Expanding the Scope: Women Transforming Rural Healthcare (1950s-1980s)

By: Brittany Beers, MA, Community Engagement Manager, Silver City Museum
Special Contributor: Dr. Kimberly Petrovic, PhD, RN

The fluorescent lights at Fort Bayard Hospital cast everything in harsh relief — metal bed frames, vinyl chairs, the concentrated faces of Priscilla Baldwin's nursing students practicing nasogastric tube insertion on mannequins. Soon they would perform this procedure on actual patients: miners with pneumoconiosis, ranch hands recovering from strokes, elderly women who had outlived their families. Baldwin noticed how male and female students diverged. The few men in the program gravitated toward emergency medicine and intensive care, what they called "real nursing." The women stayed here, learning to sustain life when cure was impossible.

This was 1983, but the gendered division of labor in Grant County healthcare stretched back decades.

When Mrs. Beatrice E. Oden opened the county's first dedicated nursing home in February 1948, she transformed a house at 102 Kelly Street into something revolutionary: acknowledgment that aging demanded specialized care, not warehousing. After running a nursing home in San Antonio for three years, she brought hard-won expertise to Silver City. Her four private rooms represented a vision where professional skill mattered as much as compassion.

The pattern multiplied. Bear Mountain Rest Home opened in 1950, advertising special provisions for expectant mothers from outlying ranches. The proprietors recognized a dual reality: elderly residents needed care, and pregnant women might labor 50 miles or more from the nearest hospital. In the vast spaces between medical facilities, parteras like Candelaria Mesa served as the only birth attendants, traveling to the Mimbres and Gila valleys for fees paid in sacks of flour, the empty sacks she'd later sew into diapers.

Meanwhile, Ada F. Todd embodied a different model entirely. For 20 years, she operated a South Bullard Street home specifically for aged cowboys, providing what newspapers called "the constant and loving care of a mother." The Odd Fellows Lodge awarded her a "degree for chivalry" for "service beyond the call of duty." The language reveals everything: caring for discarded men was framed as extraordinary charity rather than necessary healthcare.

These women created institutions from their own homes, but by 1969, federal Medicare and Medicaid requirements shattered the informal system. Rest Haven Nursing Home, run by Pat and Anita Feeley since 1959 in their remodeled Hudson Street house, closed when they were unable to meet these new standards. Silver City faced having no nursing home at all. The regulations meant to ensure quality care instead threatened to eliminate care entirely.

The erasure extended beyond institutions. When Candelaria Mesa died in 1977, her obituary listed only her name and dates. No mention of 4,000 babies delivered over four decades. No acknowledgement of her training through New Mexico's pioneering Midwifery Consultant Program, or her work sustaining Hispanic communities where she was often the only healthcare provider.

While some women housed the aging and tended to new life, others recognized different community needs. Mental health services in Grant County essentially did not exist. A coalition formed in the late 1960s under the name Area Human Resources: Jean and Ruth Peterson, Helen Cowan, Dorothy Blaylock, Bonnie Maldonado, with law enforcement representation through

Ernie Gomez. Patsy Madrid, then a VISTA volunteer supervisor who would later become a therapist, joined as a founding board member. Their initial goal seemed modest — compile a directory of mental health resources.

They established operations in Campus Village with a grant secured from Kennecott Mine. One telephone. One desk. Then the calls began. "We had calls where there were issues of suicide and depression," Madrid recalled. "We thought, no, we need training." Southwest Mental Health Center in Las Cruces had promised services but delivered nothing. So, the board hired their own counselor, transforming their referral service into Bridge Line, a crisis intervention lifeline.

> These women created institutions from their own homes, but by 1969, federal Medicare and Medicaid requirements shattered the informal system. Rest Haven Nursing Home, run by Pat and Anita Feeley since 1959 in their remodeled Hudson Street house, closed when they were unable to meet these new standards.

By 1977, Area Human Resources had become Border Area Mental Health Services, expanding to Lordsburg and Deming. They developed programs that understood health holistically. First Offenders required youth in legal trouble to attend 12-week counseling with mandatory parent participation. The First Born Program, led by Susie Trujillo and Vicky Johnson, worked with young mothers on parenting skills, connecting them to resources for everything from diapers to domestic violence support.

These women recognized that mental and physical health were inseparable, especially in communities where isolation compounded every problem.

The same year Area Human Resources formed, women from the American Association of University Women established Planned Parenthood of Grant County. Led by Mrs. Clarence Davis, they opened clinics at Fort Bayard and downtown, providing services to over 600 patients by 1971 — another example of women identifying healthcare gaps and filling them through volunteer networks.

The nursing shortage that had plagued Grant County since Martha Miller's time reached crisis proportions by 1983. New Mexico State University withdrew their satellite nursing program, leaving no local nursing education. Western New Mexico University started an emergency LPN program with two instructors: Claire Goldsmith and Nancy Marshawn. Priscilla Baldwin soon joined them part-time.

The program's structure reflected rural realities. Students spent mornings in lectures – anatomy, physiology, and medication administration. Afternoons meant practical training at Fort Bayard, then primarily a nursing home. Students learned to bathe patients with Alzheimer's who fought every touch, to coax medications into resident mouths, to maintain sterile fields in facilities decades past their prime. They rotated through medical-surgical units, pediatrics, and maternity wards at Hillcrest Hospital, later Gila Regional Medical Center.

"We were more women because nursing was one field slanted in the other direction," Baldwin recalled. "The men gravitated to exciting areas like intensive care and ER instead of nursing homes and regular bedside care." This division revealed something profound about how society valued different types of care. The dramatic, the technological, the heroic — these attracted men and prestige. The daily, the intimate, the maintenance of failing bodies — this remained women's work, perpetually undervalued despite being essential.

Despite producing competent nurses who filled critical positions throughout Grant County's healthcare system, institutional support remained minimal. "We were sort of an outside program," Baldwin noted. "We weren't exactly center stage at the university." The program only lasted two years, graduating its final class in December 1985.

Community pressure forced change. In November 1987, 60 signatures demanded an Associate Degree nursing program. By 1988, WNMU established a proper Nursing Department, acknowledging the need to "alleviate nursing shortages by offering individuals in this area an opportunity to obtain a degree that can lead to employment."

By 1989, healthcare in Grant County bore little resemblance to the informal networks women had built decades earlier. Medicare regulations had shuttered informal nursing homes. The original LPN program had folded. Yet WNMU's new Nursing Department signaled continuity: when systems failed, women organized. As Grant County entered the 1990s, the question was not whether women would continue transforming healthcare. The question was how.

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, contact us at curator@silvercitymuseum.org so their names, stories, and contributions can be honored and preserved. ■