

# CARING FOR THE AFFLICTED

## Polio victims find haven at St. Vincent

By LORNA MACCRESH  
Of the Gazette Staff

**B**ILLINGS WAS LESS than 10 years old when a tragic public epidemic gripped the city into present leadership roll in the national medical community.

Dr. Louis Albert and the Sisters of Charity made Billings a haven for afflicted children considered hopeless cases by others with little skill and determination. Thousands of children, victims of polio and many other disabling diseases and injuries, were treated by the doctor and his associates at St. Vincent Hospital.

Essentially, there were no ready line patients in the old hospital building where Central High School now stands, that the sisters developed in orthopedics developed.

epidemic that originated in New York and swept westward until reaching Montana in August. Billings was struck first, when a child came down with a mysterious set of symptoms. The case went undiagnosed and the child became the first polio victim. But within a few days, children from Montana attending Central High were afflicted. Several more came down and the Crow camp had to quarantine. Dr. Albert was called in and made the diagnosis.

As the epidemic spread, the doctor had no time in forming a battle plan. He recruited women's clubs, recruited school teachers and the senior nursing class at St. Vincent to help carry the case in a house-to-house campaign. What they found far exceeded their expectations.

"Yellowstone County had more cases than all the rest of the state, and as later reports revealed, a more virulent type," Sister Arcadia wrote.

Dr. Albert immediately contacted a colleague in Massachusetts who specialized in orthopedics. By the spring of 1917, the doctor had sent Martin Pin, a pioneer in physiotherapy, to assist. The Women's Club of Billings picked up her salary and expenses.

She began daily clinics where she examined and evaluated results of the little victims. The sisters instructed mothers on proper diet and hygiene for children who needed to regain strength before surgery could be attempted. Sister Arcadia described a patient progression of victims who came from all over for the clinic.

"Most of these cases were the recently afflicted polio victims and were brought by their suffering mothers in baby carriages, children's little wagons and all sorts of conveyances, some carried for many blocks in the mother's arms."

The hospital was so crowded only the most dire cases could be admitted. But Pin taught the senior student nurses a full course of physiotherapy and then trained them in teaching the mothers simple muscle exercises.

"Only the most pressing cases for surgery were placed in the waiting list, the others being brought in the clinic or office for bi-weekly or bi-monthly treatment over a period of months, the mother cases responding wonderfully to muscle training and re-education."

The work was almost for a while in 1918 with the demands of World War I and the Spanish Flu epidemic. But it resumed in earnest in the 1920s and began to attract national interest.

"Many of the cases seeking admission of their crippled or deformed condition were of several years standing," Sister Arcadia wrote. "Some had never walked, some had not walked for years and consequently had very little, if any, education. The majority could neither read nor write, had limited use of hands and knew no way of employing their time."

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Children from all over the state, mostly polio victims, came to Billings for the special treatment of mind and body that local pioneers in orthopedics developed.

History on your doorstep

When a school where the hospital moved to its present location in 1923. For the next 10 years, the St. Vincent Orthopedic School operated in the old hospital building, looking in the north of both body and mind. A devastating flood finally closed it down in 1937.

Sister Mary Arcadia Lee, the doctor's right hand, recorded the history of the orthopedic center sometime in the early 1930s in a document now stored at the Sisters of Charity Mother House in Lawrenceville, Kan.

Sister Arcadia believed that ten percent of the children brought to the center could be helped. That meant she was to do all children regardless of race or creed, she said. The only bar to admission was necessity below 70 percent normal.

"They can be made self-supporting, happy citizens instead of morose, dejected public charges," she wrote. "The absolutely hopeless case is a rare one."

Community leads a hand

The community seemed so responsive with great enthusiasm. Several clubs made the children their special projects and made sure they had clothing, Christmas presents and entertainments. Weekly school classes "adapted" some of the worst afflicted and provided them, compassionately and fun. If money was needed for a child's treatment, there seemed no difficulty in raising it. Dr. Albert's fee for a polio case that required months of care and many operations was usually \$25. He was a Laurel native, whose medical training led him into the unique specialty of orthopedics.

"No applicant has ever been refused because of lack of financial ability to pay," Sister Arcadia wrote. "Some large-hearted individual or philanthropically inclined club or organization always comes to the rescue."

It all started in 1916 with a polio



The old St. Vincent Hospital building, where Central High School now stands, became the St. Vincent Orthopedic School in 1923.

"She screamed with fright on being placed in bed between white sheets, having her entire chest on a pile of old clothes and horse blankets in a corner of the kitchen floor. She did not know how to feed herself, having always eaten from a tin plate placed in front of her on the floor like an animal."

Her parents, who worked from morning to dusk as their grand, East-end Montana horsehead, had no time to teach her more than a few words.

The sisters undertook her education as well as her physical recovery. A series of operations and therapy got her on her feet and walking. A few years after her return, Sister Arcadia reported that Rose's parents brought her back for a visit "for us to see a perfectly normal young woman, who had completed her high school work and was then taking a state normal school course preparatory to taking up her life work of teaching."

3,000 receive care

By 1929 the hospital school was flourishing. But the hospital was overflowing with Dr. Albert's kids. An "overflow" hospital" was opened across the street for the children to recuperate. Even if it was not large enough.

But St. Vincent's was in the process of moving to its new location and would soon be causing the old hospital. It was a perfect solution. The little building had few stairs and enough dormitory space for 30 children. The sisters hired lay teachers to help in the program. It had classrooms and a kitchen garden, as well as a chicken coop, so the children could enjoy fresh vegetables, eggs and poultry. It was equipped with eight staterooms for patients suffering

from tuberculosis. It also had special equipment for exercise, therapy and hydrotherapy. A wooden pool in the yard was connected to the sewer plant as water of any temperature could be provided.

Writing after the sisters had been at their work for 10 years, Sister Arcadia said that about 1,000 children had been cared for in Billings. A report from the 1920s showed that patients came from 30 states and over 100 foreign countries.

Other orthopedic institutions opened around the country, but St. Vincent's was unique in providing education as well as rehabilitation. It was also unique in that its aim was to avoid surgery and use diet, hygiene and physiotherapy to restore the children. Surgery was used primarily in situations where the child's condition had been neglected for a long time, according to Sister Arcadia.

Those who needed the surgery welcomed it, the sister said.

"None of them dread the surgery an adult shirks from with terror, even though they see their companions recuperating from other and enduring the inconvenience, discomfort and often severe pain inevitably following an operation, but beg the surgeons to let them be fixed."

The school continued to operate into the Great Depression. But on June 12, 1937, a earthquake struck the old building when a flood destroyed the library, shops, recreation room, kitchen and elevator. The foundation was so weakened that the building had to be abandoned.

Patients who remained were sheltered into the pediatric department of the new hospital.

# Historic Overview Of Epidemic Treatment

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