Museum Madness—

Phillips County Museum's hospital display has an outstanding number of pieces from hospital and medical history. The antiques have been donated from a number of individuals and the Holyoke and Haxtun hospitals.

Not only is it fascinating to think of the medical progress made in the last century, but since so many of the museum's items are local, some could have been used on or by Holyoke citizens' friends or family.

Displayed is an array of old-fashioned nurse's uniforms. The standard uniform consisted of a blue dress, an apron and a cap. Because part of the reason for a nurse uniform is to make them easily identifiable, those on display would fair today. As a society that has become accustomed to nurses in scrubs, most would be shocked to see a nurse in one of these uniforms.

Also accustomed to hospital beds that will move to nearly any desired position at the push of a button, the current day hospital patient would certainly be taken aback by the clunky metal hospital bed that is adjusted using a crank.

Anyone who has avoided the museum's hospital display because they think they have seen it all should definitely reconsider. Consider this: The museum has several items from as far back as the 1890s. One medical case, for example, was used by Francis M. Smith, M.D.

Smith came to Holyoke in 1887 and was one of the most influential men in early Phillips County. He lived here for 44 years where he was the first practicing physician in the county.

When Smith died, the whole community was affected. According to The Holyoke Enterprise, businesses were closed and nearly the whole town attended the services. Attendance was so great, many stood outside and listened to the sermon over a loud speaker.

According to his obituary, Smith was known for his determination and sacrifice when it came to helping those in need. So long ago, his traits were vital to his profession as the technology was so limited. His medical bag on display is a testament to how far medicine has come since then.

It is alarming to think the items at the museum were, at one time, at the forefront of new technology. Current prosthetics, for example, enable amputees to run competitively, a feat that would have been impossible with the artificial wooden leg formerly used at the Haxtun Community Hospital. The leg appears to be quite heavy and uncomfortable, not to mention, it was held up by suspenders.

Melissa Memorial Hospital, with its newest facilities opened in 2008, has a highly secure delivery room designed to provide a mother and her child the greatest safety possible. Yet another example of the difference between now and then is that at one time maximum security in the hospital was achieved by providing matching bracelets and necklaces to a mother and her newborn.

At the museum is a Baby Identification Kit that was once used in the local hospital. The kit is complete with instructions on assembling the bracelets and necklaces, the proper time to place in position and special instructions for twins and triplets. The beaded bracelets and necklaces were the method used to guarantee a baby went to the correct mother.

Technology, medicine and care available in this day and age are often taken for granted. A visit to Phillips County Museum’s hospital display serves as an excellent reminder of how great the advances have been.

These items are only a few of the many objects on display at the museum in the hospital section. It may be impossible to travel back in time, but stepping into this display is almost like taking a firsthand look at history.

To see the display of all these historical hospital objects, visit the Phillips County Museum at 109 S. Campbell, Sundays from 2-4:30 p.m.