

August 2004

Margaret Allemang Centre
for the History of Nursing

NEWSLETTER

Feature Article

JANET HAMILTON NEILSON 1873-1953: City Tuberculosis Visiting Nurse¹

By Natalie Riegler RN (ret), PhD

At the time Janet Neilson retired and later at her death, she was described as a pioneer of public health nursing and Toronto's "first city nurse." She knew she hadn't been the first nurse on the city's payroll and, when she wrote a brief history of the nursing department, gave credit to the nurse who was. But for approximately four years, from 1907 to 1911, she was the only city nurse.

In 1944 at her public retirement party, Neilson received from the Toronto Department of Health, a framed, illuminated address in "appreciation from the people of Toronto and its council." This acknowledgement was to hang in the City Hall, but it could not be found in 1999. Though she is buried in Toronto's Necropolis Cemetery you won't find her grave unless you know the name of her brother-in-law. She is visibly invisible. Who was this nurse, described in her time, as "well known and much beloved"?

Janet Hamilton Neilson was born in Toronto on 7 March 1873, the eldest of six living children. Her parents, Hugh and Kate, were Presbyterian and from Scotland. At the time of her birth, the family lived in the area now described as Cabbagetown, first, in a row house and finally in a newly-built detached home at 295 Carlton Street. This yellow brick Victorian Gothic house, built in 1878, has since been recognized by Heritage Toronto. Albert Franck, a Toronto artist, memorialized the backyard of the house in his 1960's painting, "Backyard on Carlton."

After receiving a primary education at Elizabeth Champion's and Sidonia Berthon's ladies' school and attending Jarvis Street Collegiate, Neilson entered the Toronto General Hospital (TGH) Training School for Nurses in 1895. The hospital was then located on Gerrard Street, between Sumach and Sackville, a short distance from home. Neilson was one of 620 applicants; of these, 62 entered probation, 32 were finally accepted as pupils, and 28 graduated in 1897. Hers was the last class to enter the two year program.

By now, the school was the largest in the Dominion, and Mary Agnes Snively, the Superintendent of Nurses, could select those she thought best suited for the profession. Neilson moved into the nurses' residence which, though only eight years old, was already inadequate. It had "been built with a view to economy rather than comfort or hygiene."

The two years were spent gaining practical experience in the Medical, Surgical, Gynaecological, and Obstetrical departments and attending lectures and examinations, all "calculated to make the nurse more intelligent and capable in the practical part of her work." The nursing service at the General was dependent on student labour; it had only four graduate nurses on staff.

Neilson graduated on 15 October 1897. First, she worked as a private duty nurse; then as night supervisor at TGH and later at the Toronto Free Hospital for Consumptives in Weston. Her staff experience at the General was short-lived; appointed Night Superintendent in January 1905, she resigned in September. The following year, in February 1906, she joined the Weston San and remained there for 15 months.

On 14 October 1907, Janet Neilson began a career of thirty-eight years with the Toronto

Health Department. She moved back to Carlton Street where she lived until the 1950's. Her city career began with the major problem at the time, tuberculosis. In 1904, "fourteen per cent of all mortality in all ages and in all social conditions of life" was caused by TB.

The nurse's routine included assessing home conditions, providing milk and eggs for patients not able to afford them, and dispensing paper sputum cups and handkerchiefs. Patients learned the rules and if necessary were helped with admission to the Gravenhurst or Weston Sanatoriums. The nurses worked with the social and relief agencies in the city. In agreement with the visiting nurse organizations, she was "primarily responsible for the nursing care" of TB patients. Every Tuesday morning she attended the TGH chest clinic.

Neilson was one of the early nurses in the program. TGH had appointed a nurse in November 1905 to visit the TB patients attending its newly established Out-Door Dispensary. In July 1907, with the program established and funds no longer available to pay for the nurse, the hospital asked the city to take over the nursing service at an expected cost of \$600 annually. On 8 July 1907 the city agreed to hire a nurse. With the program passing to the city, the present nurse, Elizabeth Lindsay, TGH'05, employed by TGH in January 1907, became "Toronto's first 'city nurse'." She resigned in September 1907 and in October, Neilson became the "City Tuberculosis Visiting Nurse."

Neilson was responsible for the care of tuberculosis patients in the city and outlying areas.

This included the downtown core and annexed communities such as, Riverdale, Parkdale, the Annex and Yorkville. She had 23 patients to visit and the Tuesday clinic to attend;

In April 1908, a Friday clinic was added. Though time did not permit attending the St. Michael's Hospital clinic for lung diseases, she visited the patients at home.

While she worked, Neilson wore the uniform of the Hayter Street Mission: a "little black bonnet" with white streamers, brought from England and presented to her by Snively who felt that Neilson as the district nurse "should wear some mark of distinction." She carried her supplies in "a little market basket" and worked out of the

gynaecology clinic, referred to as the "Clinic for Ladies' Insides," in a house on Chestnut Street. On occasion, when she had to provide night care for a dying patient in the area, Neilson would snatch "a few hours sleep on the operating room table" at the women's clinic, visit her patient, and then, resume her daily routine calls.

As the city health department grew and offices developed, Neilson's responsibilities changed. In 1915, she was placed in the Yorkville District office and remained there as supervisor until 1931.

Later she transferred to the University District. In July 1944, she gave up her supervisory responsibilities to assist in writing a history of Toronto public health nursing. That September, she retired.

At the age of 79, Janet Neilson died on 4 February 1953 in Collingwood, Ontario. She is buried with two sisters, Florence Sheila Duff and Christine Lewis, and her brother-in-law Walter R. Lewis, in Section B, lot 169, Necropolis Cemetery.

1. ENDNOTE

Appreciation is extended to Cathy Crowe, Toronto street nurse for the suggestion; to Margaret Van Every, archivist; Ethel Irwin, TGH 1944; Madeline Smillie, retired Toronto Public Health Department; and Ani Orchanian, University Health Network Archivist, for their help with materials from the alumnae and hospital archives, and Lianne Villanovich of the Necropolis Cemetery. The information for this article has been gleaned from primary and secondary sources.

Editor Newsletter

Dorothy Wylie. Please contact her regarding any news items, short articles, announcements, ideas you may have for the Newsletter.

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The Allemang Archives

By Carol Helmstadter

One of the goals of the Allemang Centre since the 1980's when we organized as the Ontario Society for the History of Nursing, has been to preserve records of nursing history. To this end we have been collecting items of historical interest. With money from a Trillium Foundation grant, we are currently appraising, arranging and describing accessions from nursing educators, including Helen Carpenter, Ethel Irwin, Margaret Allemang, Patricia S. B. Stanojevic, Muriel Uprichard and Margaret Wilson. The Stanojevic papers are our largest accession, consisting of 1.7 metres of textual records. Stanojevic worked with RNAO, CNA and was Director of the Toronto General School of Nursing at the critical moment in 1973 when it was rolled into the George Brown School of Nursing, making her papers particularly interesting.

Our second major collection, consisting of personal papers and a large collection of material from the Nursing Sisters of Canada, comes from Margaret Allemang. The military nursing collection is large and varied, including oral histories of Canadian Nursing Sisters from World Wars I and II on 86 audiocassettes. These interviews have now all been transcribed. The collection also contains many interesting photographs of the Nursing Sisters, nursing artifacts including a tin ammunition crate which was issued to the nurses to be used as a trunk when they were in the field, a complete uniform, scrap books and we even have a can of their emergency rations. The Allemang archive also contains both the raw data and the written version of two major clinical research projects which Margaret undertook when she was teaching at the University of Toronto. The first, completed in 1960, is a study of the nursing care of eight cardiac patients while the second, done in the 1970's and 80's, details patients' perceptions of their illnesses, their treatment and their response to self-care. Both these studies provide an accurate reflection of nursing care

from the 1950's through the early 80's.

This spring Worden-Watson Ltd., specialists in display systems, generously gave us a traveling display board so we are now able to make some of our artifacts available to the public. We have already taken a display, "Images of Nurses in World War II," to three events, the RNAO Annual General Meeting, a celebration of Margaret Allemang's 90th birthday, and the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing Conference at York University. The display was very well received at all three sites and we were especially pleased that it was the students who found it the most interesting.

In addition, we hold a number of individual items of historical interest such as a 1940's nursing procedure book from the Hamilton General Hospital, a letter from Mary Agnes Snively, director of the Toronto General School of Nursing, to the mother of a student who was suffering from typhoid fever in 1908, and movies used for training nurses in the 1950's. These materials are not complete enough to form what archivists call a "fond," or collection, but they are, nevertheless, very valuable for students of history.

To provide access to these holdings RAD (Rules for Archival Description)-compliant file level finding aids with box listings will be posted on the Allemang Centre website by the end of the summer. Searchable electronic descriptions will also be listed on Archeion, Ontario's Archival Information Network. (<http://archeion-aao.fis.utoronto.ca/index.html>)

Membership Renewal 2004

Have you renewed?

If not, please remember to do so. Share this newsletter with a friend and encourage them to join as well. Increased membership can help provide the funds to engage in more projects and retrieval of nursing history artifacts.

SUDBURY HISTORY OF NURSING GROUP

By Joyce McQueen

The Sudbury History of Nursing Group, affiliated with the Margaret M. Allemang Centre for the History of Nursing, is a small group of retired nurses who are working to preserve the history of nurses and nursing in Sudbury. To this end we have developed an oral history project and have been interviewing retired nurses.

The Allemang Centre gave us \$700 to buy a good tape recorder and start the project. We developed, tested and revised an interview questionnaire and also modified it for use with public health nurses. While we continue to interview broadly, we are also focussing on particular groups. For example, we are interviewing retired public health nurses and former directors of nursing of Sudbury hospitals. Two of our members are attempting to interview all the nurses of their graduating class.

Though the interviewing continues we are moving into Phase Two, transcribing the tapes. The Laurentian University School of Nursing has loaned us a transcription machine and we have a typist who has begun transcription. The interview tapes we have will cost approximately \$1500 to transcribe. As we continue interviewing this cost will increase. Phase Three of the project is the compiling and printing of the materials, and making them available to students and researchers. This will cost approximately \$500.

We believe this is an important project for the Sudbury community and are pleased to have raised \$1450 in the Sudbury/North Bay area. We are still requiring funds and are appealing to readers of this *Newsletter* to contribute to our project.

We are directing contributions through the Allemang Centre, which is a registered charitable

organization. Thank you for considering this project. If you have any questions please contact Joyce McQueen (705) 522 4404 or email g.mcqueen@sympatico.ca

Please mark donations: for the Sudbury History of Nursing Project.

The address is:

Judy Young, Treasurer

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NEWS ITEMS

MARGARET ALLEMANG'S BIRTHDAY PARTY CELEBRATION

Members of the Allemang Centre, retired members of the University of Toronto Nursing Faculty, friends and relatives of Margaret gathered together on Saturday, May 15, 2004.

Some 70 people helped Margaret celebrate her 90th birthday with a party enjoyed by all, especially Margaret. A delicious feast was provided by Elizabeth Kovac. It was a splendid party and opportunity to reunite with old friends and colleagues.

MARGARET ALLEMANG CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF NURSING BROCHURE

The brochure is now completed and will be available for displays and other media purposes. Thanks to David G. Allen, Alliston, ON for volunteering his time, effort and talent in helping to make the brochure a reality. Thanks also to Elizabeth Kovac who developed the original idea and members of the executive who provided content and feedback.

CONFERENCES

2004 CAHN CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY

By Judy Young

The 17th annual conference of the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing was held from June 11th -13th in the pleasant environment of Founders College, York University, Toronto.

Just over 50 people attended with participants from across Canada, the UK, USA, Tasmania, Norway, and France. Invited guests were Eleanor Pask from York University Nursing Faculty and Bill Seidelman and Mary Ellen Jeans from AMS/Hannah. Carol Helmstadter and Kate McPherson worked hard to attract student presenters and to ensure funding to enable them to attend. AMS/Hannah, the home universities and the Allemang Centre all contributed to student expenses.

The opening panel, "Making Nursing History Relevant to a New Generation of Practitioners" got the conference off to an interesting start. The keynote address (Hannah lecture), the next day, proved to be a highlight with Daniel Hickey of the Université de Moncton speaking on "Care and Prayer: Women's Religious Orders and Hospital Service in France, 1658-1880." Professor Hickey's discussion of a fascinating chapter in health care history had particular resonance for those interested in early Canadian (Quebec) history. A feature of the conference was the strong audience participation, made possible because sessions were organised to allow ample time for questions. The ensuing discussions added much to the conference

A great variety of topics were covered in the concurrent sessions. The majority of papers were on Canadian nursing history but we also learned of nursing in eighteenth century British naval hospitals, Norwegian nurses and TB care, aboriginal health in Tasmania, nursing missionaries in China, and naval nursing in France. Canadian topics included nursing on reserves in Alberta, history of radiation oncology nursing, volunteerism (Red Cross and VADs), racism in Canadian nursing, and nursing in wartime.

Local arrangements by Kate McPherson and history student Kristin Burnett proved to be excellent. Participants particularly enjoyed the Saturday evening banquet at Black Creek Pioneer Village, an event which Margaret Allemang was able to attend. Next year's conference will be in Ottawa to coincide with the opening of the nursing exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

OBITUARY

Jennie Ives, died this past year. She was a prominent figure on the nursing scene for many years. Though not a Toronto General hospital graduate, she was associated with the TGH School of Nursing from 1942 until the late 50's. Miss Ives taught probationers in the now non-existent West residence. She later became Assistant Director of Nursing. Miss Ives obtained her BA in Nursing from Columbia University, New York City, and later worked as a consultant with the Ministry of Health of Ontario before retiring. Her funeral was attended by many TGH alumnae, a member of her first nursing teaching class, and a member of her own hospital alumnae. (excerpt from the TGH Alumnae News)

UPCOMING DATES

Saturday, October 23, 2004

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
RNAO Board Room

Ottawa, June 15-19, 2005

CAHN/ACHN ANNUAL CONFERENCE &
OPENING OF THE NURSING EXHIBIT:
NURSING THE CARING PROFESSION
At the MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION

History of Nursing Writing Prize

The Allemang Centre is offering a prize of \$300 for the best essay in the history of nursing written

by a student in the year September 2003 through September 2004.

Criteria for submissions:

- 1 The paper may deal with any topic in the history of nursing in any period and in any country.
- 2 Papers should be a minimum of 8 pages, and a maximum of 25 pages in length including footnotes.
- 3 Both undergraduate and graduate students may submit.
- 4 The student must be enrolled in a university or community college in Ontario. Students **from any faculty, including nursing, social science, humanities and science**, are invited to apply.

The deadline for submission is September 18 2004. The prize will be awarded on October 23 2004 at the annual general meeting.

Papers may be submitted either by e-mail or in hard copy. Electronic copies should be in either Microsoft Word or Word Perfect and include academic affiliation, address, telephone and fax numbers. Students submitting in hard copy should send three copies. The first copy should have the name, academic affiliation, address, telephone, fax and e-mail. The remaining two copies should have no identification.

Please send papers to the vice-president of Allemang Centre:
Dorothy Wylie
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