

Jennie Nicol Memorial Health Center

That Pi Beta Phi would establish a public health clinic on the campus of its settlement school was, from the moment the first teacher arrived in Gatlinburg in February 1912, a virtual given. Existing settlement schools in the region, such as the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, had implemented such programs, and the Settlement School Committee and staff was eager to see a similar program established in the valley of the Little Pigeon. And so, after a series of frustrating delays--the financial difficulties and resource rationing occasioned by the United States' entry into the First World War prevented the fraternity from acquiring supplies and hiring a contractor--the Settlement School Committee purchased a small cottage from Gatlinburg resident Andrew Ogle in 1922, and converted it into a clinic. Dubbed the Jennie Nicol Memorial Health Center in honor of Pi Beta Phi founding member Jennie Nicol M. D., this clinic would serve the health care needs of Gatlinburg residents, as well as their neighbors in nearby smaller communities, for the next forty-three years.

The JNMHC was small; and yet, it proved more than adequate to meet the settlement school's immediate needs. It featured: a nurse's office; an emergency operating room complete with a hospital bed; a bathroom outfitted with its own kerosene hot-water heater; and a work room/laboratory that housed sinks, a work table, and a "three-burner oil stove." Practically all of the medical supplies and furnishings had been donated to the settlement school by Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Clubs and active members. The Boston Alumnae Club, for example, provided a white enamel medicine cabinet for the nurse's office, while the Houston Club sent curtains. The blankets, pillow cases, and linens used in treating patients were gifts from Pi Beta Phi actives in

Iowa, and the New York Alumnae Club provided demonstration dolls for use in “well-baby” clinics and home economics classes.

In regard to its function, the JNMHC might best be described as a public medical clinic, not unlike the free clinics operated by most U. S. communities today. For a nominal fee, the settlement school nurse provided residents with a variety of services: inoculations against a host of infectious diseases, such as diphtheria and smallpox; first aid for cuts, scrapes, and broken bones; physical examinations for babies and school-aged children; and advice regarding nutrition and personal hygiene. On occasion, however, the JNMHC also served as a makeshift hospital where visiting doctors from Knoxville and Sevierville performed tonsillectomies, appendectomies, and other minor surgeries; a dentist’s office where visiting dentists pulled teeth and filled cavities; or an optometrist’s office where visiting eye doctors performed vision tests and prescribed corrective lenses. There was, according to Nurse Phyllis Higinbotham, ample opportunity to perform such work. In her 1921 report to the Settlement School Committee, Higinbotham noted that “a classroom examination of eyes and mouths showed 79% needing attention of some kind -- teeth, tonsils, etc,” and that “the result of the eye and hearing tests will probably swell this number.”

In addition to its role as a public health clinic, the JNMHC also served as a clearinghouse for donated medical supplies. Among the items offered free of charge to Gatlinburg families were baby clothes, crutches, splints, hot water bottles, and other hard-to-come-by items. The settlement school’s only stipulation on loaning supplies to needy families was that they wash the items before returning them to the JNMHC.

By the early 1940s, the JNMHC was, thanks to a combination of harsh mountain weather, termite infestations, and constant use, severely dilapidated and in need of major repairs. Hoping

to influence the Pi Beta Phi Grand Council, the Settlement School Committee, Alumnae Clubs, and active Pi Phis to make renovating the clinic a priority, Pi Phi and Settlement School teacher Agnes Wright Spring described the cottage's deplorable condition in the March 1943 edition of the Arrow of Pi Beta Phi. "The large rocks near the doors," she wrote, "are used to prop the warped doors shut or open, as desired. . . . The basement is moldy and the foundations are wobbly from the constant attack of termites." It would, however, take time for the fraternity to act, for just as financial difficulties and resources scarcities arising from the First World War had prevented the Grand Council and Settlement School Committee from moving on the hospital project in 1914, the Second World War, and the need to conserve funds, now prevented it from addressing the needs of the JNMHC. It was not until 1947 that the Settlement School Committee approved plans for a new JNMHC, to be built on the Gatlinburg Parkway adjacent to the Arrowcraft Shop. Funding for construction came primarily in the form of several large donations, and the new hospital was ready for occupancy in the summer of 1948.

On settling into the new building, nurse Chalmers resumed her regular duties. There were, after all, still plenty of students to examine, inoculations to give, and first aid to administer. With the advent of the Cold War, however, the JNMHC acquired an unexpected new duty: that of serving as a rallying point for civilians, soldiers, and government employees in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack. Gatlinburg stood in close proximity to three of the most important sites in the burgeoning U. S. military-industrial complex: Oak Ridge, Tennessee, home to numerous nuclear weapons production facilities; Knoxville, Tennessee, headquarters of the Tennessee Valley Authority; and Alcoa, Tennessee, named for the sprawling Aluminum Company of America plant that represented its primary industry, and which provided U. S. defense contractors with much of their aluminum. And yet, at the same time, the city was situated far

enough away from these potential targets to survive a nuclear attack (or so it was assumed).

How the JNMHC would have responded to such a crisis is, thankfully, unknown; suffice to say that nurse Chalmers and the settlement school staff would doubtless have acquitted themselves well.

So it went for the next twenty years: Gatlinburg residents young and old patronized the JNMHC, and the JNMHC did its best to meet their needs. “Within its . . . walls,” nurse Chalmers insisted, one encountered “all the problems of living of the entire [Gatlinburg] community. That will be so as long as we continue to serve.”

Like all good things, however, the little clinic eventually outlived its usefulness. In 1950, a certain Dr. Shilling established a full-time medical practice in Gatlinburg, relieving the JNMHC of much of its patient load. Sevierville hailed the arrival of a fully-modern hospital fourteen years later, prompting Settlement School Director Marion Mueller to muse that “there seems to be less need for our school nurse. Hence, that service doubtless will be taken care of by the county eventually.” Mueller was correct. In 1965, Sevier County assumed financial responsibility for public health in Gatlinburg, relieving Pi Beta Phi of the need to continue operating the JNMHC. And so, with the little fanfare, the clinic passed into history on August 31 of that year. The building, which still stands on the former settlement school campus, adjacent to the Arrowcraft shop, has since been transformed into office space for employees of the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts.