An History of Embudo Hospital

by Judith R. Johnson (Judith R. Johnson is a graduate student in history at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.)

Embudo Hospital began as a small clinic in 1915. Women of the Brooklyn-Nassau Presbyterial Society responded to the call for medical services in northern New Mexico and donated $2000 to help build a hospital. This effort marked the beginning of a long medical missionary service to residents in an isolated area that was far removed from physicians or other public health facilities.

Presbyterian missionaries had been active in New Mexico since 1849 when Reverend William J. Kephart established the first Protestant church in the territory. Other ministers organized missions in the small communities located near the Santa Fe Trail, and in 1887 Rev. S.W. Curtis began a missionary service in the village of Embudo. The residents of the community welcomed this endeavor and responded enthusiastically when the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions opened a school that same year.

At first, missionaries devoted their time to meeting the religious and educational needs of the villagers. However, it soon became apparent to the early workers that medical services were also needed. Missionary teachers had attempted to provide basic health care, but these workers had no special training and lacked proper equipment. The scarcity of doctors and the high incidence of disease prompted the Home Mission Board to recruit nurses and doctors.

One of the first medical missionaries, Miss Mary MacKensie, arrived at the small town of Dixon in northern New Mexico in November 1914. This nurse supervised the construction of the Brooklyn Cottage Hospital (named after the church where most of the funds for construction had been donated) which opened in 1915 as a two bed facility with a well-equipped dispensary. Residents of the community donated land near a dependable water supply and provided adobe bricks used in the construction of this facility. After the completion of this building the Mission Board sent a second nurse to assist Miss MacKensie.

The early medical missionaries found that many people in the area suffered from tuberculosis, malaria, and other parasitic diseases. Periodic epidemics of typhoid fever, small pox, and diphtheria added to the high death rate. Poverty, poor diets, and local superstitions in dealing with disease contributed to the large number of deaths. The nurses focused their efforts on the control of contagious disease, assisted at childbirths, and held public health classes to teach improved sanitation.

The original Brooklyn Cottage Hospital.
The largest staff of nurses at Embudo, 1954-56: (I to r) Norma Cansino, Myrtle Scott, Mary Mitchell, Charlotte Maisch, Mary Carpenter, Agnes Walker, Frances Sanchez, and Carol Lejper Martinez.

The first years were difficult ones for the medical workers. The hospital lacked electricity and running water, communication with other towns was limited and hostility to outsiders was evident within the communities. However, the dedicated missionaries continued their work and received a boost when New Mexico established a state department of health in 1919.

The new board recognized the efforts of the missionaries at Dixon and officially requested that they continue. The nurses met the requirements for registration by the state and were able to assist the health department by vaccinating all school children against small pox when this became a law. The missionaries also assisted by reporting contagious diseases and helping to establish quarantines. When an epidemic of diptheria occurred in 1923 the county health officials appointed the Presbyterian nurses deputy health officers who then administered the antitoxin that brought the epidemic under control.

Other changes occurred during the 1920s. The nurses treated patients at the Brooklyn Cottage Hospital, held weekly clinics in other towns with a volunteer physician from Espanola, and began a program of health education at the mission schools. Young girls from Dixon helped in the care of patients at the hospital and accompanied the nurses on home visits. Presbyterians from all over the United States continued their financial support of this mission. New rooms were added to the original structure so that by 1926, the hospital contained two large rooms for patients, a living and sleeping area for the nurses, dining room, kitchen, and a small utility room that also served as a laundry facility.

The efforts of the nurses helped improve the health of the residents in this area, but the need for a physician still existed. Most of the people lived at least 25 miles from a doctor. It was not unusual for a physician to charge $1.00 per mile to visit a patient, which placed this service but of the reach of most people in this area. The Home Mission Board recognized this need and responded by assigning Dr. Sarah Bowen to Brooklyn Cottage Hospital in 1932.

Dr. Bowen began her work by conducting a survey of medical needs in Dixon and the surrounding area. Dr. Bowen found that infant mortality was twice that of the state in general, that malnutrition was a constant problem, and that superstitions and home remedies remained the first choice of treatment against
disease for most inhabitants. With these factors in mind, the doctor and nurses launched an intensive campaign in health education with an emphasis on maternal and childcare.

More improvements were made at the hospital during the 1930s. The women of the Brooklyn-Nassau Presbytery Society again provided donations to add another room. Equipment from a Presbyterian hospital in North Carolina that had closed greatly increased the capacity for medical treatment at Dixon. In 1934 Dr. Bowen and the nurses reported to the Home Mission Board they had held weekly clinics in nine communities, 28 school health programs, two community public health classes, and had given annual physical examinations in four schools.

Demands for medical care had increased during the Great Depression. Although donations had fallen in number, the Home Mission Board was able to begin plans for the construction of a large hospital by 1938. A site on the highway in Embudo, approximately three miles north from Dixon, was purchased. Residents from nearby towns and villages donated their labor to help in the construction of this new building, which was completed and dedicated in 1940. At the same time, the Board authorized the expenditure of funds to bring electricity to the hospital and town of Dixon from Espanola. To help with the care of the expanded number of patients, the National Youth Administration, an agency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, placed ten young women in the hospital to train as nurses' aides.

World War II created shortages at Embudo Hospital as in all areas of the country, but the need for health care continued. Dr. Edith Millican, who had planned to serve in China when the war interfered, accepted a temporary assignment at Embudo. By 1944 Dr. Bowen estimated that the hospital and clinics were serving an area equal to the size of the state of Massachusetts with a population close to 36,000.
The 1950s saw a marked improvement in the public health and economy of the entire area. The hospital was able to increase its staff and facilities, while the male members of the surrounding territory found employment with the federal government at Los Alamos laboratories.

Admissions to Embudo Hospital increased until the mid 1960s, when the number of patients began to decline. The growth of nearby population centers, with the resultant rise in the number of doctors and health services, and increased county and state facilities, contributed to this decline.

At the same time, medical costs were rising. Throughout its existence, this hospital and the original Brooklyn Cottage Hospital had always received some form of payment by the patients, either in services, food contributions, or labor. But in the late 1960s it was impossible to cover expenses in this manner when donations on the national level were decreasing.

Because of these factors, surgical care was eliminated in 1971. Later in 1974 Presbyterian Medical Services, which had assumed control of Embudo Hospital in the 1960s, decided they could no longer maintain this facility. The hospital was turned over to the residents who had formed a non-profit corporation. The Embudo Valley Health Facility assumed administrative responsibilities and continues to provide primary medical care to the nearby towns.

With this transfer came the end of a long Presbyterian involvement in medical missions in northern New Mexico. The efforts of these dedicated workers contributed to the improved health of those in the communities in which they served. These missionaries took the initiative and provided services before the state of New Mexico had the facilities or bureaucratic machinery to meet the needs of isolated residents. In addition to providing spiritual and educational services, Presbyterian Missionaries were instrumental in reducing the death rate from infectious diseases, improving the public health and paving the way for a higher standard of living for those residents in northern New Mexico.