

WHEELER HOSPITAL

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This is the story of the physicians and early hospital care in the southern part of Santa Clara County. This essay spans the years between 1899 and present. It is the story of how a few dedicated residents and influential people of the early part of this century worked together to build the modern, state of the art Wheeler Hospital, as it was described when it opened in Gilroy in 1929. It also shows how hospital care and hospital facilities have evolved in Gilroy over this time span. I also wish to show how Wheeler Hospital, though it is not used as a hospital today, is still an important part of modern Gilroy and how it is going to be preserved for future generations.

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WHEELER HOSPITAL

The first hospital in Gilroy was called the Gilroy Private Hospital. It was located on the second floor of a building at the corner of Monterey and Fifth Street. Dr. Jonas Clark established this twelve-bed facility in 1899 and it was the first hospital to serve the community until it closed in the early 1920's. Dr. Clark established a training school for nurses in connection with his private hospital and conducted both at a loss for many years before finally closing. He was one the physicians promoting Wheeler Hospital and was at the time of its opening the dean of the medical fraternity in South Santa Clara County and one of the local physicians that donated medical equipment to Wheeler Hospital.

In the early 1920's the Hazel Holmes Sanitarium or Sunshine Maternity Home was opened for a short time in Hazel Holmes home at Second and Church Street. In the mid-1920's. Hugo Schmitt, a Gilroy physician, opened a maternity hospital at his home on Alexander Street after the closing of the Gilroy Private Hospital. He closed it in 1929 when Wheeler Hospital was opened.

In 1926 Mrs. Mildred Quale was approached by a local physician Dr. Roland H. Prien to open a maternity home in lieu of the old Gilroy Private Hospital on Railroad Street which had closed. She agreed to open a maternity hospital in her home, starting a fifteen year career in the field of maternity and infant care as well as elderly convalescent

patients. Over 200 babies were born at the home before it closed in 1941.

Mrs. Quale's credits in the maternity care field were earned on the job at home under the supervision of five local doctors who entrusted their patients to her efficient care. In 1941 she closed the home and went to work for Wheeler Hospital in the care of mothers and infants. Mildred Quale served at Wheeler for 34 years, retiring in 1975. She passed away in 1982.

Henry Miller, a local millionaire, upon his death in 1926 left to the city of Gilroy, among other bequests, five acres on Hanna Street and a bequest of \$300,000 for the erection and maintenance of a hospital. This he intended to be one of the best and most modern hospitals in California. After his death, and after months of consultation with his attorneys and heirs it was determined that because of the clause in the will that stated that none of the estate could be separated until after the death of the last grandchild, that neither the land nor the money could be used at this time to build a hospital. Upon the death of the last grandchild in 1962 the five acres and the money were given to the city. The land became Miller Park and the \$300,000 with interest had grown to over \$800,000 and was used to build the Henry Miller Wing onto the New Wheeler Hospital.

Lin W. Wheeler was born December 20, 1868 at Cherry Creek, New York. At seventeen, he struck out on his own.

railroading and prospecting until 1894. He joined the Vaughn Seed Company of Chicago in 1894 and worked there until 1899 when he became manager of the New York store. In 1891 he married Leona Buster of Kansas, and they had no children.

In 1907 L.M. Wheeler resigned from the Vaughn Seed Company and came to California. From 1907 to 1910 he represented various California seed growers including A. J. Pieters of Hollister. In 1910, with his partner, E. L. Page, he purchased the Pieters Seed business and formed the Pieters-Wheeler Seed Company. He later became sole owner of the company which he operated until his death on June 11, 1944 when he and his wife were killed in an automobile accident near Stockton.

Mr Wheeler gave generously to Gilroy. He offered the funds to build the following: the Old Elks Lodge Building on Monterey Street and the Wheeler Auditorium. He provided funds for fire equipment and donated Wheeler Field, as well as funding many other civic and community projects. Through his generosity, Wheeler Hospital became a reality. He initiated and led the effort to build this state of the art facility and that is why when it opened in 1929 it was named for the man who donated time as well as money for its construction.

Mr. and Mrs. L. M. Wheeler fairly took the breaths away from the little assemblage of citizens at Hotel Millias, Wednesday evening (June 1927) when they offered to

subscribe \$25,000 for the erection of a new hospital in Gilroy, providing the citizens raise a like amount. (Gilroy Advocate, June 11, 1927). Also at this meeting Frazier O. Reed of San Jose Hospital gave advice on the dos and don'ts of building a hospital. The doctors who attended gave their pledges. Dr Jonas Clark pledged about \$3,000., Dr Hugh Schmitt \$5,000, Dr. John A. Clark \$5,000, and Dr. R. H. Prien, \$4,000. (Gilroy Advocate, June 11, 1927).

A committee was appointed at a meeting on July 30, 1927 for the organization of a board of directors to purchase land and acquire the funds to build a hospital for Gilroy. The committee elected L.M. Wheeler, president; Joe Ayer, vice-president; M. J. Crow, treasurer; E.D. Crawford, secretary. By-laws were adopted. (Gilroy Advocate, July 30, 1929). They would be asking for a permit to sell \$100,000 worth of stock. The stock would sell for \$100.00 each. It was expected that the 25 bed hospital would cost \$75,000. The board of directors began by visiting hospitals in Santa Cruz, Salinas, Merced, Sacramento, Stockton, Woodland, Turlock, and other cities for a total of twenty-five hospitals to compare and get ideas on how this hospital should be built. It was decided that as soon as \$75,000 was subscribed a site would be selected and work started on the building.

There were many sites offered but the final selection was land bounded on the north by Fifth Street, on the east by Carmel Street and on the west by Princevalle Street. A

site of 3.74 acres at \$1,000 a acre. It was thought that this was the best site because it was near the center of town, but away from traffic and noise.

Between the years 1892 and 1936, California was enriched by the designs of William H. Weeks whose style ran from the flamboyant to the very plain; from the Victorian to the later period of reinforced concrete and terra cotta. His list of works throughout the state is staggering. By 1915 over 1,000 buildings were to his credit and he would continue to design nearly 1,000 more before his death in 1936.

By 1928 the Weeks' Architectural organization was one of the largest and the oldest architectural firms in the state, having a large staff of licensed architects, engineers and other specialists in the field. Weeks favored the employment of local men and the letting of contracts to local contractors and material men, wherever possible. Weeks employed an expert engineering service and was well versed himself in engineering and construction. Details were always checked and rechecked and the architect personally guaranteed their accuracy. (W.H. Weeks Architect, Lewis, p34-35). For forty years, from 1894 to 1934, Weeks designed 19 known buildings in the Gilroy area, and because of his building style, choice of materials, and reputation he was chosen as the architect for the Wheeler Hospital.

Work on the Wheeler Hospital was started in January 1928 by Bill Radtke, the contractor. It opened July 27, 1929 at

a cost of \$200,000. At its opening every room of the building was decorated with beautiful bouquets, and many floral pieces came from friends all over the district. Thousands of people filed through the halls and inspected the building, and only the most complimentary comments were heard on all sides. Visiting physicians and surgeons marveled at the completeness of the operating rooms. Dr. Clark Saunders of San Jose remarked in his address that no place in California had a more complete hospital (Gilroy Advocate, August 2, 1929).

The 1929 Wheeler hospital is a 10,144 square foot medical building which shares its 3.74 acre city block with the new hospital completed in 1962. The Mediterranean Rivial (Spanish Eclectic) style hospital was designed by the noted California architect, William H. Weeks in 1928 and is typical of the symmetrical Mediterranean Villa style used by Weeks in Gilroy from 1921 to 1934. The building is constructed on an H ground plan with a width of five structural units and including a second story above the center section.

The east wing of the ground plan has major and minor surgery suites, an emergency room, a dining room, and the main kitchen. Maternity and the nursery, private patient rooms, and a visitors room are located in the west wing. Male and female surgical patients were roomed on the east and west sides of the central two-story section. The lower portion of the central section has the main entrance

(vestibule and lobby), offices and a stairway to the second floor. The upper floor, of approximately 1,300 square feet was originally the nurses quarters and consists of five bedrooms, two full tiled baths, and a sitting room with a balcony over the main entrance. There were twenty-two patient rooms, all with toilet and many with full baths. Each patient station was also equipped with built-in radio with earphones and nurses call button, a new innovation and the only hospital in the state to be so equipped at the time it was built.

The exterior walls of this building are stucco with beautiful ceramic tile decorations on the north side of the building, under the windows. Interior walls are painted lath and plaster with sanitary wainscoting up three feet, except in the maternity department and the surgery areas where the walls are completely covered with ceramic tile. All wood in the building is redwood of full dimension or better.

All sections of the building have low pitched hipped roofs and all roof areas are covered with terra cotta straight barrel mission-style tiles, regularly laid.

The building sits on a reinforced concrete foundation with a partial basement which houses the furnace (originally coal, now gas) and the water heaters. A portion of the basement is now used for record storage and had been equipped with shelves for that purpose.

All flooring is linoleum over wood except in the surgery suites and maternity areas which are tile. A chimney from the furnace that runs up the east side of the building is red brick covered with decorative stucco work. ('National register of Historic Places', 1990).

Wheeler Hospital is located in Gilroy's finest residential district, away from traffic, noise and confusion and yet accessible to all parts of the city and the state highway. It is so built and constructed to give maximum service to its patrons. A place of beauty, modern in equipment, staffed by graduate nurses and opened to all reputable physicians in Gilroy and the surrounding community. One may enter for confinement at the rate of sixty dollars for a period of ten days. The rate covers 24 hour nursing service, including delivery room and care of the infant. For the rate of four dollars a day one may secure accommodations in a three bed room. (Gilroy Advocate, March 25, 1932).

The 1929 Wheeler Hospital sits on 1.25 acres. In 1962 the New Wheeler Hospital, a 50-bed non-profit hospital, was added onto this 3.74-acre block along with a parking lot in front of the new building, a parking lot on the west side of the original building and another on the south and east sides of the original building. Appropriate landscaping includes large redwood trees, oaks, olives, and other large trees and shrubs planted in 1929 as well as a lawn running the full length of the block on Fifth Street.

When the New Wheeler Hospital opened Old Wheeler Hospital still was used for hospital work. The Red Cross is located in the front entrance room. Some business offices, including public relations, data processing, purchasing, and computer accounting are still housed in this building as well. The sewing circle of the Wheeler Hospital Auxiliary also meets there each week and has been doing so since 1929 (Pieces of the Past, Salewske, 1982).

In 1981 long range planning studies were conducted by Wheeler Hospital and it was recommended that a new relocated facility be built. In 1983 Samaritan Hospital Care System was created as parent corporation to Wheeler, Good Samaritan and South Valley Intercommunity Hospitals. In 1984 38 acres in Gilroy were secured to build a \$35 million 79-bed hospital. In 1987 there was the groundbreaking and a bond issue to support construction. Patient admission day was July 15, 1989. At this time the New Wheeler Hospital closed. South Valley Hospital is a state of the art facility which offers training for new nurses from Gavilan College. It also offers programs for seniors, classes for new parents, classes on stress management, good nutrition, smoking cessation and many other classes. It is a great community resource for health information and education.

After the opening of South Valley Hospital in 1989, it was thought that the 650 W. Fifth Street site of the Wheeler Hospital would be leveled and transformed into 22 single family homes. But a group of concerned citizens banded

together and saved the historic 1929 building and it will be maintained for future generations. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on September 13, 1990. In early 1992 construction of a senior citizen care facility was begun at the Wheeler Hospital site next to the 1929 building and is scheduled to open in early 1993. It will be a full service senior campus for senior assisted care and independent living. It has been designed to mirror the Mediterranean Villa style of the 1929 building, and blend into its surroundings. (The Dispatch Dec 4, 1991).

The Wheeler Manor did open in early 1993. South County Housing is the owner and developer of this facility located at 651 West Sixth Street. It covers the entire city block of 5th and 6th Streets between Princevalle and Carmel Streets. There are 110 apartments with one bedroom, bathroom and kitchenette. It offers the senior citizens of Gilroy a safe and convenient place to live. Wheeler Manor offers independent living, adult day care, a community activity center, transportation and senior support services for its residents. This facility is a great addition to Wheeler Hospital and a great asset to Gilroy.

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