

Nurse or Wife:

An early 20th Century Choice

George Matheson rediscovers his grandmother and her early life as a nurse through family photos and letters

All photos courtesy of the author

The young woman staring straight at me in the photo bears no resemblance to the grandmother I recall.

My grandfather I remember vividly; he was a prominent, dynamic minister. But my grandmother has always been a shadowy figure. In my memory, she is busy with the chores, cooking in the kitchen, attending church luncheons, listening to his sermons. That person had long ago closed the door on any personal aspirations and simply become “the preacher’s wife”.

In the 1950s, when I knew her, I don’t recall any mention of her having been a nurse. So, when I found this 1910 graduation photo amongst other family pictures in the attic, my curiosity was stirred.

Was there a time when she was a very different person? What had it meant to be a nurse in her era?

She had grown up before feminism, gender equality, women’s rights – at a time when most girls would never have aspired to a career and nursing bore no resemblance to the profession it is now. The late 1800s were a



The author's grandmother in her 1910 nursing school graduation photo.

very different time. Women were considered “the weaker sex”; a woman’s domain was her home and family. When anthropologists and theologians of that era declared that “God had ordained separate functions (and different blood flows to the

brains) for male and female,” people just nodded.

By the early 1900s, the traditional moral values and codes of behaviour were on a collision course with an emerging ‘modern’ 20th century image of women.

This clash is evident in the October 27, 1906 letter from my great grandmother, Adelaide, to my grandmother, Bess. In it she writes

Your father is fretting at a great rate over it. He says it's no place for respectable girls ... he has a poor opinion of hospital training for girls thinking that all they want to go for is to have sport with the men. Well do whatever you think best about it – you are old enough now to judge for yourself and to take care of yourself.

And then she adds this:

But there is this about it, lots of work you know nothing about... I have your skirt nearly done. Would have finished it this week but have been housecleaning...

The “it” her father, John Ratcliff, fretted over was my grandmother’s determination to leave home and enter nursing school in Toronto. John was

dealing with a daughter who was exhibiting a worrisome streak of independence. In his mind, the loud, raucous “big city” was no place to be for a young and proper woman. Rather, he expected women to be like his wife, Adelaide, who stayed home, did the sewing, cooking and housework. She would not overtly disagree with him, for wives didn’t do that, but I could sense encouragement in her words – “do whatever you think best”. And my grandmother did!

It’s possible that Bess was just following in her older sister Margaret’s footsteps. After all, Margaret was already nearing the end of her training at Nicholl’s Hospital in the quiet, rural village of Peterborough, Ontario, close to home. Conceivably both chose nursing as a path to escape the life of working on the family farm and helping out in the store. A few entries in Bess’ diary for that time provide a glimpse into that mundane day-to-day life: “Margaret ironed while I churned and Mamma sewed” (April 24th) and “M and I washed the 480 sap buckets in pan.” (April 25th)

For centuries, women had had the role of caregivers for the sick, starving and injured. Nursing was considered a natural extension of the woman’s maternal caring and nurturing role. Most were nuns for whom nursing was a religious calling, or women tending to ill family members, while some were illiterate and poor girls for whom this was their only option.

It wasn’t until the mid-1800s, when Florence Nightingale shocked her well-to-do family by taking off to care for



19th century post card depicting English nurse Florence Nightengale.

soldiers during the Crimean war that the view of nursing began to change and challenge these gender roles. On her return to England, Nightingale had documented her model for nursing, and schools had opened based on this “Nightingale philosophy.” Toronto General Hospital established its own Training



Mary Snively in undated photo.

School for Nurses in 1877 and Nicholls Hospital’s School in 1891.

Nursing offered something new and challenging to the Ratcliff sisters, a career in which they could find an independent, modern life. But it still demanded that they behave as “proper” women – subservient, obedient, religious and above all – “ladylike.”

The sisters were very close and in dozens of letters from 1906-1912, Bess and Margaret shared their personal struggles and successes giving a taste of life as students, “registered nurses”... and “modern women”.

The first challenge Bess encountered was to gain acceptance into the program. Miss Mary Snively, the hospital’s notorious Lady Superintendent, a stern person whom Margaret described as “a fierce crank”, made the selections.

Snively was picky as well as prickly. To be considered, applicants had to be (and intend to remain) unmarried, between the ages of 23 and 35, and free from any “necessity of nursing family members should illness occur among them during the coming three years.” As well, she preferred, as she put it, that they be “women from rural, middle-class backgrounds that were used to hard work and could be fashioned into dutiful and educated nurses.” Of the 594 applicants in 1906, Bess’ year, 53 were accepted on probationary status for a three month trial, 32 were eventually enrolled as student nurses but only 17 graduated three years later. Bess was one of them.

The three years of training were long and demanding

times with no room for complaining. At the beginning of Bess' probationary period, Margaret gave her advice (Nov. 28, 1906) on what she called 'the rules of etiquette':

"Eat all the humble pie you can stuff in you ... Do whatever you are told and give no back talk no matter how much you would like to. Consider everything you are told to do an honor & a pleasure. Show the greatest respect to your seniors as well as the Sup. Always rise when the Sup, Dr. or your senior nurses enter the room."

The students worked four weeks of 12 hour shifts (from 7AM to 7PM then 7PM to 7AM) and in off hours attended classes presented by staff nurses, physicians and surgeons. Only at the "expiration of the night duty," were they allowed two days to rest and catch up with personal chores.

Once having graduated, nursing life did not get any easier whether it involved working in the hospital, in private duty or in district nursing of the poor. Bess chose private duty because she was in debt after three years of unpaid training. It help that it paid \$60/mon, compared to \$33/month she would have earned in the hospital.

While the money mattered, private duty had its drawbacks. Nurses like Bess and Margaret were required to live sometimes for weeks at a time in the patient's home wherever that might be. As Margaret observed, being "a long way from town and the doctor" could be both stressful and very lonely. "I was so lonely last night", she wrote, "I thought I couldn't



Miss Snively, staff nurses and the graduating class of 1910. Bess is in the second row, second from the left.)

stand it another minute... I really thought I would go frantic. I was so nervous after the rest (of the family) went to bed & lonely too. I was afraid to breathe almost."

As well, they were expected to be on duty 20 hours/day: *I slept this afternoon from about 1:30 to 5:30. That is supposed to do for last night and tonight but that's private nursing – of course they will relieve me tomorrow afternoon again but oh it's hard work.*

The work was hard, the hours long and the cases were often heart-wrenching cases: a tragic suicide, a woman living

8 miles out a dirt road in the country who almost died in childbirth, a 80 year old with bronchitis for whom there (was) scarcely any hope, a sad, newly-widowed man who dreaded being left all alone. Many of their letters were about patients, money worries and their realistic fear of becoming infected with typhoid.

But nursing was not the only thing they wrote about. In later letters, a new theme gradually begins to appear. Bess had met and fallen in love with the dashing young preacher who would later become my grandfather. Now a

RESEARCHING NURSE ANCESTORS

For anyone researching Canadian nurse ancestors, the National Institute for Genealogical Studies FamilySearch wiki on Canadian nursing associations is an excerpt from their course on *Canadian Local Histories and Special Collections* by Michelle LaBrosse-Purcell, B. SC., MLIS. Visit the wiki at [http://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canadian_Nurses_Associations_\(National_Institute\)](http://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canadian_Nurses_Associations_(National_Institute)). For more information on the National Institute for Genealogical Studies, or the course, visit www.genealogicalstudies.com/eng/courses.asp?courseID=41.

For the US, UK and other countries, FamilySearch.org (Free) and Ancestry.com/Ancestry.ca/Ancestry.co.uk (\$) are home to many collections relating to nursing, including military nursing. Note: Indexed records relating to nurses who served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in WWI are available through Ancestry.ca (\$).

young woman in love, she wrote about their times together, his proposal, their wedding plans. Margaret shared in her sister's excitement while, at the same time, worrying that she'd never get her chance. (Eventually she would meet, and marry, a fellow named John.)

Romance had no place in Snively's model of nursing as "a calling" – "a mission". Rules at that time barred women from nursing if they were married. So Bess, Margaret and many others she'd selected and trained were forced to make a stark choice between the traditional role of the wife and their nursing careers. It would be several decades later before nursing would define itself as a profession and women could


be both nurses and wives; even then, at first, only with the written permission of their husbands.

Bess, working almost to the day she married, would go on to be the minister's wife, a role she played for almost 50 years and the one in which I knew her in. Margaret became a shopkeeper with John in an Alberta outpost.

When they married, the sisters' photos, letters and diaries were put away, textbooks went on the back shelf, and uniforms were passed on. It was as if a door had been closed.

One hundred years later, when I came across this photo, it was as if that door reopened a crack. As I found more and more material stored away in the attic, searched through

hospital and nursing archives, visited the Florence Nightingale Museum in London, England, and read articles about the history of nursing, something strange happened.

This shadowy figure of my grandmother began to transform in my memory, becoming a more colourful character and taking her place on centre stage. Finally I could see my grandmother as the young lady determining her own future in her own time. 



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