

Healing the Children: The North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital

September 12, 2009 through March 6, 2010



Construction in 1920

This unique exhibit featured oral histories from the patients and staff, photographs, and artifacts relating to NCOH. The North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital treated a wide range of diseases and conditions - from birth defects to polio to burns. NCOH was one of the leading orthopedic hospitals in the country and developed procedures still being used by doctors today. The hospital was also a major teaching institution for resident physicians and nurses. The hospital closed in 1979, but the building still remains on New Hope Road in Gastonia.

In 1909, a local businessman, Robert B. Babington, became interested in creating a school for handicapped children. After becoming aware of the many surgical procedures available to help these children, he decided instead to start an effort to build the first state supported orthopedic hospital in North Carolina. His dream was to give free health care to those who could not afford it. After twelve years of lobbying individual legislators and making appeals to the state, the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital (NCOH) was officially opened on July 1, 1921.

The only requirements for admission were: 1) to be a white child of sound mind under 15 years of age, 2) be a resident of North Carolina, and 3) be without means to pay for the medical treatment needed. Later these requirements were amended to include children of other races and raise the age limit to 16.

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Patients at NCOH

Congenital Disorders and Birth Defects

A large majority of the conditions treated at NCOH could be attributed to a congenital disorder or birth defect. A congenital disorder involves damage to a developing baby, which could be a result of a genetic condition, physical damage to the baby, or a variety of other developmental issues. Another major source of many birth defects during this time was Thalidomide, a drug

given for the treatment of morning sickness to thousands of women between 1957 and the early 1960s.



Patient with bowlegs

Many people are born with some type of congenital abnormality. It could be something as simple as a third nipple or dimples over the lower spine. Other types of disorders are more severe and can make it difficult to function normally. A few of the main conditions that were treated at the hospital included:

- **Club foot** – where the foot is twisted at a sharp angle to the ankle.
- **Polydactyly** – having more than the normal number of fingers or toes.

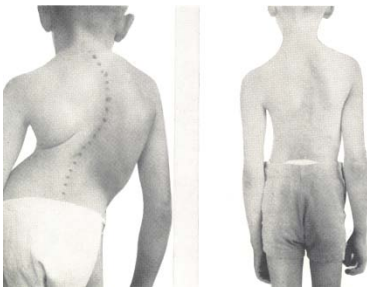
- **Ectrodactyly** – middle fingers or toes are missing giving the hands or feet the appearance of ‘lobster claws.’ Commonly called ‘Lobster Claw Syndrome.’
- **Spina bifida** - occurs when the tissue surrounding the developing spinal cord of a fetus doesn't close properly.
- **Bowlegs** – usually due to a lack of Vitamin D, the bones in the legs curve outward.
- **Dislocated hip** – dislocation is an injury to your joint in which the ends of your bones are forced from their normal positions.
- **Flat-foot** – marked by the arch of your foot being flattened.
- **Torticollis** – a condition in which your neck muscles contract involuntarily, causing your head to twist to one side.



Patient with Lobster claw

The treatment for most of these disorders was surgery to correct the problem, followed by physical therapy.

Scoliosis



Scoliosis patient before & after

Scoliosis is a condition in which a person's spine is curved from side to side and sometimes rotated. In x-rays it can appear as if the spine is shaped like an “S” or a “C”. This type of orthopedic condition mainly affects girls and is usually hereditary. In less severe cases, a child may be able to wear a brace that stops the progression of the curve, but it is not a cure. If surgery was required, the vertebrae of the spine was fused or joined together to help straighten the spine and then held together with rods or wires. Afterwards, the patient was put in an almost full body cast. This was a very long process and may have had to be done multiple times.

In 1962, Dr. Paul Harrington visited NCOH to demonstrate the “Harrington Rod” internal fixation device for scoliosis. Many people were on hand that day to observe the two patients who were having surgery for scoliosis. One of the nurses, Nancy Hunter, remembered –

“...the doctors were reaching over the operative field with their cameras wanting to get pictures of the instrumentation. I was afraid a flashbulb or a visiting doctor would fall into the wound”.

Polio/Infantile Paralysis

The polio epidemic (or infantile paralysis) contributed greatly to the history of NCOH. Polio is a highly contagious infectious disease that can lead to muscle weakness and paralysis (or the inability to walk). In almost 90% of polio infections there are no visual symptoms, however the remaining 10% of cases can be severe. In 1944, NCOH opened an emergency polio ward with 46 beds. The polio epidemic continued into the late 1940s, with the peak year being 1948.



Polio Patient

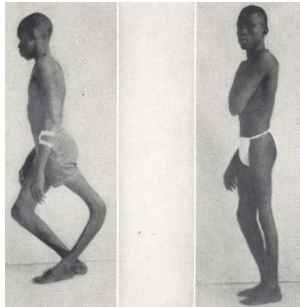
No cure for polio exists, but one of the treatments for polio victims is a negative pressure ventilator or as most people know it, an iron lung. Nurse Nancy Hunter remembers “iron lungs so loud visitors to the laundry man, Mr. Padgett, had to leave. Parents and family camped with tents, cots, and chairs on the NCOH lawn. It was August, and it was hot.”



Patient in iron lung

Since the development of the polio vaccines by Dr. Jonas Salk in 1952 and Dr. Albert Sabin in 1962, cases of polio in the United States and Europe have decreased dramatically. In areas of Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan, polio continues to affect children and adults.

Tuberculosis, Osteomyelitis, and Burns



TB patient before & after

Tuberculosis is caused by a bacterial infection and usually attacks the lungs. It can also affect the bones, joints and even the skin. NCOH dealt mainly with tuberculosis of the joints.

Osteomyelitis, which is a bacterial infection of the bone or bone marrow, was often treated at the hospital as well. The main causes of this infection are bacteria entering the bloodstream through a wound, a continuously infected surgical site, or from the fixation of bones or root-canaled teeth. In children, osteomyelitis usually affects the long bones – legs and arms. Some patients require surgical debridement (removal of the infected skin), and in severe cases the patient may lose his/her limb.

NCOH also treated patients who had first, second, and third degree **burns**. Once the patient was stable, they would receive skins grafts and reconstructive surgery, depending on the severity of the burns. The physicians at NCOH were able to do some amazing work to repair the damage to these children.



Burn patient before & after

Patient Clinics



Mothers waiting in line with children for clinic

Each Tuesday, a clinic was held at NCOH for former patients to receive a check-up or for children with less severe conditions to receive treatment. Reaching beyond the Gaston County area, many clinics were established to aid in diagnosis and referral of patients to NCOH. The first of these clinics was started in Wilson, NC in April of 1924.

Other clinics followed, including one of the largest, the Goldsboro Clinic, also known as the Eastern Carolina Clinic of NCOH. It was opened in August of 1928 to serve children living in the eastern part of North Carolina who could not travel the distance to Gastonia. On the third Thursday morning of each month, the chief surgeon from NCOH, a resident surgeon, a nurse and a secretary would travel to Goldsboro and treat as many patients as they could see in one morning. An average of 60 patients were seen each month, with many of these being former patients of NCOH reporting to the clinic for a check-up. A few new patients were seen as well, some of who were then sent on to the hospital for treatment.

Special Visitors



Roy Rogers at NCOH

One of the goals at the hospital was to provide each child with everything they needed, from their medical treatments to schooling and even entertainment to keep their spirits up. Many celebrities visited NCOH throughout the years, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, actors Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and singer Kate Smith.

Local entertainer, Fred Kirby, visited the hospital many times and almost every child who stayed at NCOH for any length of time remembers at least one of his appearances. Kate Smith arrived at the hospital with a sore throat and could not sing, but after the African American children sang for her, she cried and sang as planned. Many celebrities would send photos and autographs to the children.



Fred Kirby entertaining at NCOH

Lending a Helping Hand

The North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital was a success, due in large part to the many community volunteers who provided the children with the additional love and care they needed to fully recover from their conditions. Some of these volunteers are highlighted here.



Lion's Club

The Lion's Club provided the patients at NCOH with many fun activities as well as transportation to other events outside the hospital, including the annual Ivey's store Christmas party. One of the more famous events held at the hospital was the Annual Watermelon Feast, started in 1939, sponsored by the Gastonia Lion's Club.

Watermelon Feast at NCOH

Daughters of the American Revolution

In 1940 and 1941 the William Gaston chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) of Gaston County started a museum at the hospital, which included the state and territorial flags, historic china plates, autographs of prominent personalities, a doll collection and an Indian scene. When the museum closed in 1979, all of the artifacts were returned to the DAR. Since then, the Daughters have donated the majority of the items to the Gaston County Museum.

Red Cross

The Gray Ladies from the Red Cross Chapter were regular volunteers at the hospital. They would sometimes aid with occupational therapy, direct games in the wards, help in the sewing room and other areas, and even take over personal shopping for the children. They were very popular with the children - "*not only because they are so pretty, but because they are so interested in what we are doing*", commented one child.



Red Cross nurses with patients

Shriners



Christmas with the Shriners

The Shriners played a large role in the lives of the children at NCOH. Each Christmas they would bring presents to the children and would help sponsor the annual Christmas play that was produced by the patients and staff.

Tiny Tim Society

In 1939, some of the staff and volunteers felt that the patients would benefit from an auxiliary volunteer organization at the hospital. A group of women from the Gastonia area decided to form the Tiny Tim Society of the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital. The Tiny Tim Society did many wonderful things for the patients at NCOH, including making clothes for the children.

“They provided clothes for us, so that when we are invited to celebrations in town we will have something to wear. People say that we are the grandest looking children they ever saw”.

-Excerpt from the monthly in-hospital newsletter
“Cheerful Children”.

In 1943, the Tiny Tim Society took over registering patients at the Tuesday afternoon clinic at the hospital. The Society also provided the children with extra comforts that could not be provided by the hospital, including cameras, books, toys, and furnishings. The Tiny Tim Society disbanded on March 24, 1979 after 40 years of dedicated service to NCOH.



Tiny Tim Volunteers at Clinic

Churches

Sunday School was held regularly for the children at the hospital. Volunteers from surrounding churches would come in for the day – teaching the children Bible stories and singing hymns with them. They would wheel a piano around to the different wards so the children did not have to leave their rooms.

March of Dimes

The March of Dimes was an active sponsor of many social and fundraising events for NCOH. A number of patients from the hospital were chosen over the years to be a poster child for the March of Dimes.

Various other volunteer organizations, including schools, youth groups and a variety of societies from this area, provided their time, talents and resources to assist in helping the children at the hospital have the most enjoyable time possible while at NCOH.

Cowboys, Clowns, and Cars...

The patients at NCOH took many field trips over the years to a variety of programs and events in surrounding areas. One of the most popular trips occurred during Christmas time. Each year the patients loaded into ambulances and other vehicles and traveled to Ivey’s Department Store in Charlotte for two hours of fun and games. Santa Claus was always on hand, and sometimes actor Fred Kirby, Joey the clown, and magician Art Thompson would help entertain the children. This tradition continued for 50 years and was the highlight of their stay while at the hospital.



Patients at the Ivey’s Christmas Party

The children also went to museums, the zoo, car races, a local airport, and fishing as part of school field trips and entertainment excursions.

Reading, 'riting & 'rithmetic

A year-round school had been in operation at the hospital since the early years of its existence, but in 1939 the legislature authorized the establishment of a formal public school at the hospital.

Children of all ages were required to attend school while at the hospital. The children would be taken to the auditorium in their beds or wheelchairs, and placed in the partitioned area designated for their grade level.

The school had many dedicated teachers and once the patients were released and returned to their regular school they were academically at the same level (if not above) their fellow students.



School at NCOH

More than Just Medicine



Occupational Therapy movies occasionally, and many different activities from volleyball to an annual Christmas play were held in that room as well.

One common activity that occupied the children's time was not officially sanctioned by the hospital – many patients remember either being in or watching wheelchair races in the hallways of the hospital when no one was looking.

In addition to school, the children had many other opportunities for learning and recreation during their stay at the hospital. Occupational therapy was provided for the children as a way to improve their recovery, as well as give them a chance to learn a new skill or craft.

A Boy Scout troop was formed at the hospital with help from the Latta Fund and the Rotary Club of Gastonia. Two large projectors in the auditorium allowed the children to watch



Children playing volleyball in the auditorium

Self Sufficiency

NCOH was known for its self-sufficiency, operating its own laundry, power station, kitchen, sewing room, garden, dairy, and even hog and chicken farm. Unfortunately, the cows, chickens and hogs had to be sold because the state health inspectors found that the dairy and stock barns were too close to the hospital, causing several cases of colitis – an inflammation of the colon. The hospital continued to support itself in a variety of other ways though, helping to minimize its operating costs.

Segregation at NCOH



African-American Ward

In 1926, Benjamin N. Duke Pavilion for Color Children (Ward C) was built at NCOH to house 25 patients. All children, regardless of race, used the same operating and treatment areas, but the housing and schooling were segregated. In 1966, Charles A. McLean, field director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and a committee of ministers from the Gaston County Branch of NAACP, visited the hospital and released a report on what they found.

The news release reported the “deplorable living conditions, including the rank segregation and discrimination suffered by Negro children patients...” Their main complaints were that the Negro Ward was “separate from the main building and joined by an unheated ramp”, there were no African American teachers, the staff and dining areas were also segregated, and because of the limited space children of all ages were not separated by sex as were the children in the main building. After the report was made, NCOH took immediate steps to integrate the facility.



NCOH after integration

NCOH Staff

Additional staff members helped keep the hospital running smoothly, including orderlies, administrative secretaries, cooks, physical therapists, lab technicians, anethstaticians, grounds keepers, superintendents, and others. Without these hardworking men and woman, the hospital would not have been as great as it was.

Robert Babington

Robert B. Babington was born in 1869 in Lincoln County, NC. When he was 17, he became a railroad agent and telegraph operator. In 1885, he became interested in the telephone and built the first independent line in Mount Holly, NC. He liked this line of work so much that in 1899 he resigned from his railroad position and moved to Gastonia to work full time setting up telephone lines.



In addition to working with the telephone, Babington’s business interests extended to the Armstrong Cotton Mills Company, the First National Bank, Gaston Loan and Trust Company, and the Armington Hotel Company.

Babington was also interested in his community and did many things to help improve the lives of his fellow citizens, with one of the most impressive being the construction of the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital. After reading a newspaper article about a crippled child of a widow who was turned away from an orphanage because they did not have the resources to care for a handicapped child, Babington said -

“I made a vow then and there never to rest until North Carolina had some place to foster and care for her other unfortunate and destitute children. I dreamed about it that night; the vision would not pass.”

Oscar Miller

Oscar L. Miller was born in Georgia in 1887. In 1912, he graduated from Atlanta College of Physicians and Surgeons (now Emory University). He then trained under the leadership of Dr. Michael Hoke in Atlanta. Dr. Hoke, as consulting surgeon at NCOH, had recommended Dr. Miller for chief surgeon. Dr. Miller later recalled -



“I felt that if I could do a job even approximating something of what he [Dr. Hoke] had done in Georgia and all the South, I should attempt it. My mind was made up before I reached my office. In an hour and a half I drove home to lunch, as most doctors did in those days. Entering the house, where sat my dear old aunt and my wife, I called out to them: ‘Pack up your stuff. We are going to North Carolina!’”

Dr. Miller was an outstanding physician and served at NCOH until 1932 when he went into full-time private practice in Charlotte.

William Roberts

Dr. William M. Roberts took over for Dr. Oscar Miller at NCOH in 1932. He was born in 1899 in South Hadley Falls, Massachusetts, and attended Tufts College and Medical School from 1919-1925. Dr. Roberts was the Chief Surgeon at NCOH for 34 years and gained a reputation as one of the hardest working, modest, and most talented orthopedic surgeons. He had a passion for helping children, and inspired many medical residents at the hospital. Dr. Fred Webster commented on Dr. Roberts -

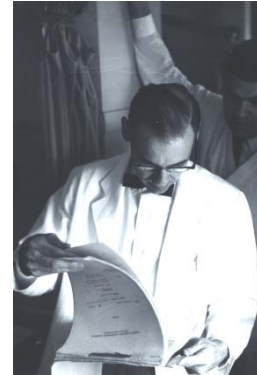


“ [He was] loved and respected by all who knew and studied under him...[his] reserved manner of teaching was both effective and appreciated by his students.”

George Miller

Dr. George Miller was born in 1920 in Albion, New York. He studied at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and completed his residency with Duke University at the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation. He became the Associate Surgeon in 1950 and Chief Surgeon in 1966. He was with the hospital for a total of 31 years, helping hundreds of children and assisting in the training of approximately 70 residents.

Dr. Miller went on to work at his private orthopedic practice and has since retired and now resides in Gastonia.



Glendall King

Dr. Glendall King was born in Eldorado, Illinois in 1927. He attended the University of Illinois and Washington University of Medicine, and completed his residencies at St. Luke's in St. Louis, with the United States Navy, Duke and NCOH. He was Chief of Surgery at Gaston Memorial Hospital in 1971 and Assistant Chief Surgeon at NCOH from 1965-1977. Dr. King continued with his private practice after NCOH and currently lives in Gastonia.



Dr. Walter B. Greene said of his time at NCOH -

“Dr. George Miller, Dr. Glen King, and Ms. Nancy Hunter were the foundations of my NCOH family. Dr. Glen King and Dr. Miller excelled as clinical teachers and as role models for orthopedic surgery

residents.”

Nursing Staff

The hospital was not only a teaching institution for doctors, but for nurses as well. Many of the nurses who worked at the hospital were long time employees who spent most of their careers at NCOH. Two of the longest working nurses were Nellie Duckworth (46 years) and Nancy Hunter (44 years). Todd Stradford, a resident at the hospital, recalled a story about Nellie Duckworth and the advice given to incoming residents –

“In the operating room, if you get stuck while performing a procedure, just hold out your hand to Miss Duckworth and whatever instrument she gives you, figure out what you do with it – and that’s the next step!”



Nellie (L) & Nancy (R) preparing plaster

In an interview with Nancy Hunter by WSOC TV in 1979, Miss Hunter said, *“I became attached to them (NCOH children). You try not to, but you can’t help it, because you’re their Mother while they are there and sometimes they would stay for years”*.