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Gary Pettett

*Children's Mercy Hospital*

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# DR. PETTETT DISCOVERS MORE ABOUT CHILDREN'S MERCY FOUNDERS

Children's Mercy co-founder, Dr. Katharine Berry Richardson, never liked to tell her age, "because then people would think you're supposed to retire," according to all previous written histories of Children's Mercy.

But historical sleuth, Gary Pettett, MD, a Children's Mercy neonatologist, has solved the century-old mystery. He reports that Dr. Richardson was born Sept. 28, 1858, and was 75 years old when she died in 1933. Her sister, Dr. Alice Berry Graham, was born March 3, 1850, and died in 1913.

The mystery birthdates are just the beginning of the new historical information Dr. Pettett has uncovered about Children's Mercy Hospital. An article including many of his new findings was recently published in the *Journal* of the Jackson County Historical Society.

What prompted Dr. Pettett's interest in the hospital's colorful history?

"I've always been interested in medical history, and when I first joined the staff here, I began hearing stories about the early years of Mercy Hospital," he says. "But the stories didn't always match — there were discrepancies and gaps, and I decided I wanted to find out what the real story was."

He began asking who else might be interested in the hospital's history, and got connected with Carol Belt.

"She and I had great fun looking into all this; she just wasn't here long enough." (Carol Belt, a long-time nurse at Children's

Mercy and later the hospital's volunteer archivist, died last year.)

Dr. Pettett's wife is "a thoroughbred genealogist," he says, and the Pettetts have been able to trace the Berry sisters' family history back to the 1500s in Scotland. They also have begun visiting places where their own family ancestors came from, and recently took a trip to central Ohio — just an hour away from Mount Union College, where Katharine received her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Dr. Pettett visited the school and dug through its archives, discovering that during Katharine's years in school, she was known as "Kitty" Berry, and was one of only three women in her class of 23 students. She graduated in 1882 after serving as vice president of her class and valedictorian. She returned to Mount Union College in 1931 to receive an honorary degree; one of the other alumni who received an honorary degree at the same ceremony was Thomas Edison.

Dr. Pettett has also done a great deal of research locally, tying up many of the loose ends regarding the earliest years of the hospital that were not fully explained in previous written histories of Children's Mercy. A few highlights include:

- When Katharine, her husband James and her sister Alice moved to Kansas City in 1893, James was a livestock broker. Dr. Alice Berry Graham was a dentist. After arriving here, James decided to attend dental school (now the UMKC Dental School), and graduated in 1897. After practicing dentistry a few years, he and a friend founded a dental supply company, named Richardson & Pfahler. James died in 1908.
- The first "Mercy Bed" was located at the Women's and Children's Hospital (located at 15<sup>th</sup> and Cleveland), which had evolved from a maternity hospital which cared for women who had experienced "the pitfalls of city life into which the weak-spirited tumble." Only women "who repented their sexual improprieties and desired moral rehabilitation were admitted to the hospital," Dr. Pettett says.
- In 1901, when the need had grown from one bed to two to five, the sisters developed a more formal organizational structure. The articles of incorporation said the hospital's purpose was "to aid in preventing neglect of and cruelty to crippled, deformed, ruptured and other wise afflicted children; to assist such children by surgical or medical means, or by nursing; also to promote the intellectual and temporal welfare of

children under its care."

- Alice headed a successful fund-raising campaign which allowed the sisters to



James Ira Richardson

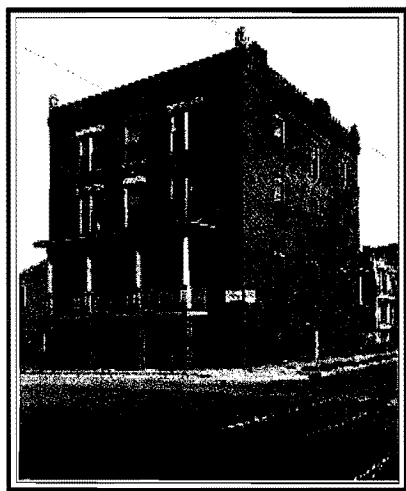
purchase the residence of Col. R.H. Hunt at 414 Highland Ave. They moved into their new facility on Jan. 1, 1904, with five beds. For the first time the name "Mercy Hospital" appeared on the front of the building. The hospital remained in this location for 13 years, until moving to the Independence Ave. hospital in 1917.

- Dr. Pettett also has located the closest living descendent of Katharine and Alice, neither of whom had children. Their sister Clara did have three children, and today a retired clockmaker in Lexington, KY, named Walker Gretter is the great-great-grand-nephew of Katharine and Alice Berry. Dr. Pettett has corresponded with Mr. Gretter, who sent additional information about his Berry family ancestors.

"Just as ancient architects have given the strong, imposing walls and heavy turrets to be modernized and beautified by every coming age, so nature gives materials which shall endure, sets upon them her indelible seal, yet allows each passing hand to leave its impress upon her work," said Katharine Berry in her 1882 valedictory address.

Surely the then-23-year-old Kitty had no idea of the "indelible seal" she and her sister Alice would leave on Kansas City, and the "impress" their vision would make upon children for generations to come! ☺

*If you would like a copy of Dr. Pettett's article from the Historical County Journal, please call the Community Relations office at 816-346-1370 or e-mail Barbara Service.*



Above: The first "Mercy Bed" was located at the Women's and Children's Hospital, at 15<sup>th</sup> and Cleveland.

Above Left: James Ira Richardson became a dentist in his second career. This is the first and only picture of Dr. Katharine Berry Richardson's husband. Dr. Pettett located it in the dental school archives.