

100 Years of Serving Veterans

“The British are coming, the British are coming!” Those words rang out as the James H. Quillen VA Medical Center in Mountain Home, Tenn., kicked off a two-week Centennial Celebration on Sept. 26. Three British World War II soldiers from the Royal Hospital Chelsea, Mountain Home’s sister hospital in London, were special guests at the celebration.

The Mountain Home VAMC is rich in historical significance. After four long years of civil war and having recently visited the Gettysburg battlefield, President Abraham Lincoln was overwhelmed with empathy for the suffering of soldiers and their families. He proposed legislation for a National Soldiers Home in 1865, but was assassinated before it could be presented to Congress. That same year, out of reverence for the slain president, Congress passed a bill funding the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (NHDVS) with eight branches across the nation.

In 1900, Tennessee Cong. Walter P. Brownlow approached the NHDVS Board of Governors with a proposal to construct a ninth branch in his district. The board had previously ruled that no new branches would be funded; instead, individual states were being encouraged to fund such endeavors on their own.

Brownlow used a three-part argument to convince the board to build a Mountain Home branch: one of the existing branches was in Virginia, a state with no volunteer Union soldiers of record; eastern Tennessee had furnished 30,000 volunteer soldiers to the Union and there were 18,000 Union pensioners living in his district at that time; and Congress had just authorized \$1 million for the construction of a fed-

eral prison in Atlanta. “Don’t volunteer soldiers deserve at least as much as convicts?” Brownlow asked.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Johnson City, Tenn., was a village of 5,000 residents. The total assessed value of all properties in the village was \$750,000. Brownlow’s project cost an estimated \$2.1 million. In the three years it took to build the initial buildings, Johnson City’s property value and population doubled. More than 1,000 workers were employed from 1901 to 1903 to construct the initial 37 buildings on 450 acres. Jacob Leab of Ohio was the first veteran admitted, in October 1903.

After World War I, large numbers of veterans poured back into this country from Europe with lung scarring from gas attacks, tuberculosis outbreaks, and the worldwide spread of influenza. Fresh mountain air was the treatment of choice back then, so porches were added to the barracks at Mountain Home. Later, hospital beds were added, a move that launched its transformation from a residential to a medical facility. Mountain Home was redesignated a National Sanitarium.

In 1930, when an act of Congress consolidated all agencies ad-

ministering services to veterans under the Veterans Administration, Mountain Home became a field station in the VA system. Many changes and improvements have been made to the facility since then, and in recent years it has evolved from an essentially long-term care institution to a smaller, acute-care hospital with an emphasis on primary care outpatient services.



Cong. William Jenkins (R-Tenn.) with the three British veterans who were special guests at the opening ceremony of Mountain Home VA Medical Center's two-week Centennial Celebration; (inset) the clocktower, built in 1903, is a landmark on the campus.

Judy Fowler-Argo, who co-chaired the centennial planning committee with Dan Kyte, said the entire community got involved in planning and participating in the two-week celebration. “The VA was an impetus for economic growth for the city 100 years ago, and it still is today,” she said.

More than 500 people attended the celebration’s opening ceremony. Events over the next two weeks included a parade, historical tours, and even a Civil War encampment on the grounds. **VA**