

# Health Before Habit

Father Emmett McLoughlin – dubbed “America’s most famous ex-priest” – was chased out of the clergy after founding the Valley’s first unsegregated hospital.

**P**HOENIX was becoming a major winter tourist playground in the mid-1920s, fueled by robust hotel and resort construction. However, the burgeoning city had a dirty little secret: It harbored one of the nation’s worst slums. The crime-ridden neighborhood, nicknamed “the Bucket of Blood,” was located on the city’s southwest side between the warehouse district and the city dump, a miserable colony of shacks built from cast-off materials. Water and power were practically non-existent, and due to substandard sanitation practices like open backyard toilets, disease was endemic. Access to healthcare was minimal.

The future was bleak for the residents of the slum – until an unlikely champion arrived in the form of a young Franciscan priest named Emmett McLoughlin. Beginning in 1934, during the height of the Great Depression, the “people’s padre” worked tirelessly to help the downtrodden of Phoenix, founding the Valley’s first color-blind hospital and earning national acclaim. Ultimately, McLoughlin’s secular accomplishments brought him into conflict with church superiors, forcing the young clergyman to make an agonizing choice between his religious vows and humanitarian work.

No stranger to poverty himself, McLoughlin was born in 1907 in a tough neighborhood in Sacramento, California. At the age of 15, he became an outspoken student at St. Anthony’s Seminary in Santa Barbara. After McLoughlin’s ordination 12 years later, church elders assigned him to a parish in Phoenix in hopes the heat would temper his rebellious disposition. Initially disappointed at not getting an overseas assignment, McLoughlin soon warmed to the desert. “Phoenix turned out to be a wide, new, wonderful world filled, to a young priest, with sin and corruption and a multitude of souls needing salvation,” he wrote in his 1954 autobiography, *People’s Padre*.

Assigned to the dilapidated hovels of



Father Emmett McLoughlin

southwest Phoenix, McLoughlin – who favored street clothes over priestly garb – began a one-man crusade to improve the residents’ lives, becoming “less concerned about saving souls from a vague purgatory rather than the hell on earth,” according to a 1962 *Point West* article. As a priest, he raised funds to transform a former grocery store at Sherman Street and Seventh Avenue into Saint Monica’s Community Center. The facility provided worship space for African-Americans who were not al-

lowed to attend the city’s other Catholic churches. Commonly known as “Father Emmett’s Mission,” it also housed the state’s first maternity and venereal disease clinics and provided food distribution, day care, social events, and vocational training. Juvenile delinquency in the predominantly black neighborhood declined, tamped down by activities such as Father Emmett’s Mission youth baseball team, which played its 1939 championship season wearing kelly green uniforms to celebrate the padre’s Irish ancestry.

Realizing that adequate housing was key to improving the neighborhood, McLoughlin persuaded the state legislature in 1939 to allow cities to construct public housing. A federal grant helped build 600 of the lowest-cost public housing units in the nation. The racially segregated Matthew Henson, Marcos de Niza, and Frank Luke Jr. projects were designed by the noted local architectural firm Lescher & Mahoney.

The energetic priest also spearheaded efforts to create a community hospital. Through barbecues and personal donations, \$9,000 was raised to buy a 14-acre site at Buckeye Road and Seventh Avenue, but the onset of World War II proved just as critical in bringing the proposed hospital to fruition. To receive war-related funding, McLoughlin assured federal officials that the city’s first major integrated hospital would combat the syphilis and gonorrhea outbreaks that had caused Phoenix to be declared off limits to military personnel in 1942. The 232-bed Saint Monica’s Hospital was completed in 1944.

McLoughlin served as the hospital’s superintendent and established a policy of treating all patients, regardless of their ability to pay. A trendsetting humanitarian, he was interested in results, not playing by the rules. He established the state’s first polio ward and, to alleviate needless deaths from scorpion stings, the pragmatic priest smuggled anti-venom into the Valley from Mexico, in blatant violation of federal law.

Saint Monica’s Nursing School, the first



interracial nursing school west of the Mississippi River, also opened in 1944. While the U.S. was still at war in the Pacific, McLoughlin ignored local opposition by recruiting Japanese-American women for nurse training. Eleanor Roosevelt, who visited the school in 1946, commented on its multicultural mix. "I think it is a grand thing that you are being trained together, and I think it is important that all of us as citizens of the U.S. realize it is the people that count," the First Lady said, according to *People's Padre*.

Although "almost as well known in Phoenix as the mayor," according to a 1948 *TIME* magazine article, McLoughlin's secular activities were often met with disapproval by his superiors. The church hierarchy charged he was neglecting ecclesiastical life and planned to transfer the 41-year-old priest to a distant monastery. After much deliberation, McLoughlin chose to defrock himself and continue his work in Phoenix. "I make this decision with the full and prayerful consciousness that God will be my judge," he wrote in his resignation letter.

Defying the Vatican's "thou art a priest forever" vow invited denunciations from Catholics nationwide. The ex-priest lost many church friends, but some expressed praise for his decision, according to his autobiography. Just when the uproar began to subside, the former priest made headlines again when

he married coworker Mary Davis, a twice-divorced Episcopalian records librarian, in 1949. The wedding was condemned by his family and spurred so many threats that the couple was temporarily assigned police protection. The experience engendered bitter feelings of anti-Catholicism in McLoughlin; he later criticized the Catholic parochial school system and alleged a Roman Catholic plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln.

Despite the turmoil, McLoughlin continued as superintendent of the renamed Phoenix Memorial Hospital. He would go on to author six books critical of the Catholic Church, divorce and remarry, and win numerous community service awards until his death from heart problems at age 64 in 1970.

In his obituary, *TIME* magazine called him "America's best-known ex-priest."

McLoughlin (second from right) receives the Hire the Handicapped Award in 1963.



Phoenix named the Emmett McLoughlin Community Training and Education Center posthumously in his honor in 2006, but perhaps the most eloquent tribute to the "people's padre" came from coworker Mary Neal Bennett, who told the *Phoenix Gazette* in 1970, "It is not so much that Emmett has helped minority groups; the truth is, he has simply refused to recognize any group at all, except the one family of humanity. He has always been, and remains today, a servant of the people of Phoenix. Whenever a need appeared, he has unhesitatingly thrown himself into the breach."

— Douglas Towne

## Color-Blind Care

**D**R. WINSTON C. HACKETT'S arrival in Phoenix in 1916 wasn't just a godsend for black patients who were often denied medical care in the segregated city – it was also a blessing for whites with socially stigmatized ailments.

A native of Tyler, Texas and graduate of Meharry Medical College in Tennessee, Hackett specialized in obstetrics. With the assistance of his wife, Ayra, he practiced medicine and delivered newborns in their home for five years. After unsuccessfully lobbying for the creation of an African-American community hospital, he purchased the residence of former Territorial Governor Joseph Kibbey and opened the private Booker T. Washington Memorial Hospital at 1342 E. Jefferson St. in 1921. Initially, the hospital had only a few beds, each arranged on the home's screened porch, but soon expanded to three adjoining lots, where six cottages were built for tuberculosis patients. Hackett opened a pharmacy nearby and recruited black nurses from Southern schools to join his staff.

In 1927, the *Arizona Republican* called it "the finest and most completely equipped hospital owned and devoted to the welfare of colored people west of the Mississippi." But Hackett's 25-bed medical center served other races, too – people seeking more affordable health care and those who needed clandestine treatment for sexually transmitted diseases. Because of unpaid bills



and Hackett's failing eyesight, the hospital closed in 1943, reopening as the Winston Inn to accommodate black servicemen during World War II. Dr. Hackett died in 1949 at the age of 67, but his legacy lives on. "I still meet people who my father delivered," says his daughter, 95-year-old Winstona Aldridge, who still lives in her father's old hospital-home on Jefferson Street.

— Douglas Towne