Franciscan Sisters Establish Appleton's First Hospital

Appleton had its early beginnings in 1853 when it was incorporated as a village. By the late 19th century it was a prospering industrial center without a hospital. Dr. Hamilton A. Levings, mayor of Appleton, organized a group of community leaders in 1885 and with the support of Father Kaster, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, Levings contacted the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in St. Louis, Missouri. He invited them to come to Appleton to help create a much-needed hospital but the Sisters were not able to comply with the request.

In 1899, Bishop Sebastian G. Messmer of Green Bay, local doctors, and the community of Appleton again invited the Sisters. This time their request was granted. Sisters Carola Lachnicht and Philipp Breidenbach arrived on November 19, 1899, the Feast Day of Saint Elizabeth who had been canonized for her dedicated service to the sick in Europe. Sisters Armella Restle and Aegida Steinmetzer joined them in December.

The plan was to raise $25,000 to build a hospital the following spring on land provided by local leaders. Townspeople raised $5,218.63 and the Sisters added $1,253.90 from collection tours.

Humble Beginnings

In spite of the shortage of funds, the hospital got its start in an 11-room wood frame house on a 3½-acre lot at 110 East Fremont Street. The first patient was brought to the hospital by an Appleton doctor using a horse-drawn wagon. There were no beds or medical supplies, but doctors and neighbors responded with the basic necessities and the Sisters' dedication to caring for patients began.

The small and unpretentious hospital was an ambitious undertaking for the four Sisters. They reserved the attic for their quarters so the remaining rooms could be used for patients. In warm weather, the Sisters used a small wooden shed without any flooring as a summer kitchen. Two empty barrels and a wooden plank served as a table, but it was a welcome respite from the heat and confines of their attic world.
The Story of St. Elisabeth

St. Elisabeth Hospital was named for a young woman who was born in 1207, the daughter of the Hungarian King Andras II and his wife Gertrude. Elisabeth was given in marriage to Ludwig IV, son of the Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia in 1221. At a time when famine and disease affected the poorest segments of the population, the couple lived in Wartburg Castle which was built on a steep rock where the sick and weak were not able to climb. Elisabeth often carried baskets of food to the poor. She became the central figure in a legend known as the Miracle of the Roses. When critics accused her of wasting money, Elisabeth told her husband she carried flowers in her basket. When Ludwig looked inside, the bread had supposedly turned to roses and he became her strongest supporter. Elisabeth had a hospital built at the foot of the rock and often made beds and attended and fed the sick with her own hands. She fed over 500 people daily throughout the kingdom and provided for helpless children and orphans. When she ran out of money, she sold her jewelry and fine garments to help the poor.

When Ludwig died of the plague, contracted while away on a crusade, Elisabeth renounced all of her possessions and embraced a life of poverty as a Franciscan Tertiary. She dedicated her life to God, and built yet another hospital in which she served the sick, risking infection from leprosy and other diseases. The weight of her work eventually took its toll. St. Elisabeth died at the age of 24, on November 17, 1231. Her canonization was granted by Pope Gregory IX in 1235.

Centuries later, on November 19, 1899, the feast day of St. Elisabeth, four Franciscan Sisters from St. Louis came to Appleton to carve out a rich tradition of healing in honor of a young woman whose mission it was to minister with care and compassion to those in need. For years, the Sisters at St. Elisabeth Hospital kept a rose garden in memory of the legend of the roses.

Right: A portrait of St. Elisabeth from the hospital on metal painted by Wisconsin artist, Sheri Jo Frechel.
The regular kitchen, with a stove badly in need of repair, served as a morning prayer room, dining room, laundry room, and occasional surgical suite. Thomas Nooyen was the hospital’s first surgical patient. He was admitted by Sister Clothilda who prepared him for the operation and kept watch as he awakened from the anesthetic. The next day she went back to cleaning and scrubbing floors. Even though they suffered physical and financial hardships, the Sisters were determined to fulfill their commitment to Appleton and the surrounding area. Neighbors became aware of their poverty and helped provide for their daily needs. Produce and baskets of food were delivered for the Sisters and patients—food that was badly needed until they could raise livestock and fruits and vegetables of their own to fill the hospital pantry.

In time, the Sisters were able to supply most of the food for themselves and their patients. They tended chickens, rabbits, goats, sheep and cows to provide eggs, milk and meat. They kept an apple and plum orchard and grape arbor, and tilled a huge garden, canning four thousand quarts of vegetables, fruits and meat yearly. Along with providing direct care for patients, the Sisters also cooked and served meals for them and did the laundry and ironing. Their administrative duties included admitting patients, keeping treatment and financial records and assisting the doctors.

A Constant Struggle

Finances were an ongoing problem and the Sisters went from door to door in Appleton and surrounding communities asking for money to help support the hospital. Sister Clothilda Schaefer and Sister Antonia Klostermann took the train to Stockbridge to beg for assistance. Sister Clothilda met a young woman named Annie who offered to drive her by horse and wagon. Sister stopped at every house along the way and when one woman told her they had no money to donate, her son joked in German that she could have half of the pig he was butchering. Sister, who also spoke German, immediately accepted the offer before he could change his mind. In the next several days she added chickens, ducks, a goose, vegetables, and a total of $190 and Sister Clothilda even enlisted Annie’s father to help crate the goods for the train ride home.

The Sisters took their fiscal responsibilities seriously and earned the trust of the people they served by their hard work, dedication and stewardship of money. Fraternal and charitable organizations offered donations and although the Sisters often received financial advice, they assumed all hospital debts, never once defaulting, and were known for repaying their creditors early.
Founding the Franciscan Sisters

Anna Theresa Pfender was born December 6, 1827 in Hallenberg, Westphalia (now Germany). Theresa eventually became the founder of the Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, of Salzkotten, Germany, of which the Wheaton Franciscans are a Province.

Theresa was five years old when her mother died but followed her mother's dedication to the Catholic faith. Her father supported her wish for an education and accepted her decision to join a religious community. She joined the Sisters of Christian Charity in Paderborn and received her habit and the name, Sister Clara, on November 4, 1850. She completed her teacher training in 1856 and began searching for a stricter form of religious life. After being refused by several communities, Sister Clara and close friends, Regina Looser, and Aline Bonzel, formed their own community. In 1859, they received permission from Conrad Martin, Bishop of Paderborn, to start a community at Olpe. They settled in a house provided by the Bonzel family, and began their work of caring for orphans and the sick and offering prayers for the Church.

On October 30, 1860, Bishop Martin appointed Sister Clara Superior of the Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. In order to avoid competition with an already established hospital in Olpe, Mother Clara moved the mother house to Salzkotten in 1863.

In 1872, the Sisters established their United States Province near St. Louis, Missouri. Along with the growth of the religious community came an expansion in the Sisters' scope of service. Ever growing needs were met through the founding of hospitals, schools, orphanages and other human services. Headquarters for the U.S. Province were relocated to Wheaton, Illinois, in 1942, and the Sisters became known as Wheaton Franciscans. With the number of religious women diminishing, the historical role of lay partnerships throughout the years has resulted in purposeful growth, including the establishment of housing communities for the poor and elderly, schools, hospital and oasis for spiritual contemplation.

On July 29, 1999, a Founders Day Celebration was held at St. Elizabeth Hospital to honor the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters and the founding of St. Elizabeth Hospital.