

{ ONCE UPON A TIME IN QUINCY }

First baby born at Blessing Hospital remains mystery

By ARLIS DITTMER

In October 1952, Myrtle McAhren, administrator of Blessing Hospital, received a letter from Mary Eliza Bushnell McCoy of Wichita Falls, Texas.

She claimed to be the first baby born in Blessing Hospital in 1875. A Quincy friend had sent McCoy an article from the Sept. 21 edition of The Herald-Whig “when the new addition to the hospital was dedicated and opened to the public.”

This addition had a new maternity suite. McAhren wrote that the hospital had received “many interesting bits of history” with the dedication. She asked McCoy if Blessing could use her name and story for a newspaper article.

McCoy was 77 at the time of her correspondence with McAhren. Through a series of five letters she told about her life, but the letters contained little information about her birth or childhood. She married Henry McCoy in 1895. Their daughter Emily was born the same year. They continued to live in Quincy until moving to Texas in 1920. At the time of her correspondence, she was a widow who owned 10 acres of land and raised calves for a living. A foster son, Bill, lived with her. Her letters talked about her children and grandchildren. Throughout her life in Texas, she had corresponded with Susan Hill, who was her godmother and later her Sunday school teacher. Hill lived at 2012 Jersey, and she sent Mary McCoy the

newspaper article about the new hospital wing.

Mary Eliza Bushnell was the daughter of Katie and Hosea Harris. She wasn't sure if her mother worked for Mrs. Bushnell but wrote “Mrs. Bushnell named me Mary Eliza Bushnell after her name.” Mrs. Bushnell's name was Eliza and the name Mary may have been for her daughter who died in 1865. Mary McCoy wrote that her “mother was left sick and alone and Mrs. Bushnell came and took her to Blessing Hospital. Mrs. Bushnell had a room there and she let my mother have it. My mother [is] named Katie Harris, my father was Hosea Harris and I will always love Blessing Hospital. ...” Mary Eliza was born June 30, 1875.

The hospital opened for patients on May 10, 1875, but none were recorded as patients until May 19, 1875. In those days the hospital matron did not make it easy to enter the hospital. There is no way to know for sure if Mary Eliza Bushnell McCoy was the first baby born at Blessing Hospital because the hospital recorded five births in 1875, the first two in June. The report provides no exact date or names. If Mary Eliza Bushnell McCoy was not the first baby, she was definitely the second.

Blessing Hospital was small and had only 63 patients the first year, half of which were charity cases who could not pay. As late as 1890, the Board of Lady Managers was discussing whether to have a mater-



This photo of Blessing Hospital was taken about 1880, five years after Mary Eliza Bushnell claimed she was the first baby born there in 1875. | Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County

nity ward, preferring to refer confinement cases to Woodland Home. However, by 1894 the hospital was publicizing the only maternity ward in Quincy for “destitute women in their hour of need as there is no other hospital or institution of any kind that receives confinement cases.”

The Bushnells were Quincy pioneers and prominent citizens. Eliza Hutson Benedict married Nehemiah Bushnell in 1840 in Millbury, Mass. They left that same year for Quincy. They lived at Eighth and Hampshire. The Bushnells had seven children but only two outlived Eliza Hutson Bushnell, who died in 1900. Nehemiah Bushnell was a law partner of Orville

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Browning and served in the Illinois Legislature. He was president of the Northern Cross railroad, which later became the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad. The town of Bushnell, Ill., is named for him. He died in 1873 and is buried in Woodland Cemetery.

Not much is known about Mary Bushnell McCoy's parents, Katie and Hosea Harris, and unfortunately for research, there was another Hosea Harris living in Quincy

at the time. The June 15, 1875, edition of The Quincy Daily Herald had a police notice that said, “Hosea Harris was up for walloping his wife. It was a pretty bad case according to his wife's story, and the fine was \$20.” That amount translates into \$421.39 in today's money. It is unlikely he would have had the money to pay that fine and may have been in jail or the workhouse. If it were Katie's husband, that might explain why she was “sick and alone” when her

baby was due.

Because of their wealth and prominence in the community, the Bushnell family had servants. The census records list three servants in their home, two black and one mulatto. Census records then and now list race as well as state or country of birth. Perhaps Katie was their laundress, or she could have been a person in need of a benefactor.

Mary McCoy was most anxious to have her story in the newspaper when the hospital wing was dedicated in November 1952. However, the paper did not use it. The story was printed May 10, 1953, in observance of National Hospital Day. The newspaper wanted a baby picture to go with the story, but Mary McCoy said she never had any baby pictures. She sent instead a current picture that was not used.

The last letter from Blessing Hospital was written by Harriet Foresman, administrative assistant, and said the hospital appreciated the picture and “decided our first baby grew up to be a very good-looking woman.”

A memo attached to the letters says, “She (Mrs. McCoy) apparently feels a very keen interest in Blessing Hospital and concludes her letter with, ‘you know I love to write and thank all of you.’”

Arlis Dittmer is a retired medical librarian. During her 26 years with Blessing Health System, she became interested in medical and nursing history — both topics frequently overlooked in history.