Franciscan order celebrates anniversary of association with hospital

75 years at The Lake

Editor's Note: Earlier this month, Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center commemorated its 75th anniversary, which means the Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady, who own and operate OLOL, are also celebrating this presence of more than 75 years in Baton Rouge. The following article examines their history.

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON

Soon after Sister Linda Constantin joined the Franciscan sisters here in the mid-70s, Mother Gertrude Hennessy brought her to the site where Our Lady of the Lake Hospital was moved.

Ground had been broken at the site on Essen Lane, when a gravel road, but construction had not yet begun on what would become the state's largest regional medical center.

"She laid the plans on the ground and sent me off on so many stops in each direction, "That's where food service is going to be, she'd say, or, "Put that over there,"" Constantin said.

On two through the downtown area, Mother de Bethaney ordered the driver to stop at an overgrown, weed yard located near the former LSU campus and University Lake.

"She could see it — even though she was that far away from them," Sister Constantin said.

The site was possessed by Mother Marie de Bethaney, who came here in 1921 at the invitation of local leaders to establish a hospital.

On a tour through the downtown area, Mother de Bethaney ordered the driver to stop at an overgrown, weed yard located near the former LSU campus and University Lake.

Climbing through a briar patch, the objects from her advisers, she envisioned a four-story brick hospital overlooking the lake. It would become Our Lady of the Lake Sanitarium.

"Her diaries and journals (early entries were written in French) report of patients paying for their services with eggs or eggs or chickens. Sometimes, I wish it was still that simple," laughed Sister Constantin, who now serves as the medical center's vice president of mission integration.

"Life was simpler then, but that doesn't mean it was easier," said Mother Brendam Mary Ronayne.

"Mother de Bethaney and the original five sisters arrived in Louisiana in the middle of August, wearing full wooden habits and headpieces. Can you imagine that? It must have been dreadful. We complain about the heat today.

"When I read her diary, I was impressed with her strength and fortitude. She came here with nothing but a desire to help," said Mother Ronayne, who is now the North American provincial for the Franciscan Missionaries.

See OLOL, Page 10H