

## Memories of McGuire Hospital

By Jim Scott, March 2011

In the February 19, 2009, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, I read an article introducing Charles E. Sepich, the new director of the McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia. The article brought back memories of when McGuire VA Hospital was my home. No, I wasn't a patient, and I'm not a veteran. But my father used to work there, and was one of a number of staff who lived on the hospital grounds.

My father was Dr. Robert J. Scott; he was director of the hospital from 1961 to 1968. There's a plaque in his honor in front of the main entrance to the hospital. This is also the approximate location of our former home.



Plaque honoring former director Robert Scott  
(Photo by Jim Scott)

It all started for my family in early 1955 when my father was transferred from his job at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Roanoke to take the position of director of professional services at the Richmond hospital. The family consisted of him, my mother Ruth Scott, me (Jim Scott, then age 12), my sister Ann (8), my sister Mary Lynn (6), and my sister Deborah (1).

McGuire Hospital was originally built in 1943 as an army hospital, McGuire General Hospital. In the main lobby today there's a scale model of it, as well as a panoramic photo from 1945. It looked much the same when we arrived ten years later, except that we had a lot more vegetation – trees and shrubs. Today, almost all of the original hospital is gone, replaced by a large modern facility, known officially as Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center.



Aerial view of **McGuire General Hospital**, at Richmond, Va. Designated US Army General Hospital by WDGO 48, dated 24 Nov 43. The Hospital was a "Type-A" construction with additional VA-type brick buildings. Construction was based on Veterans Administration plans for possible use after the war, with approval of The Surgeon General, and with cooperation of the Corps of Engineers (3 similar VA-Hospitals were built during WW2). Authorized bed capacity was 1,765, and first patients were received 29 Jul 44. Medical specialties were neurology and neuro-surgery, including amputations.

1943 aerial view



Scale model  
(Photo by Jim Scott)



### 1945 Panoramic view

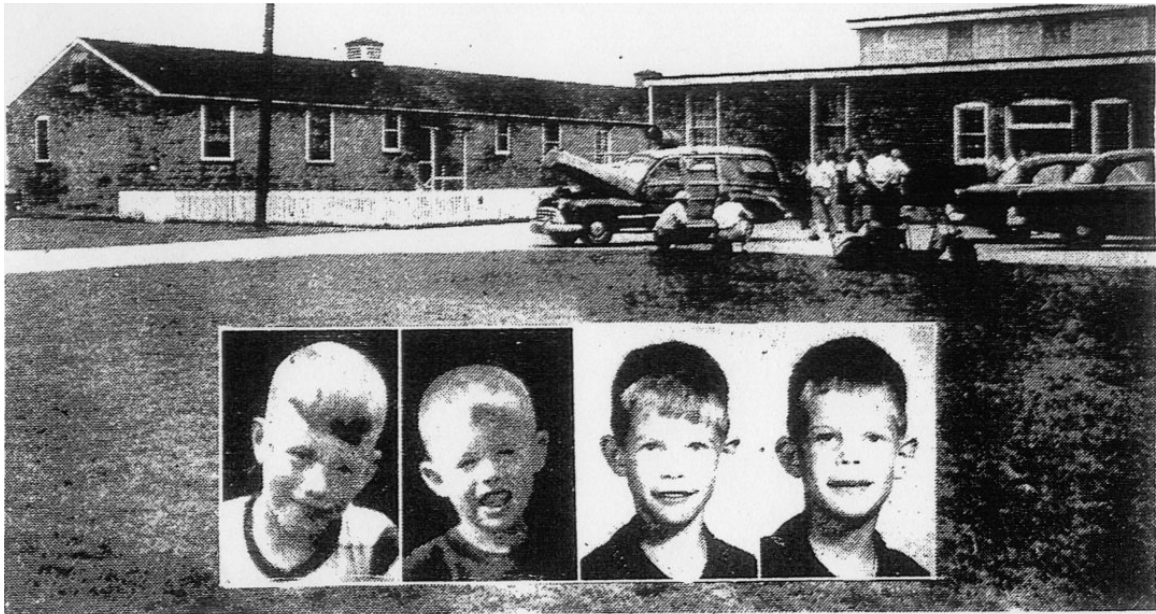
This photo faces south; the main entrance, at the intersection of Belt Boulevard and Broad Rock Road, would be just off to the right.

The first building on the right, seen end-on in the foreground, had been built as an officers' club. But by 1955 it had become a duplex residence. We moved into the south end of it, and the hospital director lived in the north end (closer to the foreground). There was a long enclosed porch on the front, a warehouse behind the house (at the left in the picture), and a corridor connecting them with the rest of the hospital. When we moved in, there was a white picket fence around the front of the house, with forsythia bushes and small magnolia trees in the front yard. There was a large conifer, a spruce I think, about halfway between the house and the main entrance. Every Christmas, it was decorated, and in front of it were large wooden letters reading "Peace on Earth".



Detail of our house (right) and warehouse (left),  
with corridor in the foreground

Before we moved from Roanoke, we had heard about a tragedy that had occurred at the hospital two years earlier. Four little boys, children of hospital staff who lived at the hospital, had been playing hide-and-seek in the warehouse. They hid in an empty refrigerator that had an old-style latch, and couldn't get out. They were found dead days later, after a massive search. One of the boys who died had lived in the home that we were moving into. When I moved into my bedroom, I found a child's drawing behind a dresser drawer, and I was convinced that it was the work of the boy who had died so tragically.



ABANDONED BUILDING (RIGHT) WHERE BODIES WERE FOUND JUST 20 YARDS FROM HOME (LEFT) OF ONE OF THE BOYS  
(Staff Photo by Rossion)  
 Walter Boykin, George, Woodrow and Wilson Blackstock (inset, from left) Died of Suffocation (Other Pictures on Page 5.)

Photo from *Richmond News-Leader*, August 13, 1953

At the upper-left is the back of our house; the warehouse is at the right.

There were other residences on the grounds. In the 1943 aerial view, the building at bottom center behind the curved driveway was the administration building, where my father's office was. To its right in the photo was the bachelor quarters, and to the left was the nurses' quarters. The left-most brick building, at the end of the corridor that ran behind the administration building, was the home of other hospital administrators and their families.



Residence for hospital director (left end)  
 and for director of professional services (right end)  
 (Photo by Jim Scott)

The little white buildings at the far left end of the 1943 aerial view were gone before we arrived in 1955. Their smooth concrete foundations were all that remained – good for roller skating. But the four U-shaped buildings at the lower-left, inside the perimeter road, were, in a way, the social heart of the hospital. These little one-story white-painted cinderblock buildings constituted what was universally (and non-pejoratively) known as Dogpatch, where young doctors doing their residency lived with their families. Dogpatch was a lively place with many small children. It was a small community of its own, but also very much a part of the larger community of the whole hospital complex.

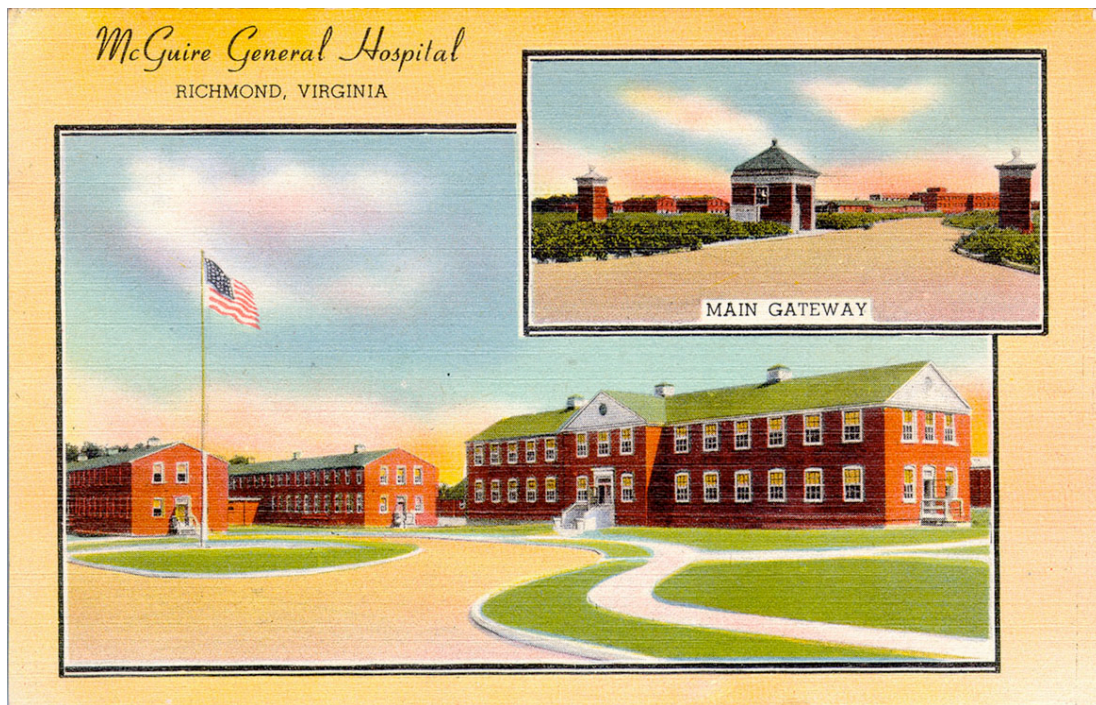


Dogpatch, 1964  
(Photo by Jim Scott)

This view looks roughly southeast. The houses in the far background are outside the hospital property. The little road at the lower right of the photo was usually closed off to motor vehicles. At center left is a playground, which was dedicated to the four boys who died in 1953. It had a sliding board and a set of swings. In the center of the play area was a push-it-yourself merry-go-round. The little kids would beg me to spin it as fast as I could, until they were in danger of flying off with centrifugal force. I was glad to oblige.



Children Playing in Dogpatch, 1964  
(Photos by Jim Scott)



Postcard showing the main entrance and the administration building

The hospital was a maze of buildings connected by long brick corridors. The explanation I heard was that the original design had the buildings intentionally spread out to reduce the impact of any enemy bombing. Another reason was to provide lots of windows for cross-ventilation, since this was before air conditioning was in wide use. The bombs never came, but the corridors stayed. My father complained that this design decreased the efficiency of the hospital operation. It took a lot of time to walk from one building to another.

At the center of the complex there was a wider central corridor with the recreation hall on one side and the canteen (PX) and post office on the other side. We all understood that these facilities were for patients and staff, but kids seemed to be welcome, too. The canteen sold candy (discounted from five cents to four cents!) and comic books; whatever else they sold, I rarely noticed. On Saturdays they somehow carried Sunday newspapers, with the color funnies on the outside. This seemed like magic to me, but somehow just not right; I would avert my eyes rather than see the Sunday funnies a day early.

The rec hall had an auditorium, ping pong tables, and shuffleboard tables. I once played a game of ping pong against a one-legged patient who thrashed me soundly. The kids and patients coexisted well; sometimes we'd push wheelchair patients who needed assistance.

At the far corner of the hospital, near where Cofer Road meets Hopkins Road, was the hospital swimming pool (upper-left in the 1943 aerial view, just to the left of the four ball fields). It was 100 feet long and had two low diving boards. There were times allotted for patient use, and other times for staff and their families. This was where I spent my summers, taking lessons in swimming and lifesaving. The pool was very popular.



FIGURE 32.—McGuire General Hospital, Richmond, Va.

A view from the opposite direction –  
the swimming pool is in the lower left corner

All of us kids who lived at McGuire got around the hospital either by riding our bikes on the roads or walking through the corridors. We all went to the pool by bicycle. The perimeter road that circled the hospital was great for bicycling, because there really wasn't much vehicular traffic.

One group of the original buildings still stands near where the pool used to be. (On the map of the current hospital, they're labeled "507 VA Office Building".) Somewhere in this general area were the bowling alley, the tennis courts, the gym, and Corridor 13.

The bowling alley had three lanes of duck pins, a version of bowling that uses smaller balls and smaller (and higher-flying) pins. The alley did not have automatic pin-setting machines, and one of my first jobs was as a pin boy there. After each roll, I would hop into the shallow pit at the end of the lane and step on a hidden pedal to make little metal pins come up out of the surface of the lane. Then I put the wooden pins back into their places, while trying not to get hit by pins flying from other lanes.

There were two tennis courts, but they were black asphalt, and really not much fun in the summer. The gym, as I remember, was pretty much just for patients. But we watched some exciting games of wheelchair basketball there.

Corridor 13 was not in use for some reason, and we half-believed it to be haunted. One night several of us kids decided to risk exploring it. (Nothing ever seemed to be locked.) We entered at a door at the end of the corridor. There were no lights, so we shuffled along in the dark to avoid tripping over any obstructions. When we realized that the scurrying noises we heard were cockroaches running around our feet, we left quickly, shuddering.

At the north end of the grounds, where parking lot 1 and the north end of the main hospital are today, there was a huge grassy area that must have been a lot of work to keep mowed. A water tower was at the north edge. As far as I could tell, it wasn't used for much, except a little golf practice by staff. I, however, found it a great place for boomerang throwing, at which I eventually became semi-adept.

This was what McGuire Hospital was like for the children and teens who lived there. My family moved away, temporarily as it turned out, in early 1959. My father had been given the position of director at the VA hospital in Fort Wayne, Indiana. So I finished high school in Fort Wayne and started college at Purdue. During my freshman year at college, in the spring of 1961, my father was named director of McGuire, and we moved back again. This time we moved into the other end, the north end, of the same duplex house. Of course, by this time I was only living at home during the summers, but those were good times of year to be there.

My father considered his work very important, and wanted to do his best for veterans. He was a veteran himself, and had been a captain in the army medical corps in Europe in the last years of World War II. He was awarded the bronze star for moving his aid station across the Rhine River under enemy artillery, while continuing to treat and evacuate the wounded. He didn't talk to me very much about his work at McGuire, but I know that he cared deeply about it. He had to go out in the evenings sometimes to make rounds or attend post-mortems. Sometimes he would talk a little about a new patient who had arrived in bad medical condition; he sometimes seemed stunned by the sadness of what he had seen. As I mentioned previously, he was frustrated by the physical structure of the old McGuire Hospital. But he enjoyed being able to walk to work in just a few minutes.

In 1968 he had a serious heart attack. When I visited him in the hospital, he told me that, statistically, he had five more years to live. He requested a different position with the VA, and relocated to the VA Center in Hampton. In 1973, at the age of 57, he had a second heart attack, and this one was fatal. My mother moved back to Richmond, and now lives at Brandermill Woods. Of my three sisters, Ann Lankey lives in Chesterfield, Mary Lynn Scott in Rockville, Maryland, and Deborah Biddle in Powhatan.

I didn't keep up with McGuire for a number of years. In 1982 or 1983 I happened to drive by and was shocked to see that my former home was gone. After that I drove by occasionally to watch the new facility emerge.

This, then, is what McGuire Hospital means to me, a 68-year-old man who remembers it as a teen-ager. It has a very different atmosphere to those who are there today, and rightly so. But perhaps they occasionally hear the whispers from the past that I experience whenever I am there.

Despite the juvenile perspective I've presented, I know that VA hospitals have a noble and essential purpose. The very least we can do for those who have served in the military is to provide them with good medical care. My family and I wish McGuire well.