

The History of Christmas Celebrations at Bryce Hospital

MONTGOMERY – Christmas has been a special time of the year for staff and patients at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, from the hospital's inception to the present. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the institution that opened its doors in 1861. The first superintendent of the hospital was Dr. Peter Bryce, the man for whom the institution was eventually named. The young Dr. Bryce and his new bride, Mrs. Ellen Bryce, were actively involved in the Tuscaloosa community, and many community events took place in the hospital auditorium, one of the largest theater settings in the city at that time.

To gain a sense of what early Christmas celebrations were like, it is helpful to remember that the white domed hospital was constructed to mirror the Victorian hotels and resorts that were common in the nineteenth century. Patients had access to the beautiful grounds, and dinner was served with china on white tablecloth-dressed tables. The hospital was decorated inside and outside. There was music in the auditorium, often lead by Mrs. Bryce, with both traditional carols and songs composed by patients. It was said that even Dr. Bryce wrote several carols for the celebration. The dining rooms and hallways were cheerfully decorated, and the auditorium served as the setting for a large Christmas tree.

As with most families, food was always an important part of the holiday tradition. In the hospital archives there is a story from Christmas 1866 that tells about staff adding another hog to the menu so every patient could get a "choice piece of meat." Adding another hog was especially significant when one considers the poverty of the war-torn South in 1866. Fortunately, all meals for many decades came from the hospital farms, but even those resources were scarce at times. There are other documents that describe the festive holiday atmosphere of the 1870s. The editor of the patient newspaper, *The Meteor*, wrote about the huge Christmas tree and the abundance of gifts. He asked his fellow patients to pray for those on the outside that might not have such a wonderful place to live and receive gifts due to the depressed state of the economy. A decade later *The Meteor* editor wrote an article to thank all the volunteers from the community that made their Christmas better despite the hard times both the institution and the community were facing. He also asked for blessings for everyone on earth, except the editors of newspapers refusing to donate to the hospital. For his fellow editors on the outside, he asked that they "get what they deserved" at Christmas.

For most of the twentieth century, Christmas continued to be commemorated as an extended sequence of events. It was truly a seasonal celebration. There were cantatas, pageants and many parties. The hospital was decorated for at least a week, and the Christmas day menu was traditional. A menu from the early 1940s featured a selection of pork, turkey, dressing, string beans, baked corn and ambrosia for desert. Ambrosia is complex and arduous to make! Including it as a dessert item shows how

important the Christmas meal was for patients and staff. Eventually, when the hospital became overcrowded, these banquets were less bountiful. However, the records tell of many occasions where staff and community volunteers worked to lift the spirits of patients with special parties and gifts during the season.

Operation Santa Claus is an example. Operation Santa Claus began in 1952 as an effort to provide gifts for patients who did not have family connections. Over the years it expanded to involve community mental health group homes in order to include consumers that would not otherwise receive gifts. The project is now managed by Mental Health America of Alabama. Volunteers assemble and distribute gifts each year to more than 5,000 people with mental illnesses.

In 2010, the Adolescent Unit was moved via contract from Bryce Hospital to UAB. The Bryce Harley Ride had become an annual event in Tuscaloosa as members of the Heart of Dixie Harley Owners Group drove their bikes up to the hospital loaded with gifts. Graciously, they have continued the ride, which now stops at UAB, to provide gifts for the adolescent patients. In recent years Pelham and Homewood High School students and faculty have provided Christmas parties and refreshments for the adult patients at Bryce Hospital. Students have one-on-one interaction with the patients to ensure they have someone to wish them a happy holiday.

The hospital staff and community volunteers continue the 150-year tradition of making Christmas at Bryce a festive and enjoyable season. With the secularization of our society, there have been open debates at the hospital each year about how the holiday should be celebrated. Some have suggested that it should be secular with presentations on the history of traditions in this country, or how the season is celebrated in other countries. While secularization and diversity are respected, the 150-year tradition of Christmas at Bryce continues. One message has remained constant through the decades – the message of love.