizens of Oshkosh were slow in coming for aid. Since the patients did not come to the hospital, the sisters nursed the sick in private homes. Unlike today, the sisters were not only expected to nurse the sick, but to do other work besides nursing; such as cooking, housework and taking care of the children (Mercy news). Doctors, as well, were slow to begin using St. Mary’s Hospital, gradually the doctors began admitting patients. By 1894, the 15 bed hospital became too small. It was decided to build a new hospital and on September 4, 1894, the ground was broken, and eight days later the first stone was laid (Mercy News). This new building cost $24,355 (Mercy News). At that time the cost was considered a huge amount of money. The new building could house 35 patients and now had nine medical staff and ten sisters who were nurses (Mercy News). The nuns took on a huge task and the Sisters of the Sorrowful had a difficult job
ahead of them, but with their strict schedule and hard work, they accomplished Oshkosh’s best medical program of the century.

The Sisters of the Sorrowful not only were remarkable workers, but also had a strict schedule to abide by. At 4:20 a.m. they woke up to a ‘wake up’ bell and had 35 minutes to dress and be ready before they would have to be in the chapel for morning prayer and Liturgy of the Hours (“Day” 1). At 6:00 to 6:30 a.m. the nuns then attended mass (1). Quickly, they would eat breakfast in 30 minutes and changed from their black veils to white veils for work (1). Finally, at 7:00 a.m. the sisters took their place at their units and began their work day (1). By 11:30 a.m. they would change back to their black veils and attend the chapel and pray the visitation to the Blessed Sacrament (1). After going to the chapel, the sisters would eat lunch from 12:00 until 1:00 p.m. (1). Immediately following lunch, the nuns returned back to the chapel to recite the Stabat Mater (1). At 1:15 p.m. they would return to work wearing white veils until 4:30 p.m. (1). Once 4:30 came around, the nuns would be back to the chapel in their black veils for Liturgy of the Hours (1). At 5:00 p.m. they would eat their evening meal and then retreat back to their work units until 7:00 p.m. (1). Once again, the sisters would recite the rosary and other prayers in the chapel at 7:00 to 7:30 p.m. (1). For about an hour they had time to do recreational activities such as crocheting, playing cards, talking, doing crafts and handiwork. For the last time of the day, they would say their evening prayers in the chapel from 8:30 until 8:45 p.m. (2). Once prayer would wrapped up the nuns would do one last check in the units of the hospital and lock up for the day. Usually by 9:00 p.m. the nuns would arrive back to their rooms for the evening (2). The sisters schedule was extremely strict and wasted no time throughout the
day. This schedule was typical, seven days a week the sisters followed this routine (2). There were no vacations and sisters could only visit their families every five years (2). Looking back on this schedule one of the sisters recalled, “Reminiscing, we DID do a lot of work. But it didn't seem like it at the time.” (2). With having to nurse the sick, they did an astonishing job of fitting their faith into their day. Throughout an average day they would be in the chapel about eight times a day for approximately three hours and fifteen minutes a day (2). With all of the patients the sisters were caring for, they needed to learn the proper medical care and precautions before heading into an intensive job.

The sisters of the first Mercy, or St. Mary’s Hospital, were not just any sisters. These nuns were highly trained and equip for what the hospital and nursing demanded. Most of the sisters that worked at St. Mary’s did not choose to become nurses. In the sisterhood, wherever help was needed is where they worked. With St. Mary’s Hospital just being established, there was a high demand for nurses, therefore, the sisters went to school to obtain their nursing certifications (Matucheski). By 1887, the Lakeside Training School for Nurses was founded by Doctor. M.E. Corbett (Nurses). It was not until the summer of 1914 that St. Mary’s Hospital officially opened their professional school of nursing program in the Lakeside Training School building (3). The Mercy Hospital Training School for Nurses was approximately a three year long course (Matucheski). The students lived at the Lakeside Training School building and followed a very strict routine and etiquette (“1908” 24). The day nursing students woke up at 6:10 a.m. (45). All at once, the students turned the bed covers down to have the edge drape over the foot of the bed. The students then had time to dress and say a morning prayer before
breakfast at 6:40 to 7:10 a.m. (45). No one would be allowed to come late to breakfast without special permission. Breakfast time was not a period of recreation, therefore every nurse was to be silent and keep the dining room as quiet as possible (45). Students were to be on duty in their respected areas promptly, no tardiness was tolerated (45). They were to appear neat in person and in clothing which meant their entire uniform must be worn at all times. Hair was also to be done neatly, pulled back in a hair net if necessary, and no boyish bobs or hairstyles were allowed (45). Students were to respond formally to superiors such as instructors, doctors, or higher standing nurses with “Yes, Doctor”, “Yes, Sister” or “thank you.” The students were to always treat the supervising sisters and nurses with respect. If seated, they would rise upon entrance of a sister, nurse, doctor, or anyone in authority (45). Not only was their routine and etiquette precise, but their classes and school work were even more particular.

A nursing student’s school work was crucial, as like any other profession, but the consequences for mistakes, in the then existing Mercy School for Nurses, were almost unforgivable. Students were not allowed to return home, even to nurse any sick family members or friends (49). They were not allowed to enter a class unless they had the following items: primary uniforms and belts, a complete set of pearl buttons, two preliminary caps, a pair of scissors, college notebook, and the correct textbooks (49). Lecture and class work was mandatory, no student would be excused for any reason except personal illness (49). Any class missed would have to be made up as soon as possible in the classroom (49). If the class could not be made up properly, it would cost the student the entire semester and they would have to forfeit (49). Exams would take place after a student completed the work required in each subject (49).
The standing of the student would be dependent on the results of the test, general character of her practical work, neatness in handwriting, and correct spelling (49). At the end of the three year program, the students had their final exam to pass (24). This exam was graded on their reliability, observations, cleanliness, and deportment and manners (24). Once they passed this exam, they officially would become a nurse.

Nursing in the late 1800’s was much different from nursing today because of obvious reasons, such as technology and space for patients. Although, the willingness and faith at Mercy Medical Center remains the same. With the amount Mercy Medical Center has grown, the goal is still focused on the spiritual healing. Faith and care together heal patients and Mercy is doing exactly that. Sister Petra is right when saying prayer and work must go hand in hand.
Works Cited


Matucheski, Michele. personal interview. 19 Nov. 2014.


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