

There is still life in the old Three Forks Hospital

When the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad made a town a division point, many railroaders and their families came to that point make their homes. The company had a vested interest in its employees and made accommodations to keep them. Many of the homes built in Three Forks were built by or commissioned by the railroad or railroaders. The company also made accommodations for single men by building the Milwaukee Hotel, of which portions have been moved to the Lewis and Clark Hotel. The company also felt some obligation for the health of its employees and to this end they built the Milwaukee Hospital.

When Three Forks had been made a division point February of 1909, a round house to repair cars and locomotives was built that year. With the round house, section house, division point and depot, Three Forks swelled with railroad men and their families. Seeing a need, J. Q. Adams donated some land on the south side of town for a hospital. Construction on the Three Forks Hospital began in 1914 to provide for the injured and sick of the area. As safety was not up to today's standards, there were many injuries and deaths to rail workers and passengers at both ends of town (as the Northern Pacific had a depot on the south end of town for several years).

Dr. Clinton Hoy, who had a home on the corner of First and Cedar, and Dr. Goertner were the first medical directors at the Milwaukee Hospital. Other doctors at the hospital were; Dr. C. V. Reed (who died in England during WW I of pneumonia), Dr. W. H. Shepards (who moved on to Dillon) , Dr. A. H. Winkel, Dr. E. Zeck, Dr. C. R. Larson, Dr. John Dimon and lastly Dr. H. L. Koehler.

A nurse training school was organized at the hospital and sponsored by Washington Hospital Training School. Miss Ruth Wilkens, RN and Miss Cora Viewig, RN were the nurse supervisors that ran the program. Graduates of the six month training course include Jessie Stearns (Mrs. H.C. Hudson of Three Forks, and Jeanette Mattison (Mrs. Wm. Fraser of Three Forks).

Many residents of the area were born at the Milwaukee Hospital, the first being Roy McKenney on June 15, 1915. Other local residents include John Arnold, Laura, and Robert Lane, James Elmose, Harvey and Wilma Carlson, Betty Gee (Lamach), and

Mary Lou and Madeline Lane (Todd).

During 1917-1918 at least a dozen patients succumbed to the Spanish Flu epidemic and its complications while at the hospital.

By the end of World War I, Three Forks was no longer as bustling as it once was because the Milwaukee had moved its division point to Deer Lodge (the newer electric locomotives didn't need to stop as often) and the round house was no longer in operation. The droughts and depressions of the 20s and 30s also ate away at the population. In 1931 the hospital closed due to a lack of patronage, and the hospital superintendent Cora Viewig Barnes advertised that all accounts due to the hospital would be received at her home at #5 First Avenue North. Dr. Dimon moved to Polson in late 1930 and set up a practice there. Dr. Koehler was still using the hospital for emergencies and x-rays only. Eventually, Dr. Koehler moved on too.

In 1940, according to the Three Forks Herald, the hospital was sold to a California firm and converted to a sanitarium. It would be used for the treatment of various ailments by the "vegetable juice method," but apparently the plan went awry, because the Pages took over that same year.

Ralph and Margaret Page purchased the building with the intention of providing "homes for the elderly," a rather new concept at the time. The Page family operated the rest home for many years, and Margaret Page was influential in Nursing Home Association of Montana. The rest home was closed in 1974. For a few years it was haunted by teenagers as a place for private parties.

Some years ago, the hospital was renovated and converted to apartments. Now owned by Vidmar Construction, Greg Vidmar and his crew continue to keep the old hospital in good health.



The Three Forks Hospital built in 1914.

Headwaters Heritage Museum