

M*A*S*H and HMOs in the desert

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By Ann Japenga

All of you screenwriters lounging by hotel pools, I'm going to save you the trouble of inventing your next hospital drama. Here it is:

A blue-eyed blonde grows up in Indio and graduates from Coachella Valley Union High School. She becomes a nurse and, in 1933, goes to work in one of the more isolated hospitals in the United States, a 12-bed wooden hut near Desert Center that serves the hard-rock miners of the Colorado River Aqueduct. Think M*A*S*H* with cactus, because that is what Contractors General Hospital most resembled.

Last month's column (November 2004) told about the ambitious aqueduct project in which some 35,000 men laid a pipeline 242 miles across desert and under mountains, all to bring Colorado River water to Los Angeles. Well, some 54 of those men died on the job. Thousands suffered broken legs, arms and fingers, powder headaches from standing too close to dynamite, and traumatic injuries from tunnel cave-ins.

To serve these patients, a young doctor named Sidney Garfield - a dapper fellow fond of silk shirts and roadsters - set up an under-equipped hospital on the edge of nowhere.

Like the M*A*S*H crew, Garfield and his nurse, Betty Runyen, were nonchalant about blood and gore. Betty drove the makeshift ambulance - a hearse borrowed from an Indio mortician. When the doctor was away, the 21-year-old nurse coolly pumped morphine into men crushed by cars.

That's all, you say? A story of a scrappy nurse in a primitive hospital surrounded by thousands of hard-drinking blasters and drillers?

No, it turns out that Contractors General Hospital and nurse Betty are players in an even bigger drama - the creation of the HMO system in this country. When the desert hospital fell on hard times, Garfield and a business partner hit on the idea of having aqueduct workers pay 5 cents a day as prepayment for medical services.

The scheme worked, and later Garfield joined forces with industrialist Henry J. Kaiser to found similar hospitals at Grand Coulee Dam in Washington and at Kaiser's World War II shipyards in Richmond, Calif. The tiny desert hospital became the catalyst for the giant Kaiser Permanente health system, and all HMOs to follow.

The fact that we know about Betty Runyen's role in all this today is largely due to the detective work of Steve Gilford, a historian who specializes in the history of Kaiser Permanente. Gilford spent years trying to track down Runyen and eventually located her son, Michael Baecker, in Grass Valley. Baecker set up an introduction and Gilford was able to meet Betty Runyen Baecker, then 81.

Betty's descriptions of the outback hospital sound more like a rustic resort than a medical facility. Betty planted a cactus garden in front of the hospital (with prime specimens brought in on stretchers) and a visiting doctor built an outdoor barbecue. There were painted rock paths and a pond with ducks.

The staff played hours of Ping-Pong on a table situated with a fine view of the Eagle Mountains. They went for cruises in the starry desert in Garfield's Buick roadster; and there were roller skating expeditions in the unfinished aqueduct.

To pass the time between patients, Betty and friends made up ditties about the aqueduct camps and towns: The town of Rice is a den of vice Where Cactus Kate does reign.

She holds her court with a bottle of port And her threats are not in vain .

Sometimes Betty sat on the front porch of the hospital and plinked at medicine bottles with Garfield's varmint rifle. Eventually patients would show up and be logged in by their colorful camp names: Killer Red, Tiger Whitey, Ace and Dad. Because of the heat, most operations were done early in the morning with surgeon Garfield standing in puddles of sweat.

Betty's good humor was as important as Sidney's surgical skills because, sometimes, there was little they could do but stand by a man as he died. The hospital was lowtech and spartan. They didn't even have a pair of forceps to deliver the two babies born there.

Betty Runyen died in 1999. Her sidekick Garfield - Hawkeye to her Hotlips - went on to be named one of the 100 most important physicians in US history. The site of their hospital is now a California State Historical Landmark.



While visiting the long-deserted hospital site, BLM archaeologist Wanda Raschkow recently found medical paraphernalia from the 1930S as well as a scatter of broken medicine bottles - remnants of Betty's target practice?

*Dr. Sidney Garfield, left, Betty Runyen, unidentified man.
Courtesy of the family of Betty Runyen Baecker*