



June 2018

Volume 12/No. 2

The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Rabun's Medical Care Journey

Rabun County has a long history of progress in the area of medical care. The story begins in the early twentieth century with three doctors who did a lot of back-road driving and bedside general practice among town and country folks of the county. Dr. J.C. Dover, Dr. J.A. Green, and Dr. Lester Neville, along with interested citizens are given credit for the founding of Georgia's first rural maternity hospital in 1942 in Clayton. Prior to that, most deliveries in the rural area were performed by midwives.

The Rabun County Maternity Hospital opened on South Main Street in November 1942 and made a significant difference by providing a place for expectant mothers to come for medical care. Construction was financed with contributions from a foundation and local

citizens. After 1942, nearly every baby in Rabun County was born in this facility, staffed by doctors, nurses, and midwives. In 1951, *The Clayton Tribune* reported that two thousand babies had been born at Rabun County Maternity Hospital.

In the late 1940s the people of Rabun County approved a bond issue to help finance the building of a modern hos-



The Rabun County Maternity Hospital on South Main Street, c. 1940s

pital in Clayton. A lot of work and planning was done for several years leading up to the hospital construction. In August of 1951, Governor Herman Talmadge spoke at the dedication of Rabun County Memorial Hospital on South Main Street. The facility opened with nine patient

rooms and two large wards. Modern services included an emergency room, operating room, laboratories, x-ray equipment, kitchen, and laundry. At that time, the Maternity Hos-



Josephine Kinman Brewer, R.N., with Mrs. Rufus English and newborn Betty at the Rabun County Maternity Hospital

The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Page 2



Grand opening of Rabun County Memorial in August 1951.

pital was closed and all obstetric services were moved to the new hospital. Citizens of the county had every reason to be proud of their new hospital. A Women's Auxiliary was also formed that year to support the hospital. They did a tremendous service to patients, community, and the staff through their volunteer service and promoting goodwill toward the hospital. One of their projects was enlisting the community to help stock the hospital pantry.

In 1959 a new wing was added to the hospital that included an up-to-date nursery, private and semi-private patient rooms as well as a laundry, doctors' lounge, conference room, library, and storage room. An additional obstetrics wing was completed in 1972. In the late 1980s, local physicians elected to discontinue delivery privileges due

to exorbitant malpractice insurance costs, and only about 170 new babies being born in Rabun County per year. The last baby born at Rabun County Hospital was November 13, 1987. In 1990 that space was converted to a surgical suite.

In November of 1967, Dr. Richard Turner opened nursing and extended care facilities called Woodridge and Ridgecrest on Germany Road. The center was

planned as a convalescent facility, a step between the hospital and home. It included physical therapy facilities, x-ray rooms and laboratory. When the county experienced a severe shortage of hospital beds, Turner converted some of the facility to urgent care. By 1970, 45 hospital beds were available at Ridgecrest.

Rabun County Memorial Hospital also

responded to the need for more health care services with a 1992 renovation that added a new wing to the original building.

By the late 1990s, the need for more hospital services became acute. *The Clayton Tribune* reported that some patient beds at Rabun County Memorial Hospital were in hallways because of overcrowding. In 1999, an accounting firm hired by the county issued a report stating that the county could not support two hospitals, and that "acute care resources



Mildred Burrell Gibbs in the hospital pantry in 1958.

should be consolidated.” Sixteen physicians practicing in Rabun County agreed. The county then committed to buy Ridgecrest Hospital facilities and close Rabun County Memorial Hospital; the \$3.7 million agreement was signed in March of 1999.

A firestorm of disapproval resulted. No matter that Rabun

County Memorial Hospital was losing up to \$100,000 per month, many residents were incensed that “their” hospital would close. A “Committee for the Preservation of Rabun County Memorial Hospital” was formed, and recall petitions were begun

against two of the three county commissioners. A rival committee formed to support the commissioners being targeted for “attempting to expand county facilities and increase county services.”

After lengthy legal maneuvering and delays, the sale finally closed. On Valentine’s Day of 2000, patients were transferred from the former county hospital to the new facility. There were now 75 total beds available, as opposed to 22 at the old facility. The new emergency room accepted the first patient the same afternoon.

The final chapter in Rabun’s long saga of supporting a public hospital came in July of 2005. After more than fifty years, Rabun County sold its publicly owned facilities to the InMed Group from Alabama. The sale came about because the county could no longer sustain the expense of maintaining the county

-owned hospital, which had created \$7-9 million of debt. Rabun’s health care services remained at the old Germany Road location under the new name of Mountain Lakes Medical Center.

When InMed purchased the hospital from

the county in 2005, they promised to build a new building when the funds became available. That promise was fulfilled in September of 2017, when Mountain Lakes Medical Center opened a new hospital on a hill north of Clayton on Highway 441. The facility has 25 patient rooms with space to add more if the need arises. Services have expanded for both inpatient and outpatient care, and the hospital added approximately fifty jobs.

The beautiful new hospital completes quite a journey from the original Maternity Hospital where so many Rabun County babies entered the world. Ironically, obstetric services are not currently offered in Rabun County; all babies



The main entrance of Rabun County Memorial Hospital on South Main Street in Clayton

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- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00.
- Group tours by appointment



*Mountain Lakes Medical Center
Opened September 18, 2017*