

Barbara Keddy Ph.D

Four oral histories of rank and file nurses from the 1920s and 1930s

On September 4, 1956 I entered nurses' training in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, after completing Grade X11. I was 17 years old and I only moved from one end of the town to the other, but it was a very dramatic life changing event. I had nine classmates and all but one of us graduated from the three year diploma program in 1959.

Yarmouth Hospital was not a physician teaching hospital, but there was a school for student nurses, laboratory and x-ray technicians. Student nurses literally gave most of the nursing care in the hospital and we were often given the unenviable responsibilities of medical students and interns of larger medical teaching hospitals. As has often been documented we were a source of free labour.

Two years were spent in Yarmouth Hospital studying and practicing while 11 more months of affiliations with Grace Maternity, Halifax, Children's, Halifax, Nova Scotia Psychiatric and Nova Scotia Kentville Sanatorium hospitals gave us the specialties we needed to graduate.

When we graduated we were highly skilled technicians and we oozed confidence. We could work with very little sophisticated equipment, sharpening needles, boiling syringes, cracking open huge cylinders of oxygen with a wrench, setting up oxygen tents and putting together a Wagenstein suction apparatus in the middle of the night with a flashlight. The 12 hour shifts were long, back breaking, and rewarding while simultaneously terrifying. By the time I was 20 and graduated I thought I could actually run a small hospital. Indeed, many of us ended up doing just that.

Twenty three years later, as a Professor in the School of Nursing, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, while finishing my doctoral dissertation, I came upon the idea of preserving the stories of female nurses who had trained and worked decades before I had. They were rank and file nurses who had worked in Nova Scotia in the 1920s and 1930s. they were unsung heroines. The Registered Nurses Association of Nova Scotia awarded me \$2,000 to interview older nurses from across the province. In 1982, I began that journey. Subsequently the tapes and transcripts were placed in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia where they now are housed in the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, NS Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage, Halifax, under the Barbara Keddy Collection. There are 37 in total. Included here are only three of the original 15 interviews which I conducted over a year. Students in my Research Methods classes contributed the remaining 22 oral histories. To them I am very grateful.

Since various students and other scholars have relied on these oral histories as a valuable source of nursing history I began to think that these stories should be made more public. To that end I have developed this small compilation.

I have taken license with the order of information contained in the transcripts in order to allow a more systematic sequencing of the ideas. However, the words presented are taken from the actual voices of the women, now long forgotten in the profession, and all have died. Their names have not been changed as it was important for them to be known for posterity. Written permission for their names to be made public was given by them to the Public Archives. In many cases in lieu of using the interview format of the transcript I combined my questions with their responses, however these were not contextual changes.