Rusted Tin Box Tells Sacrifices Of Nursing Nuns

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A piece of Appleton history was recalled recently when the cornerstone of the now razed, old St. Elizabeth Hospital was opened. Like a period drama in flashback — or a slice-of-life play — the contents of the crumbling and rusted tin box set the scene for an Appleton of long ago, at the turn of the century.

Newspapers — five different issues — tell their story of what Appleton was like in 1900 when the hospital cornerstone was laid and sealed into place with fitting ceremony. A small rosary, worn and brown in color, together with a collection of still beautiful prayer cards are dramatic reminders of the handful of Franciscan nuns who worked so hard with courage and unwavering faith to bring hospital care to Appleton and its surrounding area. The fading paper with the careful penmanship of Father John Kaster of Sacred Heart Church tells the story of the hospital founding; the words, however, are all in Latin.

A tiny medal, corroded beyond recognition, and a miniature fabric or leather heart seemingly stuffed with a once pungent filling complete the contents of the cornerstone box.

Only one of the newspapers, the Appleton Post for June 16, 1900, is printed in English. The Daily Crescent for the day is missing. But the others reveal that the Yankee flavor of the original village of Appleton had changed considerably. These newspapers were in the German language.

They carry the masthead names of the Appleton Volksfreund, the Appleton Wecker and Das Montags-Blatt, in addition to the Catholic family weekly named Excelsior and published in Milwaukee.

The Wecker was one of Editor Chris Roemer’s German newspapers; the others were among the several Volksfreund publications with state-wide distribution. The Volksfreund building was located on the site of the present police station.
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St. Elizabeth Hospital
Started in 1899 by Nuns

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ic, "These are for the sisters, not for the patients."

Nuns Resourceful

Crude and inefficient equipment and just the plain lack of
made the sisters resourceful and expedient. Equipment for
operations was scarce and often had to be contrived with what
was at hand. Surgical furniture was sparse—A table for the
operation and a few tables to hold the instruments.

Overhead lights were so inadequate that sisters often stood
on stools holding a light for brighter illumination. Incuba
tors were created by focusing lights into bassinettes.

Operations in those days were performed in patients' homes instead of the hospital. L. J. Marshall, J. D. Steele, J. For each of these the nuns received $10. After 11 such operations they were able to buy an autoclave for sterilizing instruments. This was a giant step, a major time-saver well appreciated after years of sterili
ing in boiling water heated on a gas stove.

By 1920, the 50-bed hospital that seemed so commodious when it opened was overcrowd
ed. The jump had been made from 98 patients in 1900 and 144 in 1901 to 2,000 patients a year and all indications of a steady increase.

'Squeeze' Technique

The demand for beds became so acute that the hospital became a 70-bed unit by the "squeeze" technique. Rooms large enough to accommodate more beds became multiple. The overflow was placed in the corridors. The nuns themselves squeezed into various maintenance areas and even the morgue for eating and sleeping in order to make available more rooms for patients.

The situation became so ser
ds that 28 doctors signed an appeal to the people of Appleton to help build a larger hospital.

The Franciscan sisters also were laboring under a stagger
ing financial burden. The cost of the 1900 hospital was assumed by the Order, except for the citizen contribution of $8,734, and the debt kept growing with the years.

In spite of their financial distress, the Franciscan Sisters volunteered $200,000 for a new 200-bed hospital if citizens would raise $300,000.

Under the leadership of a committee headed by Chairman M. A. Wertheimer, Kaukauna, and Vice Chairman F. J. Sensenbrenner, a mammoth fund raising drive got under
way. Committee members included A. H. Krugmeier, chairman for Outagamie County; J. P. Frank, chairman of the City of Appleton drive; T. A. Gal

Also working closely with the committee were such civic and church leaders as the Very Rev. William Fitzmaurice, the Rev.
Joseph Muesig, O.F.M. Cap., the Rev. F. L. Ruessman, John Conway and Postmaster Gus
tave Keller.

$300,000 in 4 Days

The four day drive for funds was set for May 25 through May 29, 1920. More than 225 volunteer workers were on the job. When the last day ended, the citizen goal had been reached.

The cornerstone of the pre
cent main building was laid by Bishop Paul Rhode Oct. 9, 1921, and the dedication of the completed building was held July 3, 1923, with a public inspection on Independence Day. The new hospital was a reality. In a sense it was two hospitals for the old 1900 building became a much needed obstetrical department.

Once again the community is planning to go hand in hand with the Franciscan Sisters. This time it's not to build a bigger hospital but a better one—as well as a medical center for a "greater future, built on a great past."