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When I entered Sara Mayo Hospital in New Orleans to have my baby I took with me the Biography of Virginia Woolfe and found on several women friends to help pass the time in the labor room. To my great surprise and delight I learned from the brochure handed me at the registration desk that I was in a hospital created by a group of eight women doctors for the express purpose of treating and relieving other women in a direct affront on the male medical system that excluded women doctors.

Talk about women's liberation—and in New Orleans in 1905! In researching the full story on Sara Mayo Hospital I found one of the most exciting and interesting historical accounts of women uniting to assert themselves and to better the lot of us all.

Sara Mayo Hospital -- A Surprising History

by Mary Gehman

Sara Mayo and her partners who founded the hospital rank among the city's most impressive pioneers. Ironically, they are hardly remembered today. This public library gives no references in its card catalogue neither to Sara Mayo nor to the hospital. The only comprehensive material I could locate was an entry in **Notable American Women 1607-1950**. The public relations office of the hospital headed by Mary Lee Burck, was more helpful by making available scrapbooks of news clippings and memorabilia. But she too admitted that very little has been published about Sara Mayo and her women's hospital.

The New Orleans Hospital and Dispensary for Women and Children opened its doors in 1905 in a small building at 1823 Annunciation in the Irish Channel. They were humble beginnings: \$25 capital, borrowed furniture and eight patients treated the first day. What was unusual about the hospital was that it offered treatment only to women and children, and all the doctors working there were women.

The director, Sara Tew Mayo, called fondly "Daisy" by her patients, was a strong, vibrant woman in her mid thirties. She had earned her medical degree with a specialty in surgery at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania and returned to her native Louisiana to practice her profession.

A medical career was at that time still unthinkable for a Southern woman, but she was not alone. In New Orleans at the turn of the century there were seven other women trying to break through the barriers of discrimination against women in medicine: Clara Glenk, Susanna Otis, Elizabeth Bass, Cora Bass, Clothilde Jaquet, Edith Loebner and M. Blandine Fassy. They had all taken their degrees outside Louisiana at the medical school of Tulane University would not accept women students.

These women were barred from the all male Orleans Parish Medical Society and shut out of the city's hospital and clinical facilities, most of them ended up serving in the free clinic of Kingsley House, the New Orleans social settlement headed by Eleanor McMain. There they became acquainted with each other and began to plan a strategy to correct what was obviously an intolerable injustice.

History does not record what discussions they had in coming to the eventual decision to open their own hospital and treat only women patients. Surely some of the women doctors must have argued for the more direct route of creating the medical society and forcing the local hospitals to accept them. But the separatist tactic won out. The more historical approach proved more practical.

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1) to give women physicians access to clinical and hospital experience and 2) to give women and children of small or no financial means access to services of women physicians free of cost. It would be staffed and administered only by women.

The area chosen to locate the women's hospital was in the Irish Channel because of the many poor migrant women and children who lived there without adequate medical care. The eight women physicians offered a range of services including internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, dermatology, gynecology, neurology, obstetrics and dentistry.

They opened in a small, four story house with a minimum of money and supplies but an excitement and commitment that fully compensated for any material shortcomings.

According to the hospital's archives, the New Orleans Hospital and Dispensary for Women and Children was a real community affair. People in the Irish Channel—the men were dockworkers and seamen, their wives kept house and raised the children—gathered driftwood from the Mississippi River to stoke the hospital's furnace, and when frequent storms threatened they collected tallow candles and kerosene lamps to keep the hospital open.



SARA TEW MAYO

The eight women doctors depended solely on donations and a small subscription list to keep operating. They dispensed free service and medicine to anyone who needed it and charged small fees to those who could pay. In the first year alone they treated 3,760 patients. Men patients were accepted only in cases of emergency and were kept there until they could be safely transferred to another hospital. There was a strict rule against treating males except for emergencies.

Although the hospital had a consultant staff of thirteen prominent men physicians, the women's pilot project was "received with tolerant shrugs where comment was kindest" among the medical professional circles in the city.

The eight women doctors continued their fight for equality elsewhere. Their primary concern was to gain admittance to the Orleans Parish Medical Society. In 1913 after eight years of discussion(!) women were finally granted membership. There were other distinctions

for the hospital's staff. Clothilde Jaquet was the first native New Orleans woman to study medicine and Elizabeth Bass went on to become the first woman professor of medicine at Tulane University.

The women were not above using personal influence to keep the hospital in business. An interesting anecdote is that of Edith Loebner, one of the eight, who married Marshall Bullard, editor of the *Item*, an influential daily paper in the city. She persuaded him to issue a *Woman's Item* for the May 22, 1907 edition and sell copies for ten cents, giving all proceeds to the hospital. Included in the *Woman's Item* was "A Careful Index of Eligible Men of All Ages Compiled for the Needs of Wishful Spinsters." Needless to say, the paper was a tremendous hit and brought in \$10,000 for the hospital.

tal. That is a fundraising success not to be laughed at, even today.

Dr. Mayo, recognized as the group's leader, led a life full of service and ground breaking events. Besides administering the hospital, she served for many years as a doctor at the St. Anna's Asylum for destitute women and children and was a member of the staff at St. Luke Infirmary and the Baptist Hospital. She persuaded the Sickles Fund, founded by a Philadelphia philanthropist, to provide free drugs for the sick poor in New Orleans, to establish a station in her hospital, and as a result was appointed by the mayor of New Orleans to the fund's commission. She belonged to the YWCA and to the Era Club, an association founded by Kate Gordon and others to work for woman suffrage and social and civic reform. Dr. Mayo received in 1910 the Times-Picayune loving cup, an award given annually for outstanding service to the New Orleans community.

The women's hospital was an instant success. Three years after it opened the state legislature appropriated \$1,000 to it annually to be increased by \$1,000 more each year. This enabled the hospital to expand and construct its own building. A nursing school was added; the first student graduated in 1911.

In 1940, ten years after Sara Mayo died at the age of 61, the ground where the hospital stood was included by the city in a piece of land it needed to build a low rent housing development (now known as the St. Thomas Project). The hospital was moved into a vacant children's home on Jackson Ave. In 1948 it became known as the Sara Mayo Hospital in memory of its kind and generous founder.

By that time a man had been admitted as administrator and the policy toward excluding men began to change. Men were however not Orleans as patients and board members until 1960 when the present building at 625 Jackson Ave. opened with equal care facilities for all. It is not clear exactly why this happened; indications are that the trend in medicine was toward equal hospital facilities, making others uneconomical.

I asked Doris Toups, current administrator of Sara Mayo Hospital, what the famous founder would say if she were able to return to the modern, 146 bed, fully accredited hospital today that bears her name.

Toups laughed and said, "She would roll over in her grave because of all the men. She was dead set against them. She would have never given in."

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