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Allemang Centre

Margaret

for

the History of Nursing

## NEWSLETTER

### **Feature Article**

#### **SYLVIA BURKINSHAW: DEDICATED SERVICE TO NURSING**

##### **Part 1**

Lynn Kirkwood RN(ret) PhD

The unveiling of Sylvia Burkinshaw's portrait at Kingston General Hospital marked a milestone in the hospitals nursing history. Sylvia represented the last of the 'Les Grande Dames'<sup>1</sup> of 20<sup>th</sup> century nursing yet she was instrumental in the rise of the new Executive Nursing Officer role. Although Sylvia, who was good at sports wanted to be a gym teacher she has devoted herself wholeheartedly to the career which chose her. She believes that discipline, order and hard work pay off. An optimist who lives on the bright side, she exudes a confidence which assumes things will be done. Even at the age of 87 she is independent and in charge, dispensing her considerable skills wherever they are needed.

At seventeen, Sylvia was too young to enter nurses' training but not too young to work on the pediatric unit at Scarborough Hospital in England. She was 'handed on' her profession from her mother, who had trained at Guy's Hospital and been a matron during the First World War. Unlike many women of her day Sylvia planned her career, joined her professional association, took advantage of opportunities and was not afraid to take certain risks.

The Scarborough General Hospital was new in 1937 when Sylvia began her training, so the accommodation was 'not too bad' but the meals were horrible, doctors' lectures drone on, and the hours of duty were long. She

mused that students today would not tolerate the conditions that nurses of her day accepted.

Her mother died while Sylvia was in training but little sympathy was spared for the young woman left virtually on her own. After one year as a staff nurse she did her midwifery training at the Queen Charlotte Hospital in London. She did her six months training and the requisite number of deliveries before escaping into the Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service in 1942 at the height of the Second World War. Her first assignment was at the Royal Military Hospital in Chatham, Kent, then to Dartmouth where she and her colleagues had to deal with the horrible casualties from Normandy. She spent the remainder of the war in Bermuda where she dealt with casualties from the Northern Campaign. In many ways it was an idyllic posting - very little rationing, pleasant living conditions and lots of leisure time activities. One of her tasks on the base was to row out in a dinghy to catch the evening meal of lobster.

Although she was asked to stay on after the war she wanted to "get on and do more with her life." She did the unheard of and resigned her commission. Ever insightful, she recognized by the 1950s that "if you wanted promotion you had to move from the bedside into nursing education." After studying for the Sister Tutor's diploma she accepted the position of Associate Director of Nursing Education at University College in London. Sylvia was interested in the various types of nurses training that were being developed after the war and applied for the Florence Nightingale Scholarship to study nursing education at the University of Toronto. Thus began her life in Canada.

The Florence Nightingale Memorial Fund was established in 1936 for postgraduate nursing education in some educational institution of university status. The fund was an amalgamation of the earlier international courses for nurses sponsored by the National League of Red Cross Societies and the fund set up by the ICN in honor of Miss Nightingale. The fund paid the students tuition but very little else. Sylvia arrived in Canada with five pounds in her pocket - the amount that could be taken out of Britain at the time.

Nettie Fiddler, Director at U of T's School of Nursing had booked her into a hotel at \$24.00 per week, leaving Sylvia with one dollar to spend! Ever resourceful, she found her own accommodation. While attending school she lunched on peanut butter sandwiches and apple juice which cost twenty cents at Kresgse. She annoyed Miss Fidler by also 'going to work.'

Life at U of T was interesting. Most of her classmates were from 'every country you could think of', there on Rockefeller Foundation bursaries and they soon formed a cohesive group. She remembered dinners when students would dress in their national uniforms, sing their songs, do their dances and spoke about their lives. She recalls that the Turkish students were most colorful. Students from India were laid back, quiet and unassuming. It was a time when nursing faculty and students, especially international students socialized frequently. Sylvia recalls visits to Hilda Bennett's cottage in Haliburton and a bus trip to Huntsville arranged by Jeannette Watson where the group was introduced to Canadian cuisine, pancakes and syrup. When a student at U of T she went to dinner once or twice with Nettie Fidler and Jean Marsden, Director of Nursing at the Hospital for Sick Children. An event which would not be repeated in today's nursing world!

Following her year at U of T, Sylvia went on a Greyhound bus trip across the United States visiting schools of nursing in various centers

before returning to University College Hospital. Ever forward thinking she returned to Canada in 1955 to complete her degree at McGill. Although McGill had a smaller international group, faculty and students mingled in get-togethers at the school on Pine Avenue. Following completion of her degree in 1956, she returned to Toronto as Associate Director of Nursing Education under her friend Jean Marsden. Never one to be defeated, when Miss Marsden retired and Sylvia was passed over for her friend's position, she accepted the Director of Nursing position at the Kingston General Hospital. When the Board of Governors offered her eight hundred dollars a year, she demanded \$850 annually. They accepted. The governors got a very good deal.

Sylvia's career at the Kingston General Hospital spans almost forty-five years. The 1960s were a time of upheaval and change in health care. The rise of medical technology and specialization, introduction of government funding for health care, and social changes within Canadian society, determined changes in the way health care was delivered. KGH was experiencing an extensive building program with reorganization of hospital units to better reflect specialization and clinical teaching. Interestingly, one of the first subtle changes was that of her title. The previous director had been called 'Superintendent of Nurses', Sylvia's title was that of 'Director of Nursing'. Sylvia's understanding of the superintendent role and her inherent interest in service to patients determined that she would play a significant role in these changes. She became actively involved in planning, staffing and organizing these new units. As well she was part of the planning of the new buildings. Under her guidance an intensive care unit was opened in 1962 and a cardiac care unit in 1972.

Sylvia was in constant touch with nursing staff, students and patients. She held monthly meetings with head nurses sharing information on changes and attempting to enlist nurses suggestions and recommendations. Like all nurses of that time, Sylvia found that the head nurses were not particularly interested in

hospital affairs and wanted only to get back to their 'work stations'. Her confidence and leadership style led Sylvia to assume that her decisions were right and that her orders would be carried through. In the superintendent role she had almost total control of nurses lives - both on and off duty. She believed that she was firm but fair in her dealings with people, a view that has been confirmed by others. She was willing to listen, but dealt with things in her own way. Sylvia explained that when doctors came in to complain about nursing staff she would listen carefully, then graciously escort them out of her office "and that was the end of that."

(Part 2 continues in February issue)

1. Louise Penny, *Dead Cold* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2006), 188.

Note:

Interviews with Sylvia Burkinshaw were conducted in Kingston, Ontario between February and September of 2006.

It is difficult to know how to address nursing leaders of Sylvia's generation. As a Superintendent or Director of Nursing she would certainly have been addressed as 'Miss Burkinshaw', however, as the Chief Nursing Officer role it is more likely to be as 'Sylvia'. I have chosen the more contemporary form of address to highlight her achievement as a change agent.

I appreciate the assistance of Tamara Nelson, Archivist at Kingston General Hospital for providing the 'Bibliography of Sylvia Burkinshaw' Collection 503, and 5999-69, arranged by Paul Wan, Kingston: KGH Archives.

## **Allemang Centre AGM 2006**

The annual meeting was held on Saturday, September 23, 2006 at the Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto, 155 College Street. President Kathleen MacMillan presided. Judy Young gave a presentation on some of

the artifacts and documents of the Allemang collection, and had items on hand for display. The major part of the collection has been catalogued with the exception of some items from Margaret Allemang's house acquired in the past year. Discussion followed regarding possibilities for the future of the collection. Lynn Kirkwood, Kingston, ON is welcomed back as a Board member. Lynn is an avid nurse historian and has been active in CAHN/ACHN. She is a graduate of Toronto Western Hospital, School of Nursing, has an undergraduate degree from McGill and a PhD from OISE (U of T). She is retired from the nursing faculty at Queen's where she taught family nursing and in the nurse practitioner program mixing some nursing history in with the content. Her knowledge and energy is a welcome addition to the Board.

## **President's Report 2005- 2006**

A major concern of the organisation, at present, is the care and disposition of our archival collection. As mentioned in last year's report, the directors are actively seeking a home for the collection. In the spring, we removed our materials from storage at Bridgepoint Health and they are currently housed with one of our directors. Storage at Bridgepoint had become impracticable due to the hospital's building plans.

We are extremely grateful to Bridgepoint executives who, since 1999, have provided us with free storage along with access to the collection. A considerable amount of sorting and cataloguing of the collection was possible during this period.

The Centre continued its policy of sponsoring students to the CAHN conference and this June paid the expenses of a student from Ontario to attend the Vancouver conference. Members of the Centre are involved with local arrangements for the CAHN International Conference to be held in June 2008 at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Nursing.

Events this past year included a presentation by the Sudbury group on their Oral History Project

and a visit this spring to the Kingston Museum of Health Care. Four issues of the newsletter were mailed to members during the year, and a special vote of thanks to Dorothy Wylie for her able work as editor. She took over as newsletter editor more than two years ago and has done a sterling job on behalf of the organisation.

We extend our thanks to Joyce MacQueen who has decided to step down from the Board of Directors. Joyce was instrumental in starting the organisation and had been a director since the Centre incorporated. During this time, she has served as Vice President, newsletter editor, and organiser of the Sudbury group.

Our membership has remained fairly steady at 76.

## News Items

### Jill Robertson

On June 8<sup>th</sup>, TEGH volunteer, retired registered nurse and Allemang member **Jill Robertson** was honoured by the Archives Association on Ontario (AAO). In recognition for her years as a dedicated volunteer and her contribution to the hospital. Her efforts resulted in “one of the most extensive community hospital Museum and Archive collections in Ontario”. Jill received the AAO’s Alexander Fraser Award, given to individuals who have contributed in a significant way to the advancement of the archival community in Ontario.

Jill has been a dedicated member of the team at TEGH for over forty-eight years since she trained at the School of Nursing graduating in 1961. She then worked as an RN for 32 years, and was President of the School of Nursing Alumnae for 30 years until retiring in 1993. Her husband, Hamish, retired RN, has also been an active volunteer.

On June 20<sup>th</sup>, Jill unveiled a display “**The History Wall**” an interactive display depicting the history of TEGH. The permanent display,

a series of sliding pictures and storyboards, outlines the hospital’s history and future plans. Congratulations to Jill and Hamish for all their efforts and hard work

(Excerpted from In General June 15 and July 15, 2006).

## Beyond the Dream

On October 5<sup>th</sup>, the documentary **Beyond the Dream** was previewed at the Isabel Bader Theatre. This film portrays the history of nursing at the Hospital for Sick Children and celebrates the work of Elizabeth McMaster and her vision to establish the hospital. It is a testament to more than a century of contributions made by SickKids nurses to improve the lives of children and families.

The film is a nostalgic trip through history and stars some familiar faces including Allemang’s own Judy Young.

## Lisbeth Hockey Collection

The online collection on **Dr Lisbeth Hockey** (1918-2004), known as the world’s top nurse researcher, has been contributed by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) to the UK Centre for the History of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Manchester.

This source “celebrates the life and work of Lisbeth Hockey and provides a gateway to her archives and publications”. It includes three oral history tapes of interviews with her, conducted by RCN archivist Susan McGann based on the *Guidelines* prepared by Dr. Shirley Stinson, University of Alberta. The completion of the Collection was made possible through the Scotland-based Hockey Memorial Trust fund, to which many Canadian nurses also made generous donations.

“Knowledge has its staring point in ideas,” said Dr. Hockey. This online source is a beginning compendium of how she put ideas into action. (Courtesy of Dr. Shirley Stinson).

## 2008 International Conference on the History of Nursing

The Canadian Association for the History of Nursing/l'Association Canadienne pour l'Histoire du Nursing is pleased to be sponsoring the fourth international conference on the history of nursing. This prestigious conference attracts scholars from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States as well as some of our own Canadian historians of nursing. The many different countries from which presenters come mean that those who attend find a rich variety of perspectives on our history which is exciting. As well, the conferences provide wonderful networking opportunities.

For the annual CAHN/ACHN 2008 conference we are planning this two-and-a-half day international conference which will be held Thursday June 5 through Saturday June 7, 2008. It will be hosted by the Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto and will be held in the Health Sciences Building at 155 College Street. Cosponsors are the Faculty, Women's Studies at York University, the Ryerson School of Nursing and Allemang Centre .

The conference theme will be **borders, boundaries and political context in nursing and health care history**. There will be four sub-themes: (1) the colonial and political contexts of health care, (2) religious influence focusing on nursing sisterhoods and missionary nursing, (3) the political context of psychiatric practice, and (4) Northern nursing and regionality. Last year CAHN received a \$200,000 legacy from our member Vera Roberts to be dedicated to research on Northern nursing. We believe this conference will be an excellent place to advertise our new Vera Roberts Scholarships.

We are planning two Hannah lectures as was done so successfully at our Vancouver conference this year. We have succeeded in attracting two distinguished international scholars on nursing history for the lectures.

The first is **Karen Schultheiss**, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Illinois, Chicago, who is the author of *Bodies and Souls: Politics and the Professionalization of Nursing in France 1880-1922*. This fine book is a political history of the demise of religious nursing in France. The second is **Catherine Choy**, Associate Professor from the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California Berkeley. She is the author of the highly acclaimed book, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*. This book deals with American imperialism and racism and the persistent tensions nurse migration creates in health care. The focus of both of these scholars' work is strongly linked to the core conference themes, the powerful influence of religious sisterhoods in nursing politics and policy and the politics of nurse migration in colonial context.

The Local Arrangements Committee, co-chaired by Carol Helmstadter and Judy Young, is now meeting. Professor Kathryn McPherson is representing York University. Kate co-chaired the excellent CAHN Conference at York in 2004. Dean Sioban Nelson and Michael McGillion are representing the University of Toronto Faculty of Nursing. Laurie Clune and Kathy Gates are representing Ryerson. Finally, Lynn Kirkwood who chaired the highly successful CAHN conference in Ottawa in 2005 is giving us her valuable help.

Please watch our website for further information. The call for abstracts should be posted in the near future. We hope to see many of you at the conference. Web site: [www.cahn-achn.ca](http://www.cahn-achn.ca)

(Courtesy of Carol Helmstadter)

## Obituaries

### Wing Commander Muriel Catherine McArthur (retired)

Passed away peacefully surrounded by her family on October 14, 2006 at Royal Victoria Hospital, Barrie, ON. She was born in Oro Station on August 31, 1913. Lovingly remembered by family and many, dear friends

across Canada, who knew her as Mac. Muriel's nursing career began in 1937 when she entered the School of Nursing of the The Toronto General Hospital, where she was employed until joining the RCAF in 1941. Her Air Force Service career took her to Europe twice: to England during WW11 and to Metz, France where she was the Matron of RCAF's NATO Air Division from September 1954 to September 1957. She was Matron of RCAF hospitals at Goose Bay, NFLD, and Rockcliffe, ON from 1957 to 1959. In 1958 she became an honorary nursing sister to the Queen and was reappointed for a second term in 1959 when she was presented to Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip at Government House. In 1961, she was promoted from Squadron Leader to Wing Commander of the Canadian Armed Services. Muriel was the first woman to attain this rank in Canada. In 1963 she was invested to the Order of the St. John Ambulance by Governor General Vanier at Rideau Hall. This was followed by work on the Surgeon General's staff and appointment as Matron of the Canadian Forces Medical Services. She held this post until her retirement from the Air Force in 1965. Shortly afterwards she moved to Edmonton where she nursed at the University of Alberta until her retirement. In 2002, she was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Award. When she was 86, she decided to return back to Ontario to be with her family. This was a huge move but most beneficial for everyone. The family immediately embraced Muriel from the oldest niece to the youngest great-nephew. It was a lovely time together, indeed. (Excerpted from the Toronto Star, October 18, 2006).

#### **Reynolds, Helen Fredrica (nee Hare)**

Passed away in Brampton on Monday, July 31, 2006 in her 89<sup>th</sup> year. Dear wife of Burton. Helen graduated from The Toronto General Hospital, School of Nursing in 1940. She nursed at the hospital, then joined the Navy in 1943. She was stationed in Halifax and worked in the Navy hospital. She was also stationed at Cornwallis and Sydney, NS in

1945 on the HMCS Protector. Many of the Navy nurses were TGH grads because Marjory Russell the recruiter was also TGH and preferred no one else. In her 60's she and her husband spent some time in Florida. While there she wrote her Florida registration exams and worked in hospitals there. Nursing was of great importance to her and all three of her daughters became nurses. (Excerpted from the Toronto Star and correspondence to Margaret Stephenson from Maggie Reynolds).

### **Upcoming Conferences**

**CAHN/ACHN Conference at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, May 31<sup>st</sup> – June 2nd, 2007.**

#### **Call for Papers**

The conference is held in conjunction with the Canadian Society for the History of Medicine (CHSM). The theme is **“Bridging Communities: Making public knowledge, making knowledge public”**.

The AMS-CAHN Lecture will be by Maureen Lux, Assistant Professor of History, Brock University, the author of *Medicine that Walks: Disease, Medicine and Aboriginal People in the Canadian West 1880-1930*. For further information visit website” [www.cahn-achn.ca](http://www.cahn-achn.ca)

**American Association for the History of Nursing 24<sup>th</sup> Annual History of Nursing Conference at White Plains, New York, September 28 – 30, 2007.**

For further information check website: [www.aahn.org](http://www.aahn.org)

### **Editor Newsletter**

We welcome contributions to the newsletter, news items, short articles related to nursing history, announcements, etc. that you would like to have reported.

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