

Arrowsmith once home to small hospital

“It is very seldom that a town of some 350 inhabitants can boast of an up-to-date hospital,” declared a spring 1923 advertisement for Dr. L.M. Johnson Hospital in Arrowsmith. The “wonderful little home for the sick” opened in 1921 and remained a fixture in this eastern McLean County community into the 1940s.

The hospital had the appearance of little more than an oversized bungalow (see accompanying image.) Initially, the steam-heated facility accommodated five patients and featured “a modern operating room,” X-ray equipment, offices and a kitchen

By 1928, Johnson Hospital could care for 15 patients, though it rarely had more than a few at any one time.

Born and raised in the Henry County, Ill. town of Annawan, Dr. Lyford McChesney Johnson came to Arrowsmith in 1903 to “hang his shingle.” As a graduate of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Chicago, Johnson was no slouch. “He has taken postgraduate work in surgery and is among the progressive men of his profession,” noted a biographical sketch written a few years after the hospital’s opening. His medical library was said to be one of the best in all downstate. While practicing medicine in Arrowsmith, he was also on the staffs of St. Joseph’s, Brokaw and Mennonite hospitals in the Twin Cities (the latter two have since merged.)

In 1921, Dr. Johnson opened his namesake hospital on West Crosson Street in Arrowsmith on the former site of O.T. Mill’s livery stable. At the hospital, he received occasional assistance from other physicians and surgeons, such as Dr. Rayden Arthur Laing of Ellsworth.

Long before small-town America was hollowed out by department store chains, big box stores, online commerce and other vagaries and brute efficiencies of capitalism, communities such as Arrowsmith were vibrant trading centers. In 1928, the small Corn Belt village, with just under 350 residents, was home to Krum and Krum Lumber Co., Frank Virgiel’s grocery and hardware store, O.T. Mills’ restaurant, L.E. Daley’s dry goods and grocery, L.D. Witt’s meat market, J.E. Bunn’s blacksmith shop, Lester Dawson’s feed store, Arrowsmith State Bank, and other businesses. At the time, the community was still served by rail passenger service through the Lake Erie & Western Railroad, then a part of the Nickel Plate Road.

Two years after settling in Arrowsmith, Johnson’s wife Caroline Gless gave birth to their only child, Ethel Melba. Raised in Arrowsmith, Ethel graduated from Arrowsmith High in 1923

before going on to earn a master's degree from Northwestern University and eventually head Illinois Wesleyan's drama and theater departments.

The Arrowsmith hospital surely saved the lives of more than a few eastern McLean County residents. Johnson performed appendectomies from time to time, including one on Apr. 10, 1934 on the Rev. W.F. Powell of Arrowsmith's Methodist Episcopal Church. The good reverend was serving as an election board clerk when he became ill. He was first taken to his home and then the hospital, where during a thunderstorm and a power outage Dr. Johnson performed a tricky but successful operation.

The hospital, by virtue of the business it was in, was naturally a place of death and dying. Thirty-three year old Mattie Bridgewater was brought to the hospital on Apr. 5, 1926, where she passed away two days later "following an emergency appendicitis operation." She left a husband, Ray, and three children, Mabel, age 12, Virginia, 10, and John Thomas, 3. The Bridgewaters farmed southeast of Arrowsmith.

If death was an occasional visitor to the small country hospital, it was also a place that welcomed new life, as Dr. Johnson delivered many babies. The first came on Nov. 18, 1921, when Pearl Tanner Kyle gave birth to a daughter, Lucille. When Helen Dorene was born to Dollie and Paul Jenkins on Dec. 31, 1926, she joined three other newborns at the hospital.

Farming has always been a dangerous occupation, and the hospital treated those injured on the job. On Jun. 14, 1933, William Gabe Savage, a 50-year-old farmer outside of Arrowsmith, was kicked by a horse he was trying to harness, suffering what were believed at first to be fatal internal injuries. He was taken to Johnson Hospital, and after an operation on a punctured intestine, he remained under the care of staff for another two weeks before being sent home.

On Sep. 26, 1940, 61-year-old Sam J. Crago, a stock buyer and farmer southeast of Ellsworth, was thrown under a wagon by a spooked team. He received head and spinal injuries and died at Dr. Johnson's hospital four days later.

The Arrowsmith institution treated its share of automobile accident victims, located as it was just 2½ miles south of Illinois Route 9. On May 8, 1927, members of the Vielhak family of Peoria were traveling on Route 9 when they collided with another auto two miles east of Arrowsmith. Emma Vielhak and her daughter Edna were the only ones to sustain serious injuries. With a broken pelvic bone, Edna's stay at the hospital lasted several weeks.

All sorts of mishaps brought folks to the hospital. On Jul 21, 1930, Leslie Clark, a 23-year-old Stanford man, was struck by lightning while working for a tiling crew. "He is under treatment at

the Johnson Hospital where attendants have expressed a fear that the partial paralysis of his right side might continue for a year,” reported The Pantagraph.

The collections of the McLean County Museum of History include an Illinois Department of Public Health license issued to Johnson Hospital. The license, dated May 18, 1940, certified that the institution had “qualified staff and adequate facilities” to operate a “lying-in” hospital.

Dr. Lyford M. Johnson passed away on May 1, 1948, at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Bloomington, where he had been a patient for two months. He was 67 years old. The cause of death was listed as diabetes mellitus.

“The hospital, privately owned and operated, was one of the greatest things that ever happened to Arrowsmith,” noted a history of the village published for its centennial (1871-1971).

After closing, the former hospital building was transformed into the DeArms Nursing Home, owned and operated by Mary DeArms Murillo. Then, in 1971, it became Russell’s Manor, housing mentally and physically disabled adults. Owner James P. Russell closed for good in the summer of 1976 after state inspectors cited the home for a series of health and safety violations.

Today, the old hospital is a private, single family residence. Since Dr. Johnson’s passing—more than seven decades ago—Arrowsmith has not had a full-time physician.