

## NURSING STUDENTS DURING THE WAR YEARS

The Misericordia Heritage Collection contains many artifacts, photographs and records about what it was like to be a Misericordia nursing student during the Second World War (1939-45). This article is based on interviews and scrapbooks of graduates from the classes of 1940-46 as well as articles in the Winnipeg Free Press at the time and a letter to the hospital administration by a physician in 1942.

During the war years, strict rules were observed about who could enter the School of Nursing. These rules forbade marriage during the three-year nursing program. This was a difficult situation for many students when their enlisted fiancés had to leave the country to join overseas combat. The medical profession was male-dominated, and female physicians were rare. The nursing profession was all female; male students were not admitted into the program until several years after the war.



*Nurses' residence*

Nursing students lived in an old house on Sherbrook Street at the location of the present Parkade and were required to live there during the program. The residence had tiny bedrooms, each containing a small closet and a drawer. The beds were old cots taken from the men's public ward; they had thin mattresses that were uncomfortable to sleep on. The wooden floors creaked when you walked on them. When the housemother came at night to check that everyone's lights were out, the students were warned by the sound of her shoes on the floor and turned off the light before they were caught. Nursing

students learned to walk on the side on the stairs when they snuck in after curfew so the squeak on the wooden stairs did not alert the housemother to their transgression.

The food rationing system during the war meant that items such as sugar, meat, and dairy foods were in short supply. Hospitalized individuals were required to give up their ration books during their hospital stay; however, these rations were insufficient to feed everyone within the hospital. Rationed foods were saved for private (paying) patients and hospital staff.

Nursing students were served food that was largely “inedible.” Some examples included bread with milk poured over it and a watery soup. Nursing students were not the only ones receiving inadequate nutrition within the hospital; public (non-paying) patients were known to receive poorer food than private patients. The physician writes that his patient was discharged in 1942 from the hospital in “worse shape than she came in” because she was a public patient who did not receive rationed food. He writes that this situation has been reported by many of his patients.



*Sam*

Students during the war years were grateful for Sam’s restaurant (at the site of what is now The Nook) because they could go to the restaurant for “decent food.” Thelma Sheldon (Class of 1943) was quoted as saying that her class had “no money” but that “He (Sam) was an Italian fellow and he was real nice to the nurses. We could get a coffee and donuts for 10 cents.” Bernice Fanning (Class of 1946) said, “Sam would keep tabs on what we ate and when we had a little money from home, we’d go over and settle our bill.”

Students were considered “on probation” for the first six months of the program. Students found lacking nursing qualities were dismissed at the end of their probationary period. The remaining students received a one-year assessment from the Head Nurse of the ward on

which they were placed at the time and after that period, they were evaluated by nursing instructors and the head nurse.

There was a constant threat of dismissal in the program. Students were considered “a lesser class” than the hospital staff. A nun was in charge of the keys for the linen cabinet on each ward. If a student needed some linen, such as a new drawsheet because the old one was wet, she had to go to the nun, tell her what patient required it and make a case for why this was necessary. The nun could refuse the request if she deemed the student had not made a convincing enough case. Nursing staff, however, simply had to ask and they were given the linen they required.

If students were accused of an offence by a nurse or physician, the student’s accounts of the situation were overlooked; the accuser was always believed. All nursing students were expected to defer to physicians, standing at attention whenever a physician entered the room. Questioning a physician’s orders was a punishable offence.

Thwarting discipline for breaking the rules was one of the students’ favourite

memories of their experience in the program. Bernice Fanning (Class of 1946) remembers a time when she and her classmate made a decision to go to a party that would not be over by the 10 p.m. curfew. They arranged for another student to let them in when they returned. When they returned, they rapped on the classmate’s window. Her bedroom was close to where the nuns were sleeping. A nun heard the noise and woke up the housemother. “We heard their voices and our world collapsed.” The students ran to the back lane, certain that their dismissal from the program was inevitable. Suddenly, two policemen who seemed to be “ten feet tall” shone a flashlight at them. Bernice’s classmate was petrified; she thought they were about to be shot. Bernice rapidly told the police that they were trying to sneak







*Bernice Fanning (nee Parrott)*

into the residence. One of the policemen was dating a student nurse from the Winnipeg General Hospital. The police were very sympathetic. They wrote up a report of the incident without mentioning the students' names. The girls rode in the police cruiser car until 2 a.m. when they managed to wake their classmate and she let them in. There were no consequences. Bernice said, "We never breathed a word of it until after we graduated."

The program for nursing students during the war years was rigorous. Students were expected to work 12-hour shifts and then attend three-hour lectures given by physicians. Students were permitted ½ day off a week and two weeks of vacation a year. Time off was

determined by the Director of Nursing; students could not request specific dates. Nursing students were paid \$5 per month. Payday was every three months; however, it was rare that a student received a full \$15. Bernice Fanning (Class of 1946) remembers that at one time, there were no medicine glasses to dispense medications on the ward. She went to the Pharmacy Department and requested more glasses. The cost of the glasses was taken from her pay. Nursing care provided by the students during the war years was vastly different than today's practice. Nursing students were expected to perform nursing and housekeeping duties during their shifts. They cleaned bedpans and bathrooms, served meals, gave bed baths, dusted ceiling lights, and washed floors. They performed many procedures that are now antiquated (e.g., mustard plasters, coffee enemas, sippy diets). They did not have intravenous equipment and blood transfusions were infrequent. (Intravenous therapy was not widely available until the 1950s and blood transfusions were the responsibility of physicians until the 1950s). There was no disposable equipment and autoclaving was the method of sterilizing things such as needles and forceps. Nurses were considered not qualified to give oxygen to patients; only physicians were permitted to do so. Antibiotics were not available

(Penicillin was the only antibiotic at the time and it was reserved for military personnel).

Many nurses on staff at Misericordia were engaged in military service during the war years. This meant that nursing students were often required to staff the hospital; their only supervision was provided by senior students. Bernice Fanning (Class of 1943) remembers with gratitude the care of senior students who took the time to teach and mentor students in her class. She recalls that one day, she forgot her cuffs, a punishable offence. A senior student quickly gave Bernice her own cuffs.

Nursing students were often besieged by marriage proposals when young men began returning from the war in 1944-45. The men had experienced the travesties of war and craved a life of stability and loving family. The profession at the time did not allow married women to be nurses and many nursing students were reluctant to abandon their career goals. Several declined the proposals.

Graduation ceremonies during the war years were simple affairs.

Nursing students received a bouquet of locally available flowers and had their photos taken in their graduation uniform. Speeches were few. A number of awards were given to deserving students, including awards for charting, ethics and comportment. Jobs were plentiful and graduates could choose where to work. Several chose to join the armed forces and serve overseas.

Despite the harsh realities of student life during the war years, nursing students describe many happy times, particularly in their relationships with one another. Helene Kahane (Class of 1943) said, “We coped with school because we had one another.” Thelma Sheldon (Class of 1943) added, “Your class became your family.” At their 50<sup>th</sup> reunion, the 1943 class reported, “The nicest thing about our training was all of our classmates are such good friends.”

