

## A BRIEF STORY OF THE VON

G. Stephens

1897 – VON – Lady Aberdeen of the National Council of Women became the inaugural president of VON in January 1897, as a 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Queen Victoria’s ascent to the throne. VON became the largest and longest non-charitable health care organization in Canada. From the beginning the VON relied on donor support, a wide range of volunteers and other health care services. A month before the date January 1897, Queen Victoria had given a ‘Royal Charter to VON. VON’s immediate challenge; to provide ‘visiting nurses’ to isolated Canadian areas and to establish ‘Cottage hospitals’.



The left emblem of the VON was developed and well recognized throughout Canada in the early life of VON and the right emblem is currently the VON emblem.

Nora Livingston, the Lady Superintendent of Montreal General Hospital urged Lady Aberdeen to make the new order, one of fully qualified registered nurses and suggested the name be Victoria Order of Nurses, (VON). Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier moved and the name was approved.



Doctors revolted especially in the field of ‘midwifery’ and this continued well into the 1970’s as mentioned by John Munro, Minister of Health & Welfare in 1969: “North American obstetricians are the most expensive midwife on earth”. Lady Aberdeen persisted and asked Dr. Alfred Worcester, of Boston, to present lectures in many cities throughout Canada on the subject of ‘visiting nurses’ and his successful Waltham school of Public Health, in Boston. Dr Worcester was Professor of Hygiene at Harvard University and founder of the Waltham Training School for ‘visiting nurses’. The school’s program stressed the teaching of the importance of ‘Home visiting’ and public health issues.



Aberdeen then requested of Dr. A. Worcester to loan his Chief Superintendent of the Waltham program, Charlotte MacLeod, to come to Ottawa and assist in the formation of a Public Health course, 1897 - 1903. Charlotte was a Canadian who studied under Florence Nightingale in England and then studied at Waltham eventually becoming its Superintendent.



R.  
CHARLOTTE MacLEOD

A.

WORCESTER



The first program being established in Ottawa in 1898 under Ethel Beer, from NB who had studied at Waltham. Next and almost simultaneously were programs in Montreal, followed by Toronto under Charlotte Eastwood and Halifax under Mary Pride. It was an uphill battle because of the hostility



of the medical profession and also funding because most of the patients could not pay for treatments. The VON took on the responsibility of educating the public in the dangers of gems and how they affect health issues by holding clinics, distributing educational pamphlets and making home visits. Charlotte Eastwood was also Chief Superintendent of VON CHARLOTTE EASTWOD 1906 - 1907 ETHEL BEER



Margaret Allen  
1903-1906

Charlotte MacLeod retired in 1903 as head of VON because of ill health due to overwork as there was no money for an assistant. She accomplished a lot but died in poverty in 1950 at age 98. MacLeod was replaced in 1904 by Margaret Allen, from NB, who had trained at Waltham School of Public Health. Before becoming Chief Superintendent she was Head Nurse at Ottawa and Montreal. Under Allen's guidance and direction Cottage hospitals were developed.

The first major project for the VON nurses was sending a contingent to the Klondike Gold rush area of Yukon. As females were scarce the criteria for the nurses was strict; at least 28 years old, a graduate of a recognized nursing school, must dress plainly, not curl or crimp their hair, no drinking, dancing or go out alone. The health of the miners was a challenge but dealing with the victims of typhoid made the time there daunting.

VON set up Cottage Hospitals under the Lady Minto Cottage Fund, one being the Harrington Harbour Hospital, Quebec. Another run by the Dr. Wilfred Thomason Grenfell Mission, Labrador, which was reached by ship in summer and dogsled in winter. Accompanying Grenfell on his first visit to Labrador, 1892, was a nurse from Halifax, Miss Paton.



English nurses.

1930 BATTLE HARBOUR HOSPITAL

The objective of the mission was to build schools, lumber mills, promote handcrafts industry for employment as well as the health care provisions.



The second hospital was located at Indian Harbour in 1894 as a summer hospital. About this time larger boats were required to carry equipment and staff and this is one of the sailing ships, the Strathcona 1899. The VON helped with funding and the supply of nurses later on. The next major place established was at St. Anthony, which became the Headquarters. To commemorate Grenfell's accomplishments a stamp was made in 1940.

She did her visits by dogsled. Doctors and nurses from Eastern Canada and the States would use their vacation time to volunteer at Grenfell's missions. The first hospital was established at Battle Harbour in 1893 by Grenfell and two

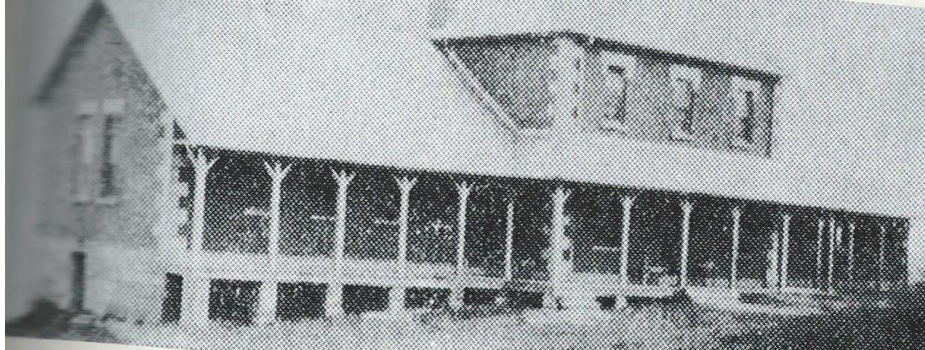


WILFRED GRENFELL



Dr. Grenfell depended on VON to supply his hospitals with nurses. As for Harrington Harbour hospital, Edith Mayo was sent in 1906 along with Dr. Hare. Dr Hare would be absent for weeks at a time as he made his rounds along the coast and Edith was left on her own to look after everything at the hospital as well as 150 outpatients. The well-recognized black bag of the VON nurse was developed by Mayo in 1909. Mayo left Harrington in 1910.

Marine hospitals were built in isolated areas such as the Marine Hospital in Pictou, NS, 1901, plus many others.



MARINE HOSPITAL - PICTOU

Mary Ard MacKenzie followed Eastwood who was filling in until MacKenzie was available to be Chief Superintendent. By 1907 the concept of public health and social services as a professional discipline were just beginning to emerge, typically opposed by the medical profession. The VON expanded to provide: Well-baby clinics, immunization clinics, responding to emergencies and disasters and sending their nurses to war, post-operative care, palliative care to name a few of their involvements in community support. Their main responsibility: prevention; medical and supportive with the help of volunteers and in coordination with other health care agencies.



Mary Ard MacKenzie  
1907-1917

Major reconstruction occurred within the VON, November 25, 2015, when without notice six provinces suddenly discontinued the VON service and the only provinces to maintain the service was Ontario and Nova Scotia. Headquarters staffing was decreased. VON then filed for Protection under the Company's Creditors Arrangement Act (CCAA). Nurses appeared for work only to find the doors locked, this is how they discovered the situation as told to the writer by nurses in Alberta. The current President and CEO of VON is Jo-Anne Poirier. (2017)



Dr. Judith Shamian was President and CEO 2004 – 2014 of VON when she was made President and CEO of ICN and is currently in this position. (2017)

JO-ANNE POIRIER

JUDITH SHAMIAN

The following are some of the first nurses to work as VON in Halifax, all were graduates from the Victoria General Hospital School of Nursing at the time. Between the dates 1940 and 1960, 19 VG graduates worked with VON throughout the province.



Irene Frame, hailed from Shubenacadie, NS. VG class 1897. She was one of the first nurses to be officially 'Trained' in VON nursing in Boston at the Waltham School. She was President of the VG School of Nursing Alumni 1922-1924. Irene married H.W. Cameron. She died in 1971.

Mable Hartling, class 1912, joined the Halifax VON in 1913, after completing her program from Montreal. Mable was a Nursing Sister during WW1 and served in Europe .She died in

Camp Hill Hospital after four years as a patient at age

77.

Melissa McCulloch (Lovell), class of 1912 a VON in Halifax, following her VON program in

worked as Montreal.



Jessie Parker, class of 1899 from Hansport, NS. She received training as a VON nurse in Montreal and after graduating was made Assistant to the Instructor. She then returned to Halifax and worked with the VON. Jessie was prominent in many phases of community work in and around Halifax.

Jobena Thomas (Forrest), class of 1898, had a Post-Graduate course in Boston for Private Duty at the Waltham School followed by a VON program in Montreal. She was one of the first from Halifax to enroll in this program. Jobena was a charter member of the Graduate Nurses Association of NS and president 1909-1910 and again in 1916. She promoted the scientific training of nurses. Jobena was a Board member of the Navy League and always interested in the welfare of the Merchant Navy, particularly during WW2. (Jobena's extensive bio will be found under her name and class of 1898 in the Bio. Book, housed in the VG School of Nursing Archives, Bethune building.)

VON was very prominent during the Halifax Explosion of 1917.



During the 1940's and into the 1960's VON nurses wore this uniform as seen in the picture. This is VON nurse Margaret Ann Schaffner "Manny" to friends and VG graduate of class 1953A. Note the black bag which was part of the uniform and contained supplies required for patient care.



**BUSY NURSE** — The busy day of the V.O.N. nurse, like Nurse Schaffner pictured above, consists of ringing dozens of doorbells — the doorbells of homes in every part of Halifax, where she is needed to administer to the sick and to encourage them to help themselves. (Photo by Cochrane.)

When giving nursing care an apron was worn over the uniform.



The uniform of VON nurses changed over time as shown here; left to right – 1950, 1925, and 1900. Wearing the 1900 uniform is C.W. Bennet who was a VON nurse in Halifax.

So called more recent VG graduates who worked with the VON:

Jean F. Rand, VG class 1944A, born in Port Williams NS. Her VON nursing career was conducted mostly in the Canso area of Nova Scotia. Due to her work as a VON nurse and her many involvements in the community as a volunteer, Jean was awarded The Canadian Government 125 medal and the Canso Lions Award. Jean died in January 2005 at age 84.

A 1947 graduate, Madeleine (McCully) McNeil has quoted from her VON experience as follow: "Had to report to the VON office on Barrington Street by 8 am in regulation uniform for the day's assignment. After receiving the assignment one put the necessary supplies needed for particular treatments in your black VON bag and given a 'Tram Pass', off you went , rain , sleet or sunshine and with a 'smile' ? If you weren't doing 'Home Visits', we worked in the prenatal, immunization or new mother's clinics. The main orientation to working in VON was

the 'Bag' technique and this was strictly adhered to. Each nurse had her own bag. In order to get all the necessary supplies inside the bag it had to be packed in a certain way. If you broke something, like a thermometer, one had to pay for it'.

There are many more VON nurses who could be documented from the VG, up to 1995 but the writer must move on to other topics as this is not the full story of VON, just a few highlights. VON is so closely related to Public Health that the next section will highlight the beginnings of this specialty.