

Hornell hospital celebrates century of caring

By Richard A. Kiley
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HORNELL — Although much has changed in the health-care industry during the last 100 years, one thing has remained constant in this Steuben County city: the tradition of excellence in caring at St. James Mercy Hospital.

On Saturday, May 5, hospital officials dedicated a new \$23 million construction project and hosted an open house. Even though the dedication ceremonies — which included a blessing by Bishop Matthew H. Clark — were forced inside, the rainy weather failed to dampen the spirits of the many people on hand who had watched the hospital carefully balance “money and mission” over the years.

“These are exciting times for us,” said Sister René McNiff, administrator of the hospital since 1966. “The new facility is so warm and pleasant ... we want to put people at ease when they come here.”

That philosophy has been consistent since the early roots of St. James Mercy Hospital, which was founded Feb. 13, 1890, by Father James M. Early, then pastor of St. Ann’s Church in Hornell.

Father Early arrived in what was then known as Hornellsville in 1879. Frequently called upon to administer the Last Rites to the sick, the pastor was acutely aware of the community’s need for a place to care for the ill and injured. As a result, he used his own money to purchase the “cure” building, a large farmhouse that is still partly used by the hospital today.

Unfortunately, Father Early did not live to see his dream become a reality. The day after he bought the farmhouse, he became very ill and died several days later.

The priest’s will clearly stated the following conditions for the operation of the hospital he founded: “All persons in need of medical treatment or nursing shall be admitted without distinction of nationality, creed, or color ... That the Sisters of Mercy shall have the perpetual charge of same, and at least two of their number shall be members of the Board of Trustees thereof ... That ministers of different denominations in the city shall have the free visitation privileges to the sick ... This institution derives its income from donations, pay patients, and the city of Hornell and Steuben County for the care of its poor.”

After the priest’s death, work began immediately to transform the farmhouse into a suitable hospital. According to hospital records, the first patient, Mrs. A. Ahearn of Hornellsville, was admitted to St. James on April 23, 1890.

Not surprisingly, the hospital had humble beginnings. The facility had 15 beds contained in two wards as well as several private rooms, an admitting parlor, an emergency room and an operating room, which was lighted by a four-jet gas chandelier.

According to hospital records, the majority of early cases treated were the



St. James Mercy Hospital, shown here in the early 1900s, began to experience tremendous growth soon after the turn of the century:

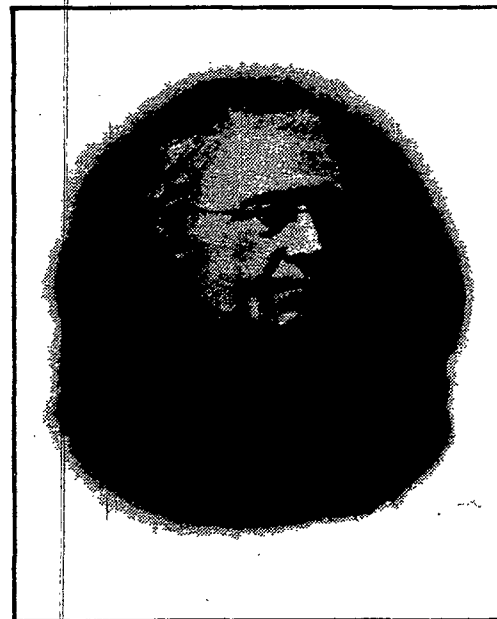
result of railroad injuries, alcoholism and typhoid fever.

Shortly after the hospital’s founding, the board of trustees and the medical staff were organized. Charles Adit served as the first board president, while Dr. J.G. Kelly was the first president of the medical staff. Sister Mary Catherine was the hospital’s first superintendent.

The hospital cared for 69 patients during its first year. The hospital’s 1890 financial statement showed a balance of \$96.13 at the end of the year.

The board of trustees built a new operating room, kitchen, laundry and three wards during 1898. The first birth was recorded that same year.

Many Sisters of Mercy have played important roles in the hospital’s history, but several stand out from the rest. Sister



Father James M. Early founded St. James Mercy Hospital.

Mary DeSales, who served the hospital for more than 60 years, arrived at St. James in 1900.

Shortly thereafter, Sister Mary Aquinas joined the sisters to begin her nursing career at St. James in 1905. Sister Mary Aquinas was associated with the hospital for more than 50 years, serving as administrator from 1934 until her retirement in 1956.

Sister Mary Colette has served at the hospital for 45 years. She was the director of radiology and now volunteers in the Pastoral Care Department.

The hospital began to experience tremendous growth soon after the turn of the century. Between the years of 1906 and 1908, 1,215 patients were admitted, 111 babies were delivered, and the hospital’s ambulance was dispatched 512 times.

In 1909, Sister Mary Aquinas was assigned to the maternity ward, which she headed for the next 29 years. During that time, 5,000 babies were born.

The hospital experienced several changes in the ensuing years, including the completion of the north wing in 1910 (increasing the bed capacity to 36 patients) and the establishment of the School of Nursing in 1912.

More additions followed with the south wing in 1923 — several years after an influenza epidemic struck Hornell residents, along with the rest of the nation — and the School of X-ray Technology in 1948.

In October, 1949, ground was broken for the east wing. The construction was completed in 1951.

Following the opening of the east wing, the south wing was remodeled to house enlarged maternity and pediatric departments, a pharmacy and a pathology laboratory.



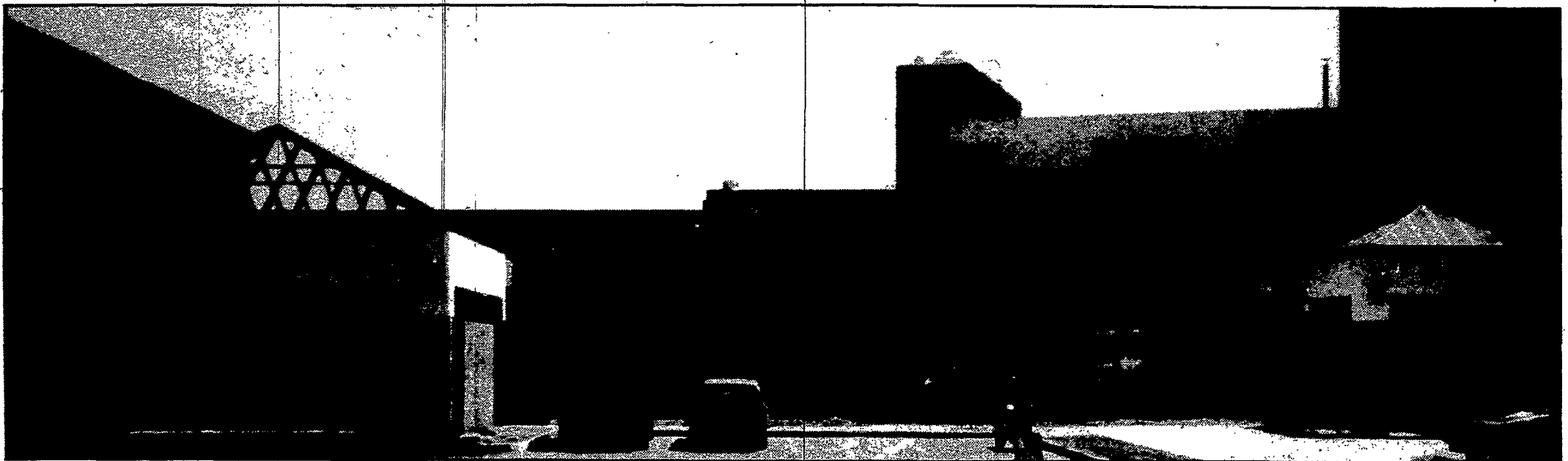
Mary C. A'Hearn graduated from the St. James Mercy School of Nursing in 1917.

Sister Mary Scholastica Caufield assumed the duties of hospital administrator in 1957 following the retirement of Sister Aquinas.

In 1961, the Intensive Care Unit was established to care for critically ill patients. The hospital celebrated its diamond anniversary in 1965, and in December officials broke ground for a west wing. The wing would offer such services as a new maternity department, enlarged emergency room and pharmacy, as well as physical therapy, central supply and purchasing departments.

Sister René McNiff began her duties as administrator in 1966, when Sister Caufield returned to school to become a nurse practitioner. That same year, St.

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St. James Mercy Hospital, as it looks today, includes the new \$23 million construction project dedicated by hospital officials on Saturday, May 5.