

Not Your Granddad's PPGH

Fast-Growing Palo Pinto General Hospital Expands Its Reach with New Services, New Providers.

What's Next?

When James Lynch moved his family and 60 head of livestock west from Denison in 1877, they were in search of a healthier climate. They settled on a spot in Palo Pinto, about four miles from the nearest water source on the Brazos River.

The Lynches couldn't have envisioned what would happen when they traded livestock to a man in exchange for the digging of a well on their property. The water tasted unusual, but the Lynches, who suffered from rheumatism, began feeling better after they started drinking it. Soon after, Billy "Uncle" Wiggins dug the first public Crazy Well nearby and produced mineral water from it. With word getting out about the water's healing properties, about 3,000 people flocked to the Lynch property, where they camped and happily paid for the water.



Entrepreneurs moved in, opening bathhouses, bars, spas and more water companies – 21 by 1913. The legendary Baker Hotel downtown opened in 1929 and became an international destination, playing guest to Clark Gable, Will Rogers, Judy Garland, and Lawrence Welk. The Great Depression and World War II rationing dealt big blows to the Palo Pinto economy. But the region’s legendary reputation as a place of healing remains in place today. A group in 2019 purchased the Baker and is redeveloping it, with plans to turn it into a resort and spa. Community leaders aspire to turn Mineral Wells into one of the nation’s healthiest small communities.

Apart from that, Palo Pinto General Hospital, the countywide healthcare network founded in 1965, is enjoying its own renaissance. The Texas Hospital Association recognized Ross Korkmas, the PPGH CEO, this year with its Pioneer Award for accomplishments in running a rural healthcare network, citing Korkmas’ taking of the job during a turbulent period and the hospital’s additions of physicians, services and specialties. Rural healthcare has been under siege, with unhealthy populations, cuts in federal funding, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining medical personnel.

“Everything we do builds a foundation for a future for what our hospital can be,” Korkmas, who took the job

in 2019, said. “We do want a healthy Mineral Wells and a healthy Palo Pinto County, and a healthy hospital is part of a healthy community.”

PPGH’s significant expansions include inpatient tele-pulmonary and infectious diseases, school-based tele-health, urology, pediatric clinic, and pain management clinic, the THA noted in its citation. And, most recently, PPGH opened a new family care clinic at Possum Kingdom Lake, further increasing the healthcare network’s service area.

PPGH continues to explore creative ways to recruit top-notch providers. In August, Dr. Ruth Duesterheft, who grew up in Palo Pinto County and graduated from Mineral Wells High School, joins PPGH as a family physician. Korkmas called Duesterheft during her second year of residency in Conroe to gauge interest, obtaining her phone number from her father Paul, a longtime Mineral Wells dentist.

“I called his office, told him why I was calling, and he couldn’t give me his daughter’s phone number fast enough,” Korkmas said.

Duesterheft, who graduated from TCU and medical school at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, says it was a dream of hers to return to Mineral Wells and practice medicine.

“I didn’t know if that opportunity was going to exist,” she says. “I feel really lucky to be part of it.”

PPGH’s history dates to the community’s desire to ensure it continued to be home to a hospital when, in



Physical Therapy



1965, the Sisters of The Holy Family of Nazareth, which operated Palo Pinto's only hospital, approached the county and said they felt they could no longer sustain the operation. The public Palo Pinto County Hospital District was formed. In 1968, the first location of PPGH opened in the Crazy Water Hotel downtown. The Palo Pinto General Hospital Auxiliary was formed in the same year, led by a group of former Nazareth Auxiliarians. In 1969, the Palo Pinto Area Foundation was launched to support the development and operations of the hospital. And in 1970, the new Palo Pinto General Hospital opened at its current location.

The hospital has continued to expand, with a third floor and women's services wing among the additions to the main building, and primary health care and urgent care building to the hospital's Mineral Wells campus. With Palo Pinto County growing, the PPGH extended its reach regionally, adding a mobile health clinic, and family care clinics in Gordon, Santo, and, most recently, Possum Kingdom Lake.

Part of PPGH's success in providing top-notch health care in a rural setting is its trustees. They committed themselves to a high level of professionalism within the last two decades, becoming 100% certified as Texas Healthcare Trustees, a status the board maintains today.

"Palo Pinto County is exploding," Richard Dennis, the board president and 24-year PPGH director, said. "It's an exciting time to be in the community and we, as trustees, are focused on ensuring PPGH is a leader in rural health care. We do this through holding ourselves to the highest standards and striving to be leaders in the industry. PPGH trustees attend training sessions annually, and we continue to stay up to date, educated, to try to be aware of what it takes to be active governors. We are not operators. We are in governance."

Like Dennis, longtime trustee JC Colton credits PPGH trustees' commitment to governance for significantly contributing to its stability. PPGH's board was among the first rural hospitals to go through certification by the Texas Healthcare Trustees Association, Colton said.

"There are still healthcare trustees in Texas that never leave their county, never go to a meeting, never subscribe to a healthcare journal," Colton said. "Unfortunately, these are some of the healthcare systems that are in trouble right now."

Rural healthcare has long been in the crosshairs. Colton was elected to the board in 1998, replacing Dr. William O'Quin, one of the original trustees who founded the hospital.

When Colton became a trustee, PPGH was "\$2.5 million in the red," he remembers. "We were asking the questions can we survive this? We turned it around. Within two years, \$2 million in profit annually. We've been on a fairly good success track ever since." The tenacity of PPGH leaders has allowed the network to grow when many others have been shrinking or closing doors altogether.

PPGH, like other hospitals, has been forced to change direction following cuts in Medicare and Medicaid – a major source of revenue, particularly in rural communities with aging populations – and the recognition that healthier populations reduce the need for hospitalization. Hospitals moved increasingly toward outpatient care and preventative services. PPGH financed the expansion of its clinics through cash flow and sources such as federal block grants.

"The big (urban) hospitals have a broader pool of citizens who have insurance, self-pay," Colton said. "Rural hospitals, two-thirds of the business is Medicare and Medicaid."

Palo Pinto County must continue to stay on top of providing the best care it can, Colton said.

"It's critical you have a community hospital," he said. "Areas that have a good community hospital grow. Communities that lose their community hospital die on the vine. You can lose between 1.5 and 2% of your total population. Your school districts get smaller. The industry might not want to move to a community that doesn't have health services. Thirty-seven percent of critical access hospitals nationally have closed."

As PPGH has expanded its specialties, orthopedics, cardiology, urology, and pediatrics have been key, Colton said. "Those would be the big four areas, your bread and butter," he said.

When Korkmas entered as CEO, he saw an opportunity in reversing the high numbers of patient transfers from PPGH's intensive care unit to other hospitals. That's when PPGH added telemedicine for pulmonology and infectious diseases, connecting PPGH to those specialties by remote around the clock.

That paid off during COVID-19's surge. "We were so lucky to have the partnership we did," Korkmas said. "That really showed what we are capable of."

PPGH also expanded its reach by launching school-based telemedicine, linking school nurses to PPGH by remote. Clinic additions have included urology, pediatrics, pain management and family practice, and PPGH partnered with the local orthopedics practice.

PPGH has numerous arrows in its quiver when it comes to recruiting the best physicians. First is pursuing what Colton calls "the right people."

In rural settings, "physicians enjoy seeing people when they shop at Walmart. The people know you and they

trust you. They like to see their physicians. That physician relationship is really critical. You have to recruit the right people."

Responding to industry trends of physicians becoming employed by groups or providers such as hospitals, rather than of managing the headaches of their own entrepreneurial practices, PPGH offers both options to its recruits.

"Most physicians coming out of residency (the piece of a physician's medical education following graduation from medical school) are going to join a large established clinic or they'll go the employment model," Korkmas said. New physicians immediately hanging out their own shingle, "those are gone for the most part."

Additionally, the federal government offers to pay down educational debt for physicians who agree to move to qualifying rural areas. "That's been a very good tool to get people to come," Colton said.

Duesterheft, who spent a few summers working at her father's dentistry while in high school, has worked four or five times a month in a clinic in an underserved area near Conroe since she began her residency there.

"Growing up, living in a small town, you have limited access to healthcare," Duesterheft said "I really like helping people in my hometown get the healthcare they need. I just feel a great sense of community."

Palo Pinto County's attractiveness as a place to live is a big recruitment point for PPGH.

"There's so much possibility in Palo Pinto and Mineral Wells," Korkmas, who lives at Possum Kingdom Lake with his family, said. "You've got the renaissance of the community. There are a variety of living options. You can live at the lakes, on a ranch, or more urban in Weatherford and Aledo. Because of our geographic location, we offer a lot. You can be in Fort Worth in an hour."

Looking ahead, Korkmas sees opportunities in tele-neurology, nephrology, inpatient dialysis, and outpatient wound care. "Strategically, where would we put the next clinic?" he said. "What services do we need to add?"

Levering technology through telemedicine is important, Korkmas said. "If we don't have the 24-7 coverage, we don't keep the patients at this hospital, which is most likely closest to their homes and families." Through telemedicine, PPGH estimates it reduced emergency room transfers by 38%, or 368 patients, between fiscal years 2020 and 2021, Korkmas said.

As PPGH continues to grow, it will at some point need to examine whether to build a new main hospital or significantly update the existing one, Korkmas and Colton said. "Maintaining a 50-year-old building requires capital investment," Korkmas said.

With all the remodeling and additions since PPGH opened it, "it's not the same building we had, but the bones of it are old," Colton said. "There will come a time when we ask, do we build a new facility? That will be a big decision we'll have to make, within the next 10 years."



A History of Healing: Mineral Wells and Palo Pinto County

The healing properties of Mineral Wells' mineral waters launched the economy in the late 1880s.

1877. James Lynch, his family and 50 head of livestock settle in Palo Pinto County, four miles from the only water source—the Brazos River.

1880. The Lynches hire a man to drill a well in exchange for livestock. Lynch and his wife, who suffered

from rheumatism, begin to feel better after they start drinking the water.

1881. Billy "Uncle" Wiggins digs "Crazy Well." By year's end, with word getting out about the water's healing properties of the area's water, over 3,000 people camp on the Lynch property, buying water. In the next several years, 125 more wells are drilled.

1881. Mineral Wells is established; Lynch is first mayor.
1904. Ed Dismuke founds the Famous Mineral Water Co. and begins selling Crazy Water. Tourists and entrepreneurs flock to town, with bathhouses, bars, and spas opening.

1913. Mineral Wells is home to 21 mineral water companies.

1914. Dismuke builds the Famous Pavilion, selling products from the mineral waters.

1925. Federal grant pays to build a training site in Mineral Wells for mounted cavalry, named Camp Wolters after Brig. Gen. Jacob Wolters.

1929. Baker Hotel by Texas architect Wyatt Hedrick, opens as an international resort, a Roaring Twenties monument designed to take advantage of the mineral waters. Clark Gable, Will Rogers, Judy Garland and Lawrence Welk are guests. The hotel closes in 1972.

1931. Sisters of The Holy Family of Nazareth buys the 46-bed Mineral Wells Sanitorium from the Crazy Water Concession Co. and opens a hospital.

1938. Possum Kingdom Lake in Brazos River basin constructed.

1940s. World War II's gas rationing takes further toll on tourism, already hit by Great Depression. U.S. Army designates Camp Wolters an Infantry Replacement Center during World War II, and the camp serves as POW site for German soldiers.

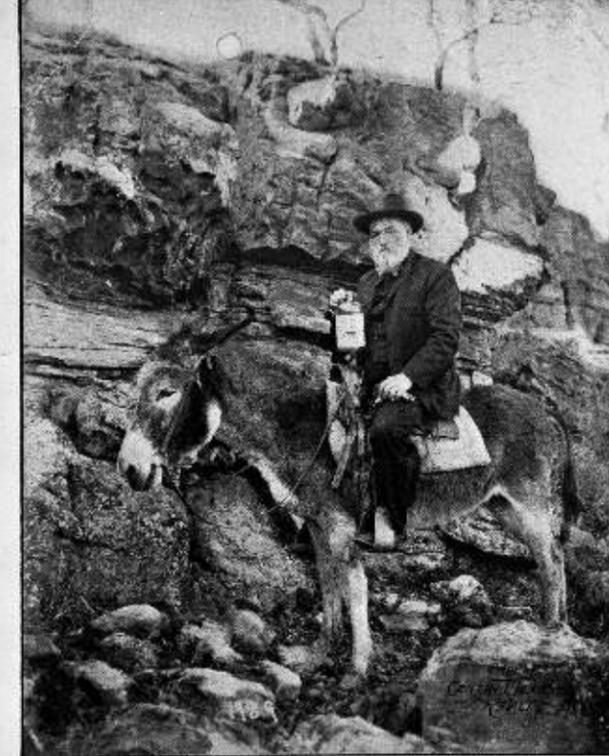
1946-1970s. Camp de-activated; later re-activated as Wolters Air Force Base, the primary helicopter training home during the Vietnam conflict; closes in 1973; now is Wolters Industrial Park.

1953. Mineral Wells' Nazareth Hospital Auxiliary organized.

1958. Famous Mineral Water Co. is sold to J.C. Causey; now owned by Carol and Scott Elder.

1965. The Palo Pinto General Hospital District (PPGH) as the Sisters of Nazareth, could no longer sustain their hospital.

1968. PPGH Auxiliary is formed by the group that had been Nazareth Auxiliaries.



J. A. LYNCH, FOUNDER OF MINERAL WELLS

1968. PPGH opens first location, at the Crazy Water Hotel.

1969. Palo Pinto Area Foundation formed as a 501c3 nonprofit to support PPGH.

1970. New PPGH is completed and opens at current location.

1985. PPGH completes the hospital's third floor.

1992. PPGH opens Women's Services wing.

2000-07. The board becomes 100% certified as Texas Healthcare Trustees, a status maintained today.

2002. PPGH introduces mobile health care clinic.

2014. PPGH opens Professional Health Center Building.

2020. While managing through COVID-19, PPGH adds multiple physicians, services, and specialties, including inpatient tele-pulmonary/critical care, school-based tele-health, infectious diseases, urology, orthopedic clinic, pediatric clinic, and pain management clinic.

2021. Adds more physicians, services and specialties, including tele-infectious disease, Possum Kingdom Family Health, and outpatient tele-pulmonary clinic.

2022. Mineral Wells Family Health coming soon. 🍎

Sources: Mineral Wells Chamber of Commerce; The Portal to Texas History; palopintohistory.com; Brazos River Authority; Palo Pinto General Hospital; Baker Hotel; Crazy Water; interviews

