

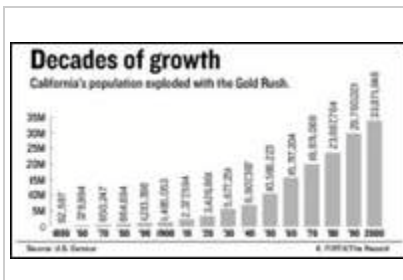
County's hospitals arrived with Gold Rush

Paula Parrish
Record Staff Writer
Published Sunday, Feb 12, 2006

Quality medical treatment in San Joaquin County during the Gold Rush was about as common as deodorant, toothpaste and clean clothes.

The Gold Rush brought to California hundreds of thousands of miners, many of whom passed through Stockton.

Nearly 6,000 of the miners died from lack of medical care, starvation or assaults by Indians, according to a historical review of San Joaquin General Hospital by Dr. Erwin H. Roeser published in the San Joaquin Historian in 1990. Another 2,000 died from bitter depression and disappointment. Stockton saw many of these patients.



During those years, "contagious diseases were more feared than the Indians," Roeser wrote. "The cholera plague in 1851-1853 nearly wiped out the town. Smallpox was devastating. Diphtheria was a killer on short notice, and consumption (tuberculosis) was everywhere. ... Amputations were common and performed without anesthesia. On occasions, laudanum (opium) by mouth was given, and large amounts of the strongest whiskey available was provided."



Patients in the men's ward at Stockton State Hospital in 1900

Hospitals went up not long after the miners arrived. The Stockton State Hospital was created in April 1851, one of three general state hospitals established by the Legislature, according to a 1976 article in the San Joaquin Historian by Neal L. Starr, administrative assistant to the hospital's medical director. The Stockton hospital was for residents of the southern part of the state, as well as the mentally ill. The hospital treated patients until May 1853, when its name became the Insane Asylum of the State of California (later called Stockton State Hospital). It became the first publicly supported psychiatric facility west of the Missouri River. (The former hospital site has been home of California State University, Stanislaus-Stockton Center since 1996.)

San Joaquin General Hospital was established in 1857 by the county Board of Supervisors, who gave Dr. E.B. Bateman a contract for \$3,400 to care for indigent patients and to build a hospital on the leeward side of town, according to Roeser's review. The hospital was a two-story frame structure measuring 25 feet by 30 feet.



Doctors and a nurse stand in an operating room in San Joaquin General Hospital in 1900

St. Joseph's Hospital opened in 1899, fulfilling the dream of its founder, the Rev. William Bernard O'Connor, to build a home to care for men in their declining years.

When the town learned of O'Connor's plans, according to the hospital's history, Dr. Ellis Harbert suggested the facility include a critically needed hospital in addition to the home for men.

Harbert's wife recalled that on one occasion, when "called upon to perform surgery on a French Camp resident, (her husband) had no course other than to use the patient's kitchen table in lieu of an operating table."

O'Connor agreed to set aside a wing in the proposed home for the medical facility.



An early view of Stockton State Hospital

In February 1900, The Stockton Evening Mail described St. Joseph's interior and services, reporting that "each apartment is high-ceilinged, airy, roomy and well-lighted by day or night."

According to the newspaper, space in a ward with four or five beds cost \$1.50 per day, one with two beds was \$2 per day, and single rooms were \$18 to \$25 per week. Admission to the men's home ranged from \$2,000, for those ages 60 to 65 to \$1,000 for those older than 75. The price included food, clothing, washing, medical attendance and nursing when ill, and a "cozy, even luxurious, home where he may spend his declining years in peace and comfort." The home and hospital each accommodated 25 to 30 people.



The men's ward of the Stockton State Hospital in 1875

Today, St. Joseph's Medical Center has nearly 300 beds, more than 400 physicians and more than 2,400 employees. "I think (O'Connor) was a very shy and retiring person and wouldn't take any credit for all this (today)," said Sister Abby Newton, vice president for mission integration at St. Joseph's Medical Center. "But I can't help but think that he would be pleased and moved. I think St. Joe's has been a quiet presence in this community for years and years."

Dameron Hospital, founded in 1912 by Dr. John Dameron, opened with facilities for 20 patients, which grew to 55 beds by 1927.

With time, hospitals expanded; medical advances such as penicillin, surgical gloves and the polio vaccine came at a rapid rate; and new treatments made their way west. When Dr. Robert M. Hermann, an orthopedic surgeon, arrived in Stockton in 1965, "we still had some children with residuals of polio, who needed surgeries to correct the deformity or have proper braces."

The last cases of naturally occurring polio in the United States were in 1979.

Contact reporter Paula Parrish at (209) 546-8269 or pparrish@recordnet.com

Population explosion

California's population exploded with the Gold Rush.

- 1850: 92,597
- 1860: 379,994
- 1870: 650,247
- 1880: 864,694
- 1890: 1,213,398
- 1900: 1,485,053
- 1910: 2,377,594
- 1920: 3,426,861
- 1930: 5,677,251
- 1940: 6,907,387
- 1950: 10,586,223
- 1960: 15,717,204
- 1970: 19,971,069
- 1980: 23,667,764
- 1990: 29,760,021
- 2000: 33,871,648