

The Willett Hospital in Paris celebrates its 100th anniversary

By Irene Schmidt-Adeney

Area residents have good reason to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Willett Hospital in Paris. For 100 years it has provided a vital service to the community in Brant and beyond its borders and staunchly supported during a recent time when some officials recommended that it should be closed.

Thanks to the foresight and perseverance of its supporters, that thinking has been completely reversed. The Willett continues to undergo expansion and will become an integral component of the major transformation of hospital care in Brant County.

No one has a greater vision for the Willett than Paul Emerson, Chair of the Brant Community Healthcare System Board of Directors. You could say that the Willett has been an integral part of his life from Day One.

"That's where the journey started for me," said Emerson. "I was born at the Willett, along with my sister and brother, and almost everybody I knew at school was born at the Willett."

He recalls visiting all four of his grandparents at the Willett, two of them spent their final days in its care. His mother was on the Willett Hospital Board and his grandmother was a long-term member of the Hospital Auxiliary.

"The circle of life in our family, and many other families, right through the whole process was centred around the Willett Hospital."

"And many things in between," he added with a chuckle.

One of his first jobs was cleaning the floors and then the kitchen pots and pans in the evenings, after the staff had left for the day. While he appreciated the job, at the end of the day, all of the pots were taken to a room in the basement using an old-fashioned elevator cage.

"It happened to be right beside the morgue and kind of scared me," he admitted. "That was the worst part of the job."

The next year he was working for the town, cutting municipal grass. And his working life would continue in public service, and come full circle. From cutting grass to the top position, Emerson retired as CAO of Brant County in May 2018, with the welfare of the Willett never far from his mind.

"When I was working for the County of Brant as CAO in 2016-2017, there was a report done that was looking at efficiencies and it recommended that the Willett Hospital be closed," said Emerson. "This wasn't the first time. The Willett had been under attack before that a few times – right back to the early 1970s and again in the early 2000s."

"But the town rallied together and stopped it."

Emerson wasn't retired for long.

Brant County Health Service Board was replaced by a provincially-appointed administrator Bonnie Adamson and one of her mandates was to review the recommendation to close the hospital. In the summer of 2018, she contacted Emerson and asked if he would sit on the new board that was being put back together.

"Adamson did a wonderful job with the board that she selected – old, young, male, female, first Nations representation, the Muslim Society chair. It's a very diverse group with a common goal."

Then Emerson was asked to chair the committee, a two-year commitment. Due to COVID, that commitment



The official opening of the Willett Hospital, July 1, 1922.

has been extended until June 2022.

Vision goes back 100 years

Perhaps the sentiments of the community have not changed. Over 100 years ago, Anna Willett had a vision and the drive for a 'cottage hospital' but it was not realized in her lifetime.



Anna Willett

Parisians fought bravely to save the Willett Hospital

By Carol Goar

Paris Museum & Historical Society

The Willett Urgent Care Centre in Paris, which marks its 100th anniversary this year, offers Canadians a capsule history of small-town medicine in Canada.

It began with an immigrant's dream. Anna Willett, born in Australia in 1857, came to Paris, Ontario at the age of 39. She championed the building of a cottage hospital throughout her life. When she died in 1917, she left a \$20,000 bequest for the founding of the hospital.

The endowment was a godsend for local doctors, business leaders and politicians. For seriously ill patients, the 13-kilometre trip to Brantford on poor roads could be treacherous.

The town started making plans in 1919. Over the next three years, local leaders purchased a site, hired an architect and built the original two-storey building at a cost of \$29,894, using \$15,000 from the Willett legacy supplemented by the town of Paris, the

Red Cross and private donations. The Women's Hospital Auxiliary provided bedding, linens, room furnishing and kitchen equipment.

On July 1, 1922, more than 1,400 townsfolk gathered proudly for the official opening of their new hospital. Ontario Lieutenant Governor Henry Cockshutt, did the honours, congratulating all involved and declaring: "Hospitals are essential for the sick and suffering."

The 18-bed hospital had three nurses who worked 12 shifts, a janitor and a cook. Doctors came and went as required by their patients.

By 1926, the hospital had 24 beds and a staff of 11. But as medical science advanced, its once-modern equipment was showing its age. In 1937, against the backdrop of the Great Depression, the Willett Hospital's board of governors launched a \$35,000 plan to update its equipment, add laboratory and X-ray facilities, install an elevator and open 11 more beds, bringing the total to 35.

It was a bold project at a time of austerity. It took enormous effort and personal sacrifice, but the money was raised. The Willett Hospital marked its 25th anniversary in fine style in 1947. Unbeknownst to the proud Parisians who gathered to mark the occasion, it would be the last celebration of their independent local hospital.

The next addition to the Willett in 1952, which raised its capacity to 60 patients, cost \$130,000. Paris needed a provincial grant to cover the cost. Similarly, a nurses' residence, built in 1955 at a cost of \$100,000, required provincial support.

From that point on, the narrative changed from one of growth and community spirit to one of rising tensions with the province.

In 1961, a \$5,000 upgrade was needed to bring the hospital up to the provincial standards. By 1971, talk of closing local hospitals was in the air. A federal task force released a proposal to disband small hospitals located within a 90-minute drive of a bigger hospital. The Willett Hospital, backed by the citizens of Paris, fought back hard, pointing out that small hospitals

offer their patients humanity, comfort and the support of friends. Ottawa backed off, but Queen's Park soon adopted the 'bigger is better' approach.

On February 10, 1976, Frank Miller, the Ontario health minister of the day, announced the closing of the Willett Hospital.

"I'm trying to get people to accept that they shouldn't expect more and more, but rather a little less," he told reporters.

He faced a fierce backlash from the hospital board, Mayor Jack Bawcutt, Paris council, the Ayr Board of Trade, provincial MPP Robert Nixon and federal MP Derek Blackburn and newspapers from Brantford to Toronto.

Miller pushed ahead with his cost-cutting mission, announcing hospital closings in 10 other communities. In 1977, to defuse the growing controversy, then-Premier Bill Davis appointed a more conciliatory health minister.

Dennis Timbrell quickly reversed Miller's harsh dictum. But the town was divided; the politicians were pleased, but doctors were wary about practising in a hospital with an uncertain future. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, the Willett Hospital focused on emergency

services and outpatient care, supported by its laboratory, x-ray and physiotherapy departments.

That era ended in 1999 when the director of the Willett Hospital retired and the chief executive of Brantford General Hospital took on the dual role to promote the integration of the two institutions.

Brant Community Healthcare System billed them as "equal partners", but it was clear to all that the Willett Urgent Care Centre was the junior partner.

Today, it treats Parisians for influenza, ear, nose and throat infections, sprains, small fractures, asthma and rashes. It offers same day x-ray, bloodwork and diagnostic tests, and provides temporary beds for seniors awaiting admission into a long-term care facility.

It is a fine community resource, but not a hospital.

Sources: The Paris Star; Brantford Expositor; Brant County Healthcare System; Hamilton Spectator; Toronto Star.

A vision for the future

By Irene Schmidt-Adeney

The Willett is included in the plan for a \$1-billion expansion of the Brantford General Hospital.

"I think its future is bright," said Emerson.

He said that Brantford General Hospital would focus on surgeries and acute care.

"The Willett is essential as a health hub – but a super health hub because it has beds," he said.

With a new Health Hub in Paris' south end, the Willett would be the Health Hub for the north end of town and for the broader community.

"We have been looking at bringing some other services to the Willett, such as dialysis suites, diabetes program," said Emerson. "But there is nothing official."

"Hopefully by this time next year, the Willett will not only have 60 beds and vibrant urgent care, but rehab-type and dialysis."

100th Anniversary celebrations

It's difficult to plan any celebrations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"BCHS is willing to coordinate a steering committee made up of community members, alumnae, and volunteers to organize some events," said Emerson. "What we want to do is have a one-day, or weekend-long event with tents and pictures, showcasing the Willett over the past 100 years and some formal ceremonies."



Paul Emerson is the chair of the Brant Community Healthcare System Board of Directors.