

## Adelaide Munroe

Taken from the Barbara Keddy Oral History Collection, (Rank and File Nurses in the 1920s and 1930s) Nova Scotia Archives.

*She was born July 19, 1898, on the Ward Road, Kings Annapolis County Line, Nova Scotia. Her father graduated from Acadia University in 1893, went into farming and owned a saw mill. He met her mother (who was a Killam from New Brunswick) at Acadia where she was learning to "be a lady" at the junior school, called the 'Ladies Seminary'. Her mother did not work outside the home; she "kept house" and cared for five children. After attending the Ladies Seminary for one year, following completion of Grade X1, she attended 'normal school' (a diploma school in Truro, Nova Scotia, for teachers training). Adelaide Munroe said she did not "take to the 'lady' part" of the Seminary. She then left directly to take up a teaching position in Alberta as there were no teaching jobs available in Nova Scotia except for one position in New Ross for Grade X1. She was a school teacher for 12 years, in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia, until she entered nurses' training at the age of 29 at the Winnipeg General. At the time of the interview, in 1983 she was 85 years old and living at Cornwallis Inn, Kentville, Nova Scotia. Adelaide Munroe never married, nor had children. I had not seen her for several decades at the time of this interview. She had been Director of Nursing for Affiliates when I was a student nurse at the Kentville Tuberculosis Sanatorium for two months. I had been in awe of her then and after completing the interview I was inspired by her intelligence and devotion to nursing education.*



First a teacher:

I taught a history lesson one day to Grade 7 and Joseph Howe's son had just died and it just fitted in my teaching. So I had taught what I thought was a good history lesson. After I'd finished, one of the students said "Miss Munroe, did you know that Joseph Howe's son died yesterday?" I said "Yes". Decided I was no good as a teacher.

To the Winnipeg General by train:

I always had a liking for nursing. And what else could you do at that date? I went in (nursing), the Depression of '29, October 4th. The third group of the year. There were 84 of us. What crashed with us was the \$6.00 per month allowance. We never got it. You didn't get it for six months. We did get fed and clothed and our books. Family and friends thought I was very foolish.

I had a trunk. I was put in a room and my roommate was out. She finally came back and when she came back... apples...I hate apples. She was from Manitoba. She lives in Okanogan Valley now and we write each other. She has visited me in this apartment. Oh yes, we became very close friends because she taught school eight years. There were several who had taught school for a considerable time. I didn't feel out of place because of my old age.

Dress code:

We wore black shoes until the last six months and then white. And our uniform was blue, a fairly deep blue, not a solid blue, there was a thread of white in it. I can't remember just how. And of course the bibs were very stiff and the aprons were very full and we must wear slips and we must wear some type of garter belt and the collars were stiff. Stiff cuffs. We could take those off until 10 o'clock in the morning. After 10 the patients were supposed to all have been bathed, and, cleaned the utility room and the bathrooms.

First day on the ward:

We were assigned certain things to do. I was to clean the utility room and I cleaned it three times to keep busy. We weren't allowed (to mix with the patients). The ward had 20 in it and there were a number of rooms with from two to four going down the corridor. It was in an old wing of the hospital. And you would be in the way. Later on you were put in the ward to do up so many patients but I was fortunate, I got the utility rooms. I've always hated housekeeping but I was glad to do it there.

The first few weeks:

We went into the classroom and we were taught everything first and practiced it under supervision. We had 8 hour days but the day was 7 to 7 with three hours off or your two hours off. Ordinarily, the head nurse who had too much to do, kept you on duty at least an hour of that time off. Our teaching was good. It was excellent. We could make a seven minute bed, with the patient in it and without. We had qualified instructors. The one who was in charge of the classroom had taken a special course in teaching. The school (graduate) in Toronto had opened. And she was a graduate from there. And when we took our fourth year we took some of our subjects at the university ...and our Chemistry Professor...I had taken Chemistry...they didn't know that. My principal of the school put it down because he thought I should have it. But he was very sorry for us so he just taught us a few things, asked a few questions, set a very easy examination and when Santa Claus parade, and so on, he told us to get out in the street, "the fresh air will do you more good".

The nurses' home was a nice building and it was well run. We were closely supervised. If we weren't asleep at 10 o'clock we were knocked at the door and told to be quiet, it was time we were asleep.

We weren't allowed to go out with anybody senior to or junior. We were encouraged to make friends within our own class.

Times were bad:

We had the cross section of humanity going through Winnipeg and any old building could be crowded with derelicts. Some of them that came into the Winnipeg General had university degrees and frozen feet and lice. They were worse in Winnipeg than any place else because they crisscrossed. The hospital was full of cockroaches. There was nothing to do anything with about them. Supplies were in short supply and money was in short supply. You learned a lot. More than nursing.

Those who graduated: causes of illness

There were 36 or 37. At least fourteen had tuberculosis. There was an area of two floors of tuberculosis. And the students, really, didn't get in there to work. I didn't. But that would have been comparatively safe. It was the ones who had tuberculosis on the ward that were unsafe. But I must have had good health. Primarily tuberculosis, or feet, probably not wearing good shoes. I had worked long enough to buy myself a good pair of shoes. But arches fallen and corns and so on. And they would be in the nursing wing for the students for weeks at a time and that time made up. There wasn't sick time allowed. I had eleven days to make up.

Relationships with those in authority:

We liked practically all. I can't remember anybody that I really disliked on the staff. Miss Grant (Superintendent of Nurses) left at the end of the year and there was another one came. She was Johns Hopkins and she was very strict. While I was at McGill she visited the city and invited any of the Winnipeg there and she smoked one after the other. She probably did so until the time she was in. I enjoyed that. We had a good relationship (with doctors). We had a large out patients and the doctors would sometimes call the nursing school office and ask that the classes be sent down; there was something unusual to be seen. Oh, the teaching was good. They didn't all lecture but the heads of the staff all lectured.

Memories of 'funny' occurrences:

I got in (training) in the fall and stayed there (on a particular ward) all winter and three Christmases I took care of almost the same people. I was there for Christmas three years night duty on this man's ward and there was one old fellow that was short of breath. He had an aneurysm of the aorta of course, they were all veterans. And he had to have an inhalation. Well, our inhalation routine was to get a metal pitcher, fill it with boiling water, a little bit of solution to make it smell good and put a towel around and have the patient sit up in bed and put it on the mattress, between their knees and then they'd bend over with a towel over their heads and inhale. And you were supposed to stay with them. Now there were about 52 patients on that floor and two nurses and by that time I was quite senior so I would be the senior nurse and you couldn't stay with him, just couldn't. Someone would be dying and I heard this bell go and I rushed and there he was: "oh nurse, nurse, I've burnt my privates". I looked and here was the solution all over the bottom of the bed. So I had to call the night supervisor and usually you created a great disturbance. This time she was sorry for me. So she said "well, I don't know, you'll have to go to the medical superintendent in the morning and then we'll see what the doctor in charge has to say". I went to the medical superintendent. He was a nice man. He didn't say much to me and he said "how could you watch him and be senior on the ward at the same time?" I said "I don't know, I haven't found that out". And then, when the doctor came. Well, of course, an intern came and looked at him and he wasn't badly burned. But, the doctor the next morning said "oh, he'll be alright". But, I didn't have any sleep that night.

It was made easy. Another time I threw away an infectious disease patient's toothbrush. Worse looking old toothbrush and her people were going to sue the hospital for it. And also for a hat. And I said "she didn't have a hat".

Those are the only two funny things I can remember.

First birth:

That was a demonstration. And we were standing in this big teaching room at the end of the obstetrical ward and it was hot. Winnipeg is the hottest place on the earth in summer and there was no air conditioning and we watched this woman, her contractions. I haven't any idea how long and I don't remember what happened but when I woke up I was in one of the private rooms and I had missed two classes. I had fainted. And I had to go down to the office and the Director of Nurses, this is the one that was...that smoked in Montreal...she said "you're older than the rest, I can tell you, I did the same thing". So really, it was a very ...one or two of them could be a little bit snippy but when it came down to facts, they were...if you did your work properly...you worked hard and you worked overtime. That was acceptable. We had to accept it. There was nothing else to do.

Time off:

Hours of work were from 7 to 7 during the day with 3 hours off and 3 to 11 which gave time to do the patients up in the afternoon with enough nurses on. No days off. An afternoon if you got off at 1 o'clock. If you got off at 2. And Sunday we had 10 to 3 off to go to church. Well, it was very seldom you could get off in time to get there at 11. And in the evening by the time you were off and got off at 4:30 there was only one thing to do and that was soak your feet and put them up. We had the first two weeks off the first year, three weeks the second year and I forget about the last year.

Nursing that was significant:

Our wards were crowded. Our private rooms were empty with the exception of a very few families who came in and we had one family who came into a ward, one woman at a time. There were three of them lived together. And they must have potted around the house in bare feet because it took me with soaked poultices a week to get their feet so I could tell that they were white instead of...of course, that type of nursing I liked. Most nurses didn't.

Reading:

(I) Read a lot of books. *The Well of Loneliness*...came out at that time. That's on the homosexual situation. I found it at the San library. When I told the librarian what it was about she was going to throw it out and I said "Don't. Keep it there. You have it. It's a good book". So, even as early as that we had them all picked out. Nobody worried about it though, in those days. Or talked about it.

Social conscience:

There was a private duty registry, a central one in the city. In...I was about six months there, I was only called once. See, nobody could afford nurses. Well, you felt very sorry for the people you saw in the street. And the political situation was extremely bad. I walked, one day, instead of walking towards Portage Avenue, I walked toward Main street. It wasn't quite as far and I didn't know that part of the city and I was alone in my time off. When I got there... almost there, a policeman came and tapped me on the back. He said "sister, I don't like to see you here". And I said "well, I just came for a walk". He said "do you see those people there? There is going to be a big fight in a few minutes and I don't want you to get hurt". See, the police all knew us from bringing patients into the hospital. They always called us 'sister'. Nobody else did. But the police always did. So, I turned around and walked home. And I found out after that we had I don't know how many fractures come in. It was just two different sides of politics. None of them spoke English. This is just about the date that Woodsworth was starting in (J.S. Woodsworth was associated with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), later known as the New Democratic Party (NDP), a social democracy party in Canada). He ran an election that time. And he started and did something with those people. I'm not a follower of Woodsworth

though I'm an admirer of his. And they got together in little groups. They couldn't get work. They weren't happy.

Working as a graduate nurse at the tuberculosis Kentville Sanatorium Hospital:

I came back and that's when I got on at the San, 1933. As a staff nurse for \$45. A month and living. Well, we worked a day with three hours off. You could have 10 to 1, 1 to 3 or 4 off. And nights, you worked 12 hours and you could find a place to cuddle down and go to sleep in the middle of the night if the patients were quiet and they usually were. And you had a bell that made a lot of noise and you woke up. I never went to sleep. I started in the women's annex. Then a little time in the old infirmary and then I went to the new wing, the east and I was on admissions. And I think I got a \$5 raise by that time (3 years) because I was in charge of the ward.

When I was there in the early years, there was nothing but bedside care. Not a thing. And palliative drugs, and pneumothorax of course, and the phrenic nerve operations which raised the diaphragm and collapsed the lung. But from the time I went back, in '47, they were starting streptomycin and that changed, the drugs, changed the whole picture. The surgery would be a pneumonectomy and we'd have the patient up the next day. And, it might be a lobectomy and it might be just a piece...I forget what they called that.

Dr. Miller was in the same place in New York state (as Dr. Norman Bethune, famous for his role in the Chinese Revolution), Saranac Lake, in the little red cottage. He (Dr. Bethune) wouldn't stay though. Dr. Miller did. Of course, he was a different temperament, although Dr. Miller was just as determined as he was. They always said he looked like a castor oil bottle because he lost the muscles in these operations.

I never heard his name (Dr. Bethune). The first thing I heard of Norman Bethune was when I was at McGill and he was in Spain. That's the first time I ever heard of him. Oh, I think he was later than Dr. Miller because the little red cottage...they had been using tents up there before and his description of it, I thought, was probably a little larger than Dr. Miller's cottage. I've been through there and I used to send him pictures of it. He (Dr. Miller) was a man who could administer anything.

Getting along with Dr. Miller, the administrator at the 'San':

Well, the first year, I used to lock horns a few times and I think that's one reason why I always got back on the staff. He didn't like people he could walk on. I've always decided that because I got along well with him after that. When we had trouble with interns, which we did sometimes, because the general feeling was that those doctors didn't know anything about chest, except chest, and they were students and the interns wouldn't accept the doctor's medical prescriptions. They'd change the amount. And Dr. Miller always told me "keep your eye on things, and if you see anything going on you don't like, you come to me".

Life after university:

Well, after my three years there I knew that if you enjoyed your time off more than on duty...we had a good social life in the early days there...we were just like one big club...that your profession was deteriorating. You see, I was older than most recent graduates. So, I had been trying to save money and I had about \$300 saved. But, the old life insurance came out again. Father had a good crop of apples and I went to McGill. (She took a one year course in Teaching and Supervision).

I went to Peterborough as Medical Supervisor, Hamilton General as Assistant in the classroom and then Yarmouth for teaching, the last year of the war (1945).

Dr. Miller was after me to come back to the San and start an affiliate course. So I came. I started my nursing assistant course at once. It wasn't recognized. But, the Deputy Minister of Health had been on staff of the San

and he knew me and he kept prodding me along to keep on with it. He said "we'll get it through some time". We, the nurses, put an Act in for recognizing it and it was defeated. So, he put it in as a private Bill and got it through.

I had no education in nursing here, therefore when I first started the course, I had Jean Church, who was on the staff. She came down for two years. And when she left, I had nobody to take her place, and they (R.N.A.N.S.) Said "Oh, you're going to have to close your School". I said "Why?"

"Well you have nobody qualified". I said "Oh? Have you forgotten that I'm qualified". "Oh, are you?". You see, if you're not educated in Nova Scotia... I started the school for affiliates. They came first... about 1950 and also post-graduates. Three different schools. Until '58 when I was 60 and had to retire, you see. Now they can work to 65.

The final curtain:

I went to Windsor. And, Mrs. Mack, who had been my Director of Nurses at the San when I first went there had been at Windsor. And she went back to the San and I took her place as instructor. And she wasn't qualified as an instructor but she was a good one. And they didn't like me very much at Windsor because I wasn't Mrs. Mack. But, I enjoyed it and they got so they put up with me. I was in Windsor three years. Tolerated me and then I retired and then Dot Allan needed somebody, as she said, with some age and some experience (in Yarmouth). She called me on the phone one day. And, I said: "well, I have plenty of both". So, she coaxed me down there. So I packed up my things and started to work again and I was there three years (in charge of the Nursing School).

When I retired, I retired. I have a life membership in the R.N.A.N.S. I never went on to be President. But, I'm no good at that. I was President of the branch here. I was a charter member of the Valley Branch. I don't know whether it's the Valley Branch now. I think it's divided. But it went from Windsor to Digby at that time. And I was President of that. And I was always on Committees. Even in Yarmouth, I drove to Antigonish.

Adelaide Munroe defines nursing:

"The means of making a person well".