100 Years of Health Care

Cary McNeil Clayton, an occupational therapist at Baton Rouge General Medical Center, stands in the hospital hall in front of a portrait of her great-great-grandfather, Dr. T.P. Singletary, founder of the hospital.

BR's first hospital marks century of service to community

BY LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON

Cary McNeil Clayton smiles when she passes the portrait of Dr. Thomas Polfer Singletary in the hall at Baton Rouge General Medical Center. The portrait honors Singletary as the founder of what became the city’s first hospital. Clayton is on staff at BRGMC as an occupational therapist; she is also the great-great-granddaughter of T.P. Singletary.

"Does that mean you're going to inherit the hospital?" one of Clayton’s patients teases her. She laughs.

"Not many of my co-workers even know about my connection," she said. "I moved back to Baton Rouge last March and started here in June. To come back as a professional and to have family ties to the hospital is really nice."

A young surgeon in practice here in 1900, T.P. Singletary was called to action when a wreck occurred on the Yazoo and Mississippi River Valley Railroad, according to hospital accounts.

Two severely injured passengers were entrusted to his care.

Rather than transporting them to a private home or hotel, as was the custom at the time, Singletary had his patients brought to a large frame building on the corner of Florida and Church streets for further treatment.

The tragic accident became the first link in a chain of events that eventually led to the building of Baton Rouge’s first hospital — Baton Rouge General.

General Health System will celebrate its 100th anniversary at the 1999 Excellence in General Banquet Tuesday, Oct. 5, at the Riverside Convention Center. At that time, the Excellence in General Award will be presented to Singletary’s descendants.

The event will feature a cocktail reception and silent auction, followed by dinner prepared by Chef John Wolfe, a live auction and dance with music by Jubilation! Tickets are $200; for reservations, call 763-1400.

As the train victims slowly recovered, according to hospital accounts, Singletary realized that local doctors could treat their patients more efficiently if they centralized care in a community hospital. So, he built a three-story building next to his office on Florida Boulevard in 1900 and called it the Sanitarium. A group of women formed the Charity Ward Association and rented the third floor for $2 a month to treat indigent patients and later took over operation of the hospital.

It was extremely important to build a community-run enterprise, according to an earlier interview with the late T.J. Singletary, son of T.P. Singletary.

"I remember the rope elevator, with its platform and the big wheel going around it at the top. Dad used to pay me a quarter for operating the elevator for him."

"How excited he was, too, when he got the first"
Baton Rouge General Medical Center celebrates 50 years at its Midcity location, even as it celebrates its centennial.

Baton Rouge General Medical Center — Bluebonnet became General Health's second full-service hospital here when it opened its emergency room this summer.
X-ray machine in the city. I made quarters operating that, too. It was an upright with a glass front and, there being no electrical current, we had to turn a crank to generate the current.”

John “Buck” Noland Singletary, grandson of T.P. Singletary, said the General has been an integral part of his life since his earliest recollection.

“I had my tonsils removed there, and my two sons were born there. It has been a source of pride with me that both my ascendants and descendants have had strong connections with the General over the years.”

Singletary saved the hospital invoices from when his sons were born. “My oldest son was born on May 5, 1959. The room rate was $17.50 a day; they stayed five days and the total bill came to $209.25. The room rate had gone up to $21 a day when my second son was born in 1961.

“I remember when hospital rates went up to $100 a day in New York, and people said that could never happen here.”

T.P. Singletary, who also served as parish coroner and physician for the state blind school and the state school for the deaf, continued to be involved in the operations of the hospital until he died of cancer in 1916.

In 1923, the hospital became known as the Baton Rouge General and moved into a large house on East Boulevard. Expansion in 1927 saw a four-story, 62-bed building on Government Street.

The 250-bed hospital at 3600 Florida Blvd. opened in 1950 and became the cornerstone for what is known today as BRGMC - Mid City. Even as the General celebrates its centennial this year, it is also celebrating its 50th anniversary at the Midcity location.

Other milestones BRGMC marked through the years include:

• 1944 - Louisiana Baptist Convention takes over operations and expansion of hospital.
• 1958 - “Heart Station” cardiovascular program is established with first open-heart surgery performed in 1959. The General’s Diabetes Program established to give education support to patients diagnosed with diabetes.
• 1969 - Louisiana Baptist Convention relinquishes responsibility for the hospital and releases it back to the local board of trustees.
• 1970 - The General’s Burn Center opens to provide emergency burn care to Gulf Coast region and petrochemical corridor.
• 1976 - The General’s Chemical Dependency Unit opens.
• 1984 - General Health System is established, merging the associated health-care products, services, and programs of the many BRG affiliates under one operational entity.
• 1994 - Baton Rouge General Medical Center at Bluebonnet opens.

Next week’s dinner is the start of a series of events commemorating the hospital’s centennial, according to Nanette Kelley, chairman of the Board of Trustees for the General Health System.

“As we celebrate our 100th anniversary, we felt it was only fitting that the Singletary family be recognized as the recipient of this year’s Excellence in General award.

“Dr. T.P. Singletary had the vision, compassion and philanthropic spirit that began our hospital. ... This event and our celebrations in the year ahead are about recognizing and remembering the history of a community hospital deeply rooted in a history of caring.”