

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 220: MERCY MEDICAL CENTER

TO SHIELD THE SICK IS TO SERVE GOD

1882 a handful of Sisters of Mercy from St. Louis began constructing their hospitals in Colorado, starting with Denver, Manitou, Cripple Creek, Ouray and last but not least, Durango. Their motto – “To shield the sick is to serve God.” The women spent their first night in Durango sleeping in the loft of a barn next to St. Columba Church. It was a hard life, and two of the religious women returned to St. Louis after the first year, and were replaced by other young women.

The informal hospital they founded in Durango began with less than ten beds total in April of 1882. Durango was still in its infancy at

this time, with mostly cowboys, miners, and railroad workers taking residence, along with the businesses that served them – including saloons and brothels.

Mother Mary John Baptist Meyers, age 35, took out a \$10,000 loan at 8% interest to build a more suitable hospital, and subsequently, an orphanage with two schools for the children, one on each side of the Animas River – so that children would not have to cross the river on what was a rather rickety bridge to get to school.

On September 1, 1882, the Sisters of Mercy admitted their first patient at that hospital. The Durango Herald wrote that “This is a truly a noble and much needed institution and it merits the most generous support of

our people . . . the Sisters are experienced and trained nurses and their new hospital will be a great boon in Southwestern Colorado.” The Durango Male Quartet gave a benefit performance for the Sisters, and other fundraising activities were arranged. Sister Kathleen O'Brien wrote in *Journeys* (a newspaper at the time) that Mother Baptist “was known for her ‘incessant activity,’ for her charm and for her ability to involve others in her projects. She and the other pioneer Colorado Sisters were not afraid to begin projects in the most rugged and inaccessible mountain towns and they were not afraid to terminate those projects when the need for them no longer existed. This was a characteristic very fitting for the ‘boom and bust’ gold and silver mining milieu of Colorado at the turn of the century.”



Mother Mary John Baptist Meyers. Photo Courtesy of Mercy

CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY

The *Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy* was founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1831 by Catherine McAuley some years after she had inherited a large sum of money from relatives and had decided to create a new religious

congregation of women dedicated to service to the poor. She and two other women entered the *Convent of the Presentation Sisters* in Dublin in 1830 to begin preparation, formally founding this new community on

December 12, 1831.

McAuley served ten years as a Sister of Mercy before passing, and by the time of her death in 1841, there were 150 Sisters of Mercy and counting.



Painting of Catherine McAuley

1884 AND ON

Just prior to a smallpox outbreak in May of 1884 the sisters had begun planning for a newer, larger establishment. In 1885 the sisters opened the two-story sandstone 30'x50' building at 375 East Park Avenue that would come to be known as Mercy Hospital of the San Juan Basin (some referred to it as the "Stone Hospital"), with a total of 25 beds. Major additions took place in 1892, 1931, and 1952, and over the following 50 years. Older sections of the facility were demolished to make room for new and in 1974 the name was changed to Mercy Medical Center.

Operating at full capacity by the late 1990's it was decided to relocate Mercy Medical Center to the newly annexed Grandview area of Durango. A 212,000 square foot state of the art building was constructed with plenty of room to expand. The original Mercy Hospital was transformed into



Mercy Regional Medical Center celebrated its 50th anniversary, its "Golden Jubilee," in 1934. Nuns, nurses, clergy and doctors gathered in front of the old Mercy Medical Center for the occasion. *Photo Courtesy Mercy Archives*

MERCY TODAY

Mercy is a not-for-profit, full service, acute care hospital designated as a Level III trauma center. As a not-for-profit medical center, Mercy is committed to improving the health and wellness of the communities it serves and the individuals who receive care at the hospital. Medical staff at Mercy is comprised of 135 board-certified physicians who represent 35 medical specialties and sub-specialties. Mercy is one of the largest employers in Durango with more than 800 full and part-time employees. The facility



Sister Mary Pauline Sponsel. Circa 1930s, shows her working in the "operating department" at Mercy. *Photo courtesy of Mercy Archives*

what is now the Durango Public Library. The original stone cross is now located inside the ground floor entrance to the new hospital at Three Springs. Sisters of Mercy no longer work at Mercy Medical Center. And although the name has changed over the years, the word Mercy has never left its title.

The definition of Mercy reads: compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm; performed out of a desire to relieve suffering; motivated by compassion. Mercy and compassion is the legacy a handful of nuns brought to Durango in 1882.

IN THE UNITED STATES, THERE ARE OVER 4,700 SISTERS OF MERCY, AND WORLDWIDE, OVER 10,000 MEMBERS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, HOUSING, LONG-TERM CARE, AND SPIRITUAL MINISTRIES

has 82 beds (all private rooms) and features a healing garden, labyrinth, chapel, and one of the largest artwork collections in Colorado.

