



VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL
BOISE, IDAHO

HISTORY

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL

Station No. 531

Boise, Idaho 83702

The Boise Veterans Administration Hospital has had an unusually colorful background, one which is woven in with the history of the Northwest--woven out of buckskin bags of gold dust, placer mining camps, Indian massacres and the coming of civilization.

A rich gold strike on Grimes Creek, in the Boise Basin, mushroomed scattered placer mining camps, overnight, into a bustling and thriving settlement of 20,000, known as Idaho City. For the protection of these settlers, with them as a basis for a permanent community civilization, a Fort was established in 1863, first known as Fort Boise, later as Boise Barracks. The government's interest in establishing this fort was two-fold: It felt the necessity of protecting newcomers from the maraudings of hostile and discontented Indians; and, since many of those coming to the Basin sympathized with the South in the Civil War it felt that an Army Post was vital to maintaining this rich section as a loyal unit to the Union.

So, Major Pinkney Lugenbeel, 9th U.S. Infantry, was commissioned to establish a military post near the Boise Basin.

- 1 -

"Les Bois, Les Bois!" (The Woods, The Woods!) was the cry of a weary French Canadian trapper accompanying the U.S. troops when first he glimpsed the future site of Idaho's largest city. And welcome it was, too, after an arduous trek across miles of arid, desolate terrain, marking the Old Oregon Trail.

Major Lugenbeel first encamped near the present site, on June 28, 1863, with Companies D, F, G and H, 1st Washington Territory Infantry, and a detachment of the 1st Oregon Cavalry.

He chose as a site for the Post, land at the foot of the mountains, about a mile from the Boise River, adjoining the trail connecting Idaho City with the recently discovered Owyhee Mines. Natural drainage from Cottonwood Creek, and the proximity to hard sandstone from the hills for building purposes, were factors in the selection of the site for the Fort. He chose the name Fort Boise because of an old trading station established by the Hudson Bay Company in 1834 not far from the mouth of the Boise River, known as Old Fort Boise.

During 1863 and 1864, quarters and other buildings were erected to accommodate two Companies. Still standing--and in use by this Hospital--is Quarters No. 1, a low sandstone building constructed for staff personnel, completed the fall of 1863. Also completed that same fall (1863) and with an eye to "first things first" was Building No. 6 for use by the Paymaster. Sandstone from the quarries of nearby hills was used for this construction.

- 2 -

And through its portals traipsed many a soldier for his hard-earned stipend - as evidenced by the sandstone doorsills, now worn thin. Yes, Bldg. 6 is still standing, and is in active use by the VA Hospital in 1973.

In 1885, Building 13 was built to house the expanding administrative affairs of the station. Utilitarian brick now replaced the romantic sandstone, and Bldg. 13 still stands, in active use, as the first brick building constructed here.

Record has it that even from its establishment, the Boise Barracks added much to the color and gaiety of the social life of Boise City, its life centering around that of the Garrison. The officers were well seasoned, with high experience. Tennis, tea parties, riding parties with the spirited horses of the Cavalry, beautifully appointed dinner parties, dancing in the Army Hall, all swelled the social calendar. But during duty hours, the serious business of planning and operations continued.

In the early 1900's, the need for expanded medical facilities became apparent, and three more buildings were constructed. Bldg. 29, (our recreation facilities now), Bldg. 33 and Bldg. 27 were all erected in 1907. 1906 had seen the construction of Bldg. 28, which has served as our Laundry for many years. Bldg. 33 functioned as an office building through 1967, and Bldg. 27 still houses hospital wards. In 1919, Bldg. 34 came along, and throughout the years has been devoted to the issuance of supplies.

- 3 -

1909, too, had been a banner year, with the completed structure of Bldgs. 43 and 48 (warehouses) and Quarters 44 and 45. All are still in use. So the grounds as we now know them, were beginning to shape up. There was no landscaping, as such, but hands were busy planting saplings, and the dusty trail that wound in from the front entrance had now become a patterned road, albeit still a dusty one.

Ah, the hustle and bustle of the Army Post - the drills and parades on the broad parade grounds - the pomp and display of the Cavalry ... with Reveille to greet each busy day and Taps to salute the end of honest labor. No man regretted his "Boise Tour" and the transfers-out departed with lagging step and mournful heart.

So the years rolled around until 1912 when the War Department found it must arrive at the decision to give up its small army posts and concentrate on a few large ones. One by one the doors were closed and the halls grew silent-no shadows in the summer's sun now ... no footprints in winter's snow. Only the station knew this was not the end .. that the people would return .. and the helping hand again be outstretched on this land dedicated to service.

For seven years, the buildings stood empty, except for some occasional use of the stables and storage space by the National Guard. During the latter part of this period, concentrated effort began to be exerted by local citizens to utilize the Post as a Public Health Hospital. Approval of this was finally accomplished, and an agreement was signed on November 20, 1919

- 4 -

between the Treasury Department, the Secretary of War, and the Bureau of Public Health.

For a year or two, the sick and injured of World War I veterans were cared for under the Public Health Service. The need for a centralized organization for the care of all veterans was recognized, and the Act creating the Veterans Bureau was signed on August 9, 1921.

On April 1, 1922, Congress passed the hospital bill, providing that hospital care and treatment should be made available for veterans of the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurrection, and the Boxer Rebellion who were afflicted with neuropsychiatric and tubercular diseases. This was the first legislation which provided care for ex-servicemen other than those of the World War, and the first time that hospital treatment was made available, outside of soldiers' homes, for diseases other than those of service origin.

It was under the terms of this bill that the Public Health Hospital in Boise was turned over to the Veterans Bureau on an indefinite lease from the War Department.

This same year (1922) saw construction of "temporary" Building No. 54, to house the neuropsychiatric patients. Building 33 (1906) was restricted for the care of tubercular patients. Bldg. 27 (1907) was designated for the care of general medical and surgical patients. Although not all recommendations for physical plant improvements were approved, more than \$25,000 was

- 5 -

spent in reconditioning certain buildings, and by 1925, the hospital was adequately equipped to care for 235 patients comfortably. It furnished employment for 110 persons, and that year spent, for equipment, food, salaries and maintenance, the imposing sum of \$220,000.

There was considerable concern on the part of servicemen and citizens of Idaho that the War Department might request the return of the hospital for the purpose of housing troops. Following an active campaign of protest, on December 7, 1927, General Frank Hines, Director of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, announced that the War Department had indefinitely postponed its plans for this purpose. But it was not until February 7, 1938 that all grounds, consisting of 110 acres, were transferred from the War Department to the Veterans Administration by Executive Order.

The swiftly flying years saw many changes and improvements. In 1929, an electric passenger elevator was installed in Bldg. 27, at a cost of \$3,855. It cost almost twice that much to fence the grounds and install the front gate, that same year. Bldg 67, "Infirmary Building and Connecting Corridor" was completed in 1932 for \$233,493, and later that year an elevator added, for another \$8,000. 1932 also saw the first planned traces of landscaping with the planting of a screen of trees and shrubs. The steam distribution system was extended in 1934 (\$24,500), following the construction in 1933 of the garage and attendants' quarters.

On Memorial Day 1930, there were 181 patients in the hospital - the largest number in its Veterans Bureau existence. On May 1, 1929 the Veterans Bureau administrative offices had moved from a downtown loc-

ation to the station grounds. There were now 7 divisions in the Boise Bureau: Legal, Medical, Accounting, Supply, Adjudication, Disbursing and Utilities. The Bureau plant was like a miniature city.

During the middle 1930's, the neuropsychiatric and tubercular patients were transferred to specialized Veterans Bureau Hospitals, and a group of veterans, known as "Domiciliaries" who were not so much patients as old soldiers - and this their home - were housed in Bldgs. 33 and 54. There they stayed until January 1947 when they, too, were transferred to specialized facilities.

The years since 1946 have seen more changes and improvements ... a degree of activity beyond the scope of the dreams of that small group of workers who toiled to complete Quarters No. 1 before the snows came in 1863. Bldg. 77, housing our Dietetic Service, was completed in 1951. The grounds have been landscaped and are now one of the attractions of the city. Modern equipment and the latest administrative and medical techniques are a constant goal in our service to veterans. The Regional Office was separated for a time into a downtown building, then operations were consolidated into a Center from May, 1955, to October 2, 1972.

Since then, continuing the Fort's tradition of public service, 35 acres of the original 110 have been released to other Federal Agencies and the State of Idaho. Both the Army Reserve Training Center and the new Federal Building were built on land excessed by the Veterans Administration, as was the Idaho Veterans Home. The Regional Office is now located on the 7th floor of the Federal Building, administering benefits to Idaho's 102,000 veterans.

- 7 -

Over one hundred years ago, Fort Boise was established for the protection of life and the preservation of peace. In its place today stands Boise Veterans Administration Hospital, dedicated to the protection of the welfare and health and the preservation of life of our nation's war veterans.

Little they knew - that brave Escort
When first they trekked across this land
And carved the stone to build the Fort
And in the wilderness made their stand

Little they knew - as they made their rounds
How the years would crown their memory
And how those who followed on these grounds
Would share with them a destiny

A common mission - - - a common goal
Down through the years, for all to see -
Devotion to a service role
Since first the Fort made history.

No greater heritage than this creed:
A helping hand in time of need.

- 8 -

April 1973