

Convention reflection: Tour of the Indiana Medical History Museum



The anatomical museum was a place for research and education in Central State Hospital's Old Pathology Building. Today, visitors to that area learn about organic and physical causes of mental illness.

About 20 nurses who attended the 40th Biennial Convention of the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI) took a side trip on 31 October, traveling back in time to a 19th-century, mid-America pathology laboratory. The trip, a tour of the Indiana Medical History Museum (IMHM) in Indianapolis, was sponsored by STTI's Virginia Henderson International Nursing Library.

It was a perfect day for time travel. Mary Ellen Hennessey Nottage, executive director of IMHM, welcomed the group in the museum's lecture amphitheater and introduced Norma Erickson, volunteer coordinator, and the two docents who conducted the tour: Corinne Nordin, graduate intern from Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and Virginia Terpening, immediate past executive director of IMHM.

The museum, located on the grounds of what was once Central State Hospital, is the oldest existing pathology laboratory of its kind in the United States. The laboratory opened in 1896 and was the hospital's pathology research facility, dedicated to finding causes of and cures for mental illness. Its secondary function was education.

Medical students from schools across central Indiana came to the facility to listen to lectures and view autopsies. Indiana University School of Medicine's Class of 1956 was the last to attend formal classes in the amphitheater. Today, medical students and the public still come to the building for tours, lectures and meetings, and they can sit on the same wooden chairs that students sat on more than 100 years ago.

The Pathology Department closed in 1968, but the hospital remained open until 1994. In 1969, the building officially became a museum, thanks to the efforts of Charles Bonsett, a physician who worked at the facility. In 1972, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and in 2009, the museum's 40th anniversary, application was made for National Landmark status.

The Old Pathology Building, as it is called, has an amphitheater, autopsy room, anatomical museum, chemical storage room, records room and library, as well as bacteriology, chemistry, histology and photography laboratories.

Sarah Cole Halter, director of public programs at IMHM, considers the amphitheater one of building's "most prized spaces." The chairs, gravity fountain and clock are original, as are the "No Smoking" signs above the doors. Paintings now displayed in the amphitheater—not there when it was in use as a laboratory—depict important figures in the history of medicine in Indiana, as well as state medical schools that sent students to the facility for psychiatry and neurology lectures. Until 1932, students viewed autopsies in the amphitheater. Afterward, the table was removed to prevent spread of disease from the cadavers to the students. The drain, located on the floor near the lectern, remains.

Visitors to the facility's anatomical museum, a place for research and education, can still learn about organic and physical causes of mental illness, such as tumors, inflammation (especially syphilis of the brain), brain trauma, circulatory problems, and degenerative and congenital defects. The brains and other organs displayed in the museum are from patients who were autopsied at the hospital.

In 2005, the museum expanded to include the adjacent building, known as the Ice—or Dead—House. Once used to store cadavers, it is now furnished with equipment from the 1950s' office of Marion Scheetz, MD. Scheetz was a rural doctor who worked from his basement office in Lewisville, Indiana, until his death in 1971. His examination and laboratory equipment, as well as office furniture, books, personal items and medicine bags, are displayed in the exhibit.

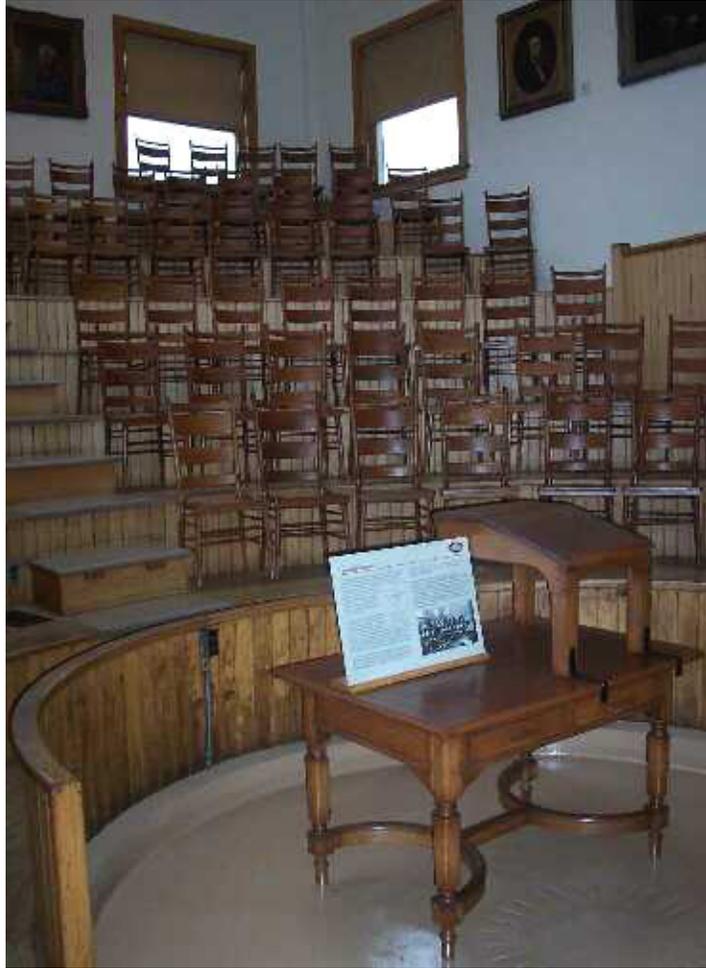
A World War I nurse's uniform was displayed especially for the STTI group. This display complemented an existing arrangement of photographs, pins and related nursing memorabilia from the 1930s.

The Indiana Medical History Museum is open to the public and offers guided tours, special programs, lectures and temporary exhibits. More information is available at www.imhm.org. RNL

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See photo gallery beginning on next page.



In the amphitheater, one of the “most prized spaces” in the Indiana Medical History Museum (IMHM), visitors can sit on the same wooden chairs that students occupied more than 100 years ago.



IMHM's chemical storage room



IMHM's bacteriology laboratory



IMHM's chemistry laboratory



IMHM's histology laboratory



Once used to store cadavers, the Ice—or Dead—House at the IMHM is now furnished with equipment from a 1950s'-era doctor's office.



A World War I nurse's uniform was displayed especially for the tour group from STTI.