

## **FROM TAKING LIVES TO SAVING LIVES: WWII AND PUBLIC HEALTH AT HOME**

By Laura Clemons

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In the mid-century flush of peace and prosperity following World War II, health care in Cookeville and surrounding counties changed forever. An industry was born, and the men and women of the medical professions – as well as city and county governments and the people they served – never looked back.



The time for change had never been better: Quality medical care here had never been adequate, and as the population grew in the aftermath of the war, the need had grown proportionately. Cookeville itself was still a relatively new town, incorporated in 1903. The municipality spent the first half of the century building infrastructure: public schools, streets and an electrical grid, police and fire departments, water treatment and sewer systems. Competition for tax dollars was fierce.

(Pictured: Dr. Alex Barnes Shipley, a WWII veteran, championed the Putnam County

Health Department for decades. Pictured here during an annual pre-school clinic at the health department with Shipley are Debra Ann Whitefield of Boma and Elizabeth Ann Herd (right) of Baxter, TN. This photo ran in the June 2, 1958, issue of the Putnam County Herald).

Even so, the first significant venture into expanding health care came as early as the 1920s, when a public outcry at the possible closing of the town's first and only hospital prompted the young Cookeville City Commission to buy the modest 15-bed private facility. Built just off the Courthouse Square and operated by a WWI veteran Dr. William A. Howard, the hospital had opened in 1921 but had nearly run its owner into the ground financially; Howard's only chance to save the desperately needed hospital – with the town's only genuine operating room – was to sell it. In 1927, on the eve of the great Depression, he accepted the city's offer of \$18,000 for the two-story building and all its fixtures.

Coinciding with the worst economic failure in U. S. history was a rise in public expectations based on recent advancements in medicine: new diagnostic technology and a better understanding of disease, which led to more effective treatment. People started living longer, and they stayed healthier, thanks to science and battlefield research. Wars, after all, are about saving lives as much as taking them. The fledgling X-ray machine proved itself in WWI field hospitals, and became perhaps the most valuable diagnostic tool ever invented. The new wonder drug aspirin took off like wildfire among doctors and their patients. The concept of vaccination rose in significance as science gained a more profound understanding of bacteria, the root cause of so much disease.

Throughout the 1930s, doctors and other citizens tried to find additional ways to participate in these new opportunities. Year after year, they petitioned the Putnam County Quarterly Court to fund a public health department that could address needs that the small hospital in Cookeville couldn't – the diagnosis and treatment to tuberculosis chief among them. Tuberculosis, once the leading cause of death in the United States, flourished in Tennessee, and for a time, Putnam County led the way in number of TB deaths in the nation.

In April 1941, the County Court approved a new 5-cent tax for every \$100 worth of taxable property, resulting in an annual county appropriation of \$3,000 for the new Putnam County Health Department, which on the Courthouse Square, the department administered the first structured preventative health care

program in Cookeville. It provided immunizations and exams of school children, it offered a limited amount of services for handicapped children, it treated venereal disease, and it hosted a state-sponsored mobile X-ray unit to diagnose tuberculosis.

But just 18 months into these new programs, when most of its personnel joined the armed forces during WWII, the public health unit closed. Only the mobile X-ray service continued in a once-weekly clinic at what was intended to be temporary quarters in the old Staley Home on the corner of Broad Street and Dixie Avenue.

The health department wasn't the only service to suffer during the war, although it certainly suffered the most. By the time WWII had ended, overcrowding at the tiny Cookeville City Hospital had reached critical proportions. The social fallout of WWII had begun, and everything was getting bigger: the population, the economy, advances in medicine, public expectations. The war's greatest medical contribution, antibiotics, revolutionized health care, not simply by saving lives, but by expanding the scope of what the medical community could actually do for its patients over an ever-increasing lifespan.

After 1945, doctors and other medical staff began coming home from the war. Veterans were coming home, too, of course – and the single largest bump in U. S. demographics, the Baby Boom, had begun. A young war widow and single mother, Adell Young, joined the nursing staff at Cookeville City Hospital in 1946.

“Sometimes we had so many babies, we had to put them in boxes on the floor and be careful where we walked,” she said.

City Hospital expanded its services in 1946 with the addition of a laboratory adjacent to the hospital – and it, too, was operated by a WWII veteran, Leroy Harkins, and his wife, Eleen Harkins, both of whom had worked as lab technicians at Camp Forrest, the Army's training base in Tullahoma.

But adding services wasn't enough to meet the growing public's needs; physical space was necessary, too. The Cookeville City Commission began serious discussions about expanding the hospital – although not as sole financier. Commissioners began to look toward Washington for relief. And thus began Cookeville's involvement in another post – WWII revolution in American health care: the Hospital Survey and Construction Act, or Hill-Burton program.

Named for Senate sponsors Lister Hill and Harold H. Burton, the bill was enacted in 1946 as a public works program to help communities whose health care infrastructures has been neglected during the Depression and WWII. Many of the returning veterans were severely impaired by their injuries, but finding too few facilities to address their needs. Others needed work, and the construction of both veteran and civilian hospitals and clinics was a partial – if temporary – solution to that problem as well.

Hill-Burton funding enabled the city and county governments to make what was likely their single largest contributions to the well-being of the region: re-opening the Putnam County Health Department in February 1949 and building and opening City Hospital's replacement, the brand new 50-bed Cookeville General Hospital on the west side of town in December 1950.

In the 65 years since the end of World War II, the health care industry has grown to gigantic proportions in the United States, a phenomenon echoed here, and the most visible symbol of that growth is embodied in what we now know as Cookeville Regional Medical Center.

The modest investment of local, state and federal funding in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has paid off in dividends, few residents could have foreseen.

*Laura Clemons is writing a history of Cookeville Regional Medical Center to coincide with the hospital's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this December. She can be reached at (931) 520-002 or [lauraclemons@frontiernet.net](mailto:lauraclemons@frontiernet.net).*

\*See History-Cookeville Regional Medical Center & Doctors of Putnam County Tennessee at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

## **THE PEOPLE'S HOSPITAL: BOOK CHRONICLES CRMC HISTORY**

by Liz Engel Clark

**COOKEVILLE** -- It was September 1988 when Walter Fitzpatrick stood in front of the Cookeville council, pleading that the city maintain ownership of Cookeville General. It wasn't the first - or the last -- time the fate of the hospital was at question, but Fitzpatrick, told the city's leaders that he'd "invested his heart and soul" in the facility.



He walked away to a standing ovation.

"It was the people's hospital to begin with," Fitzpatrick would say years later.

Those words are now forever cemented, providing inspiration for the title of a book tracing the origins of the hospital in the Cookeville community. The release of "The People's Hospital: A History of Cookeville Regional Medical Center," also coincides with its 60th anniversary -- which is being celebrated this month -- but it is much more than that.

(Pictured: Howard Hospital, built in 1921, and bought by the city of Cookeville in

1927, was located on Broad Street, a block from the Putnam County Courthouse).

The story begins in the 1920s, when Howard Hospital first opened in a brick, two-story bungalow-style building, which the city purchased in 1927, to the days of Cookeville City Hospital, Cookeville General and the present-day CRMC, now a 247-bed facility that spans 18 acres. In between, the community hospital survived two referendums in the 1940s, in which residents had to decide whether to build Cookeville General in the first place, and on the west side of town, and three referendums in the 1990s, where resident had to decide whether the city should maintain ownership of the facility or sell or lease it. One outside bid hit \$140 million.



Local author Laura Clemons entered the project not knowing much about hospitals or health care, especially the colorful details behind the Cookeville medical scene, but says she walked away with dozens of very personal, enlightening and emotional stories.

(Pictured: Georgia Bryant Green, who still lives in Cookeville, worked as a nurse's aide at Cookeville City Hospital on Broad Street in the 1940s. She went to nursing school at a Nashville hospital and then came back home as a surgical nurse, after the new hospital, Cookeville General, was built in the West Side of town in 1950).

Over the course of a three-year period, Clemons conducted more than 100 interviews and combed through more than 50 written sources for the book, including microfilm versions of the Putnam County Herald and present-day Cookeville Herald-Citizen, city council minute books and more.

"I wound up telling the story everybody kept telling me in the interviews," Clemons said. "It was interesting that so many people who were and still are associated with the hospital at different levels, either

as a board or council member, or as a patient, doctor or nurse, all had very similar stories to tell -- and it was all about how this is a public hospital, and that shaped what it has become today."

The idea to chronicle the turbulent history of the hospital came after the death of general practitioner Dr. J.T. DeBerry in 2007. DeBerry was the last of the original physicians and "the only surviving member of the hospital medical staff who bridged the gaps between each iteration of Cookeville's public hospital: Cookeville City Hospital, Cookeville General Hospital and Cookeville Regional Medical Center," Clemons wrote.

"Our Foundation board of directors realized how easy it is to lose the history of an institution," said Gary Curto, executive director of the Foundation at CRMC, which, with its supporters, commissioned the book project. "When Dr. J.T. DeBerry passed away, the board agreed that the time had come to start gathering our history, before more of it was lost."

Clemons said the book contains many surprises - not only were there numerous referendums that helped shape the hospital's fate, but there were several other constants throughout its history -- the ever growing need for more family practitioners and medical specialties, for one, and the shortage of nurses, whom Clemons interviewed more than any other source. Nurses, for example, ran Cookeville City Hospital for more than 20 years.

"It's always been so hard to do what they do over there, I found that surprising, and they've always had to fight for resources," Clemons said. "Some of the stories the nurses told me, especially the older nurses who worked in the '40s, '50s and '60s, it was so hard to do their job. They would be the only person on duty at night with 20-30 sick patients, people who needed a lot of care, and they couldn't get the job done. The burnout rate was incredible."

Today, Cookeville Regional is one of very few public hospitals remaining, Clemons said. "From five physicians to 140, from 30 employees to 1,800, Cookeville Regional Medical Center emerged from the events of the past 60 years as a regional referral center, forging a bond between the people and their hospital that appeared strong enough to withstand the challenges facing U.S. health care in 2010," wrote Clemons, her final words in the book.

"History repeats itself," she said. "The debate over the hospital has often been contentious, but when it's viewed over a continuum - over the events of the past 60-plus years - it's easier to understand why there were differing opinions. A lot was at stake.

"My guess would be that this will all come up again, because the health care industry is an industry now. The competition is more fierce than it's ever been, there are more hospitals, there are more doctors, there are more patients needing help."

The People's Hospital is now on sale at the CRMC Auxiliary gift shop, located in the lobby of the North Patient Tower. The book, a hardcover with 128 pages and more than 250 photographs, costs \$25.

Gift shop hours are 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday.

For more information, call The Foundation at CRMC at 783-2037.

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### **A LOOK AT HISTORY**

Cookevillians interest in local history recently gathered at the Cookeville History Museum for a look at “The People’s Hospital: A History of Cookeville Regional Medical Center, 1950-2010” Written by local author Laura Clemons. “The People’s Hospital” was commissioned by The Foundation at Cookeville Regional Medical Center for release during CRMC’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in December. Gary Curto, far right, executive director of the Foundation, was on hand to donate copies of the history to the Cookeville History Museum and the Putnam County Library. With Curto, from left, are Laura Clemons, Clay Robertson, library director; Judy Duke, museum manager. “The People’s Hospital,” a hardcover 128-page edition containing more than 250 photographs, is on sale at the CRMC Auxiliary Gift Shop, located in the lobby of the North Patient Tower. The cost is \$25. Gift Shop hours are 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 8 a.m. Fridays. For more information, call (931) 783-2037.

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