History Note: Gillette marks 120 years' groundbreaking service to children

by [Access Press Staff](#) // May 10th, 2017

What is now Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare is celebrating 120 years' service to the community. Supporters gathered at the capitol April 25 to mark the occasion.

On April 23, 1897, the Minnesota Legislature established Gillette as the nation's first hospital specializing in care for children with complex medical conditions. The hospital was established at a time when these young patients were often marginalized by the health care system and greater community.

Today's hospital got its start in 1863, when Arthur Gillette was born on a Dakota County farm where South St. Paul is today. He later attended Hamline University and after graduating from medical school in 1885, he went to New York to study with two well-known orthopedists. Gillette later returned to Minnesota and specialized in orthopedics. He served as an instructor at the University of Minnesota for what he called the "almost new science" of orthopedic surgery.

In 1855, Jessie Haskins was born. She developed severe curvature of the spine, and was inspired to advocate for children with disabilities. She went on to attend Carleton College. During her time as a student she presented a paper to the Minnesota Board of Corrections and Charities, outlining the need for an institution to care for children with disabilities.

In 1897, Gillette appeared before the same board to present his own paper on the same topic. That same year state lawmakers gave the University of Minnesota the authority to provide care for children with disabilities, with Gillette serving as chief surgeon.

The first child admitted to the new hospital ward was Royal Gray. He spent more than a year there, being treated for Pott's disease or tuberculosis.

In 1900 the hospital set up an education system, so that young patients could study and work to obtain their high school diplomas. That same year a new hospital, designed by noted architect Clarence Johnson, was built near Lake Phalen in St. Paul. It was needed to meet patient demand.

The hospital performed its first spine surgery in 1915, without antibiotics and blood transfusions. Only ether and chloroform could be used for anesthesia. Surgery had to be quick and precise.

The hospital continue to see more patients, with 426 admitted in 1917.

Gillette died at age 57, in 1921. He had overseen the care and treatment of 4,171 children. The hospital added Gillette to its name in 1926, in his honor. Haskins would die two years later, at age 61.

The hospital opened its first brace shop in 1925. That grew over the years to become assistive technology service today.

The work and the faces at Gillette have changed over the years. As tuberculosis cases became more uncommon, more children with polio came to Gillette. In 1940 629 children were admitted. Those numbers would drop as treatment for polio become widespread. Fewer children needed hospital services and stays were shorter.

In 1975, Gillette became a self-supporting nonprofit hospital, to accept payments from insurance providers. State assistance was no longer needed. Two years later the hospital moved to its current site on the Regions Hospital campus near downtown St. Paul.

Today Gillette serves more than 26,000 patients each year.

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