

HENRY J. KAISER – KAISER HOSPITAL

By Jacquelyne Kious

Kaiser Hospital, which gets its name from industrialist and shipbuilder Henry J. Kaiser, has been a fixture in SSF since 1953 when it took over SSF General Hospital. Henry Kaiser is best known in the Bay Area for the four shipyards he operated during WWII.

The roots of the Kaiser health plan date back to the industrial health care programs in the construction and shipbuilding industries of the 1930s and 40s run by Dr. Sidney Garfield. With the scarcity of jobs during the depression, Garfield, a young surgeon from Los Angeles, saw an opportunity in the Mojave Desert. The Colorado River Aqueduct was under construction with much of the work occurring in the vast desert east of L.A., far from medical care. Garfield was able to get a loan to build a 12-bed hospital in the small town of Desert Center and began treating sick and injured workers.

As the aqueduct project came to an end in the late 1930s, Henry Kaiser convinced Garfield to re-locate to Washington state and care for the construction workers building the massive Grand Coulee Dam, the biggest of the many depression-era projects undertaken by the government to provide jobs. As the Grand Coulee Dam project neared completion, the US entered WWII.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, an unprecedented shipbuilding effort began, bringing tens of thousands of people to California to work in the shipyards. Once again Kaiser and Garfield teamed up to provide health care to the workers and their families at Kaiser's Richmond shipyard.

Kaiser knew he needed a healthy workforce in order to meet the immediate demand for ships. He came up with the idea of a pre-paid medical care system known as Permanente Health Plan, a precursor to the health maintenance organization (HMO) system. Permanente Health Plan had a 92 percent participation rate until mid-1945 when the war ended and the number of workers dropped from 90,000 to 13,000 in just a few months. Garfield and Kaiser wanted the plan to continue, but how? On October 1, 1945, Permanente Health Plan opened to the public. By the mid-1950s there were over 300,000 members in northern California.

Following SSF's population boom through the 1950s and 60s, it became apparent that a larger medical facility was needed. Kaiser Hospital and Medical Center on El Camino Real opened in 1977.