

## Telling the story of the Calgary General Hospital

The history of health care in Calgary goes back to the very early settlement of the community. After the arrival of the CPR in 1883, many newcomers started to arrive. In 1884, the population of Calgary was approximately 500 people with only two physicians to attend the needs of those who could pay. The majority of people were single men and epidemics of typhoid fever, smallpox, scarlet fever and red measles were common. It was difficult to obtain drugs and supplies and provide much needed care. The Catholic Church had opened a hospital called Holy Cross but a public hospital was also deemed to be necessary.

In 1886 a Hospital Committee was formed and it obtained a four and one half acre land grant north of the Bow River, in present day Bridgeland from the territorial government. However this land was not within the boundaries of the city of Calgary so it could not be used for a municipally supported hospital. Instead, a Cottage Hospital was established in a 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW residence. The doors opened in October 1890 and patients began to be treated for pneumonia, typhoid, colds and the after-effects of too much alcohol. A replica of Calgary's first hospital can be seen at Heritage Park.



Calgary continued to grow and a larger hospital was soon needed. Construction on the second General Hospital, a large sandstone structure, started in 1894. Situated at 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 6<sup>th</sup> Street SE, the new hospital's doors opened in May 1895. It contained many "modern" features including five private wards, a telephone and an operating table that cost \$117.00. Additional buildings were added as required. To address recurring epidemics of measles and typhoid fever, individual tents were periodically erected on the hospital lawn. This place was not to last although remnants of its sandstone walls can still be seen south of 12 Avenue SE.



By 1907, the problems of overcrowding at the hospital needed to be addressed as the city's population was increasing substantially, and included women and a growing number of children. Ongoing epidemics of diphtheria, scarlet fever and measles increased needs for

reliable health care. The new provincial government added land to the original 1886 grant to enlarge the hospital area to seven and half acres on the north side of the Bow River. Bridgeland was annexed to the city in 1907 and efforts were underway to annex Riverside. As well the river crossing needed to be upgraded to a sturdier steel trussed bridge so that people could be safely transported across the Bow River. A city firehall (#4) was also built on nearby 6a Street.

Finally in 1908 the conditions for a larger and third General Hospital were in place. Construction began on a four-storey brick building that cost \$1.5 million dollars and took two years to complete. The official opening of the 160 bed General Hospital was February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1910 and it was attended by fifteen hundred people who arrived on horseback and in carriages. The address was 841 Centre Avenue South East, known today as North East. A School of Nursing was established and students lived in a nearby residence. To the south of the hospital gardens were grown that helped to provide healthy food for the patients.



Calgary grew slowly through the next decades but by 1949, Calgary's post war population explosion soon demanded additional hospital services. The original 1910 building was found to be inadequate and a larger structure was needed. The fourth edition - a seven-storey modern hospital opened in May of 1953, and this building served as its central core until 1998. The new building provided the city with 626 beds and 110 bassinets. Construction then began with the Psychiatric ward in 1954, followed by a new multi storey Nurses' Residence in 1956, the Pediatric wing in 1958, eight-storey Rehabilitation Centre in 1962 and the service wing in 1967. The Gertrude M. Hall education wing was built in 1970, and the Centennial Wing, which included Canada's first forensic Psychiatric unit, was added in 1977. Studying and living in the residence at any one time were several hundred student nurses. Medical doctors and other health professionals received the clinical practice component of their education and worked at CGH. The hospital provided employment for many Bridgeland - Riverside residents and a growing number of people drove to the community to work or access health services. Other institutional settings such as the Canadian Institute for the Blind, Crossbow Auxiliary Hospital, Bow Valley Seniors Housing and the Calgary Rehabilitation Society were built near the hospital.



1960's

Further expansion of the hospital was planned for the 1980's. To accomplish this, several blocks of homes north of the existing hospital buildings – between Centre and First Avenues and from 7a to 9a Streets, were expropriated and demolished. This included the entire south side of the First Avenue business district. The planned expansion was never built and the area that had been cleared of over a hundred homes became a large parking lot for the hospital. This would accommodate the vehicles of several thousand staff who drove to the hospital each day, along with many hundreds of visitors and delivery services.

Progress continued at the hospital. A helipad was installed to accommodate emergencies. Innovative programs and leading-edge health practices contributed to the hospital's well-deserved reputation as a leader in health care. To accommodate medical practices that were associated with the hospital, two large professional buildings were constructed nearby in the early 1980's. The hospital and community were buzzing with activity and there was a sense of great potential for the future.



1980's

The mid 1990's saw a provincial government intent on trimming costs to eradicate a budget deficit. Studies determined that the city had too many hospital beds; the decision was made to close the entire Calgary General Hospital. Despite protests and court challenges to overturn this decision, the hospital was permanently shuttered in 1997. After preparations were completed the entire hospital campus was imploded on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998.



1998

After removing tons of debris, the city took the opportunity to develop this large tract of land for high density residential purposes, naming it the Bridges project. The area of the former hospital between 7a and 9 Streets became Murdoch Park, with a large soccer field and tree lined promenade as well as the new Bridgeland - Riverside Community Centre. Surrounding this park area, four to six storey condominiums were planned.

Community consultations were held about how best to commemorate the hospital that had served the city of Calgary for 88 years. Residents who were no doubt still angry and hurting from the loss of the heartbeat of their community indicated that they preferred a “modest” commemoration. The solution was a long wall emerging out of the edge of the escarpment. Constructed with concrete and bricks salvaged from the hospital, the wall was marked, “Calgary General Hospital 1910 - 1998”. Completing the design was a stairway along one side and a sloped walkway down the other side.



Over two decades have passed since the implosion of the hospital. Former residents have departed and many new people have moved to the community. Many Calgarians and visitors come to Bridgeland - Riverside to visit our parks and restaurants. When asked about the meaning of the brick wall, very few have any understanding about the presence here of a 1000 bed hospital that served Calgary for decades. The story of the Calgary General Hospital’s eighty - eight year presence in Bridgeland - Riverside has not been told and is at risk of being forgotten.

Calgary has not been so willing to diminish its memory of similar aspects of the city’s history. The Colonel Belcher Hospital was closed and demolished in the early 2000’s but its story is told in pictures in front of the new Sheldon Chumir Health Centre that took its place.

The Holy Cross Hospital and School of Nursing was closed and sold in 1996 but a sculpture entitled “Nuns and Nightingales” reminds passersby of the building’s past as a training school for nurses. Calgary’s short-lived French settlement of Rouleauville is well commemorated in a large park on 17 Avenue, with interpretive plaques, bas relief carvings and pictures.



The Baker Sanatorium, a tuberculosis treatment centre, was commemorated with the installation of several information panels by Bowness Historical Society in the city’s Baker Park.



The year 2020 will mark one hundred and ten years since the third edition of the Calgary General Hospital opened in Bridgeland - Riverside and began to offer much needed health services to Calgary’s residents. It has been twenty-two years since the entire hospital campus was wiped out of the Calgary landscape. Now is the time to more fully and appropriately commemorate its significant presence and to tell the story of the Calgary General Hospital in the heart of Bridgeland - Riverside.

- Deb Lee and Sharon McKendrick, BRCA Heritage Committee