

Foundations of Care: Women Pioneers in Grant County Healthcare (1880s-1940s)

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An unnamed nurse cares for a soldier at Fort Bayard Military Hospital circa 1917. Fort Bayard's nurses in some ways represent the arrival of western medicine to Grant County. Although many photos of nurses at Fort Bayard exist, few, if any, are named (From the Silver City Museum Archive #01363).

At some point, the suffering became intolerable. The indigent miners' coughs echoed through Silver City's dusty streets, their lungs ravaged by rock dust and tuberculosis, their bodies broken by falls and explosions in the dark belly of the earth. It's in these moments that Martha Miller, leader of the Silver City Ladies Sewing Circle, must have listened to their labored breathing and watched their lips move ever so slightly just to get the prayers out.

In 1883, this small sewing circle of prominent Silver City women decided the suffering had gone on long enough. Their needles, which had been content to pierce fabric, would now pierce through the fabric of societal indifference.

The solution began modestly—a small cabin on the northeast part of town, owned by Martha Miller's husband John. The ladies secured its use for their fledgling hospital, and on March 18, 1884, the Grant County Charitable Hospital Society was born. Their stated mission, as local

businesswoman Elizabeth Warren would later articulate in 1937, was deceptively simple: "provide some sort of shelter, care, and treatment for the aged and sick prospectors and miners."

The Silver City Museum's Grant County Charity Hospital ledger (1887-1924) reveals the daily reality these women faced. Pages document everything from mining accidents to childbirth complications, often treated by nurses alone. The entries show nurses managing traumatic amputations, delivering babies, treating gunshot wounds—frequently with minimal supplies and no physician present. This wasn't caregiving as an extension of femininity; this was frontline medicine in one of America's most dangerous industries.

The cabin quickly proved inadequate. Providence intervened when county officials relocated to a newly built courthouse. The women negotiated for the abandoned building—rent-free. Over time, they commandeered all four rooms, the detached

jail, and surrounding grounds.

The true medical workforce in these makeshift wards were nurses—women whose 12-hour shifts involved everything from surgical assistance to administering last rites. The historical record renders these women nearly invisible. They are mentioned only in passing—"an excellent nursing staff" or "the matron." The systematic erasure of these women's names wasn't accidental. While male doctors' names appear prominently in newspapers and official documents, the women who provided 90% of direct patient care were reduced to "nursing staff" or identified only as "Mrs. [Husband's Name]."

Four years after the Ladies Hospital's founding, the Sisters of Mercy, an order of Catholic nuns, arrived in Silver City. By 1887, they had obtained a two-story house near the new courthouse to start their own hospital. The Sisters entered agreements with the local mines to "care for the sick and wounded of their camps."

These nurses weren't just caregivers; they were often the only medical professionals available. In a region where doctors visited weekly at best, nurses diagnosed, treated, and made life-or-death decisions independently. Grant County's 4,000 square miles meant nurses often traveled by horseback to reach patients, carrying medical supplies in saddlebags, and per-

forming emergency procedures in remote cabins with only lamplight.

During the 1898 smallpox epidemic, these unnamed nurses enforced quarantines that likely saved hundreds of lives, working despite constant risk of contracting the disease themselves. Local newspapers published notices about quarantine orders but never mentioned the nurses who enforced these measures, who tended to the infected or who prepared bodies for burial when treatments failed.

As the 19th century waned, Silver City transformed itself into a haven for health seekers. The town marketed itself with almost desperate optimism: "A Paradise for Consumptives," "Air Conditioned by Nature." Tuberculosis sufferers flocked here, believing the high elevation, arid climate, and abundant sunshine possessed healing powers modern medicine couldn't provide.

Cottage Sanatorium emerged as the crown jewel of this movement. Its creation story perfectly encapsulates how women's social networks translated into healthcare infrastructure. Mrs. W.P. Wilson—identified in newspaper reports only by her husband's name—undertook the task of fundraising. Armed with letters of introduction from former presidents Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, she presented her case to Andrew Carnegie himself. The steel magnate donated \$5,000 with the stipulation of matching funds.

The donor list tells its own story of women's centrality to healthcare. Of the nine major contributors to Carnegie's matching fund, six were women. When the original 15 cottages were built, 10 were credited to women.

Parallel to these institutional efforts, traditional healers continued their quiet work. The Hispanic and Apache communities maintained their own nursing traditions—curanderas and traditional healers who worked alongside, and sometimes in place of, institutional medicine. While the sanatoriums promised scientific cures, traditional healers offered something equally

vital, cultural continuity and spiritual comfort in a rapidly changing world.

The Fort Bayard Military Hospital adds another layer to this story of invisible labor. Photographs show nurses in crisp uniforms, identified only as "Mrs. McClusky, Mrs. Jorgenson, and Mrs. Hall"—a handful of names among hundreds who served over the years. During World War I, when the Army faced severe nursing shortages, the Red Cross stepped in. Local women volunteered in droves, their names recorded sporadically if at all.

By 1940, with the advent of antibiotics, the health seeker era drew to a close. The sanatoriums emptied, some buildings repurposed, others left to decay in the desert sun. But the foundation these women built would endure.

Today, as nurse practitioners and physician assistants essentially run Grant County's healthcare system—most of them women—they follow in the footsteps of predecessors who've always filled the gaps in rural medicine. The challenge remains unchanged: providing quality healthcare in the "middle of nowhere" with limited resources but unlimited dedication.

Their legacy lives on in every Grant County nurse who works a double shift, every traditional healer who offers comfort alongside conventional medicine, every woman who recognizes suffering and refuses to look away. From Martha Miller's sewing circle to today's modern healthcare system, the thread remains unbroken—women seeing need and responding with whatever tools they possess.

The Silver City Museum is actively collecting stories of nurses and healthcare workers from our community. If your mother, grandmother, or aunt served in any healthcare capacity, we need their stories. Contact us at curator@silvercitymuseum.org. Their names deserve to be more than "an excellent nursing staff," and perhaps in remembering them now, even incompletely, we begin to pay a debt long overdue. ■

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