

Alton Memorial's First Baby Delivered Returns For Rehab At AMRT

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ALTON – Billy Welch almost came full circle recently during a short-term stay at Alton Memorial Rehabilitation & Therapy. The former Eunice Smith Home is less than a mile from Alton Memorial Hospital, where on Nov. 15, 1937, Billy was the very first baby

born at the hospital, delivered by Dr. D.M. Roberts and weighing in at 9 pounds, 8 ounces. That was the same day the hospital opened to welcome its first patients.

“Not only that, but my mother (Elsa Geraldine Welch) was the first woman to give birth twice at Alton Memorial,” Billy said, referring to his brother Gayle Glen Welch, born at AMH in February 1939. “It wasn’t something we necessarily talked about a lot when I was growing up. But once in a while when I’ve been at Alton Memorial, I have mentioned to people that I was the first baby born here. They usually take notice of that.”

Billy Welch grew up on Brown Street, not too far from the hospital. He spent a lot of his childhood riding a sled down the Edwards Street hill just across Rock Springs Drive from one of the hospital entrances.

“My grandparents had a house on Runyan Street right at the foot of the hill, and it was the only house there at the time,” he said. “You could see the hospital from there back in those days.”

Billy remembers that Miss Eunice Smith crocheted a blanket for him as the first baby born at the hospital on the land that the Smith family donated.

“Unfortunately, it got eaten away when my mother tried to preserve it in an old trunk,” he said with a laugh. “That was very nice of Eunice Smith to do that. She cared a lot about everything at Alton Memorial.”

The Welch family moved to Worden, Ill., before Billy went into high school, where the family ran Welch’s Café. Billy graduated from Worden High School in 1955. He played on a 30-2 Worden basketball team that year which beat Highland, the defending state champions, in the first round of the regional before losing to Greenville in the next game. Their other loss was to conference rival Livingston.

After high school, Welch spent 20 years in the U.S. Army, stationed in several locations around the country, plus Japan and Germany. He and his wife, Fleta, were married almost 60 years until Fleta died five years ago. Fleta spent some time at the Alton Memorial Nursing School but ended up raising the couple’s two daughters. A son, Billy Jr., was killed in an automobile accident in 1970 when he was only 21 months old. One daughter, Susan Huff, lives in Bethalto, and another, Loretta Winskie, lives in Florida. He has four granddaughters, five great-granddaughters and a great-grandson, many of them with advanced degrees.

Billy’s three siblings were also born at AMH, though one brother died at a young age. His father, Wilbur Welch, worked at Western Cartridge and then Owens-Illinois -- coincidentally the company owned by Eunice Smith’s father. Billy worked for Owens-

Illinois after retiring from the Army in 1977 until 1999. He has lived in Alton ever since retiring from the Army.

“I’ve been back to Alton Memorial many times,” he said. “I had prostate surgery done by Dr. (Alan) Stein 20 years ago, now I’m dealing with some other cancer and also had a hip replacement recently. I’ve had some great doctors and always get good care here.”

He should – as he’s been getting care at AMH longer than anyone else.

Billy Welch, the first baby born at Alton Memorial Hospital on Nov. 15, 1937 – the first day the hospital opened to the public – spent some time recently at Alton Memorial Rehabilitation & Therapy on the AMH campus. He is surrounded by AMRT staff, including administrator Mark Jeffries at the far right.