Stories from the Mercy Hospital Archives

By Kathleen M. Washy

Mercy Hospital has many interesting stories, some of which have been passed down and recorded within the documents found in the Mercy Hospital Archives.

Both the Mercy Hospital Annals, begun in 1908 and Sister M. Cornelius Meerwald’s book, History of the Pittsburgh Mercy Hospital 1843-1959, provide wonderful, image-filled accounts of Mercy Hospital history, giving readers an interesting glimpse of what life was like in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

One story takes place in the 1870s. Soon after being assigned to work at the hospital, Sister Bernadette had the duty of making nightly rounds, checking to make sure everyone and everything was in its proper place.

“Just before midnight, [Sister Bernadette] made her last round. The lights were all turned low; everyone seemed to be sleeping quietly; as she came along the second floor towards the back stairs, her heart stood still. For there leaning against the banister of the stairs stood what appeared to her to be an intoxicated man, hat pulled down over his face. She said to herself: ‘Well, how did he get there?’ Realizing she had to act and yet not awaken the patients, she addressed the slouched form in a low voice: ‘Good evening to you.’ No answer. Thinking he had not heard her, she advanced a step and again repeated: ‘I say, Good evening to you.’ Still no answer. She decided she would have to show her authority so a third time she said: ‘Gentlemen always answer ladies; I said, Good evening to you.’ At that moment she heard heavy steps coming down the stairs, a man’s step. How had two of them gotten in?

But what was this? A doctor! And he took up his hat and coat from the banister and went out into the night without seeing her. Relieved, she ran upstairs [and dropped] into a chair ... from sheer relief.”

Perhaps one of the more delightful stories took place in the 1890s. The tale is as follows: One day, Sister Clemenza and a companion went out to get some fresh air, taking their meditation books with them. They decided to go up on the Bluff, which today is the Boulevard of the Allies.

“At that date the Bluff was very quiet thoroughfare. Between the sidewalk and the edge of the Bluff ran a long and wide strip of grassy ground. On the space beside the hospital, Sister Magdalen [the hospital’s Superintendent] had placed benches for the convalescent patients. Sister Clemenza and her companion did not wish to occupy any of these benches, so they wandered down to a spot just below Stevenson Street. There they found a covered seat. Here they sat down. It was a beautiful morning and the quiet was very pleasing to Sister Clemenza after the active night duty. Suddenly a tremor went through the seat as though some animal was trying to escape from under it; looking down they were dumfounded to find their feet going up in the air; they were swung around and began to descend; down they went until they landed on Second Avenue by the railroad tracks. They had taken a seat in the old incline that used to operate near the head of Stevenson Street. When the man came to collect their fares, he found two nuns without a penny to their names. They got a free ride back which ended the morning’s airing.”

The final story is one of the compassion and loyalty of the Sisters of Mercy. Throughout much of its history, Mercy Hospital was home to several “residents,” that is, individuals who had physical limitations but were desirous of a meaningful occupation. The very first “residenter” was Julia Kelly, who lived at Mercy for over 70 years, from 1849 until her death in 1923. She had very poor eyesight when she first came to Mercy. She began by working “faithfully in the hospital, giving service whenever needed, but chiefly in the laundry. As time passed on, her work grew more limited in its nature as her eyesight was failing gradually and she could do only such tasks as were familiar to her.” As her eyesight and health continued to diminish, Julia dedicated more of her time to prayer. In an entry in the Hospital Annals, one of the authors writes “[Julia’s] life of prayer and contemplation is now almost marvelous and is a great source of comfort to the members of this busy household ....” The Sisters were able to find the silver lining in Julia’s infirmities.

These stories are seamlessly woven into the hospital’s colorful and vibrant history, appearing alongside the many medical advances, the quality and compassionate care given to the patients, and the ongoing dedication of the Sisters of Mercy to their Catholic health ministry. By including tales such as these, the histories provide a broad picture of what life at the hospital was like at the time.

1. Meerwald, History of the Pittsburgh Mercy Hospital 1943-1959, pp. 144-45
3. Mercy Hospital Annals, Begun in 1908

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