

## FIRST POLIO CLINIC IN NS – “A PERSONAL STORY”

This is the story of the polio clinic at the NS Mental Hospital, Woodside, Dartmouth area, in the early 1940's, as seen through the eyes of nurse MABEL G. (PURDY) DOUCET.

Mabel Grace Purdy was born in Shoal Lake, Manitoba in 1917 to Nova Scotian parents: Douglas and Hannah (Crawford) Purdy.

Mabel graduated from Brandon General Hospital School of Nursing, March 23, 1939. Her father died during her second year of Training and her mother returned to her home province and lived in Truro, Nova Scotia. As soon as Mabel graduated she joined her mother and began her nursing career in Truro. She had to obtain Nova Scotia registration first, which she promptly did.



CERTIFICATE – RNANS, Sept. 1939

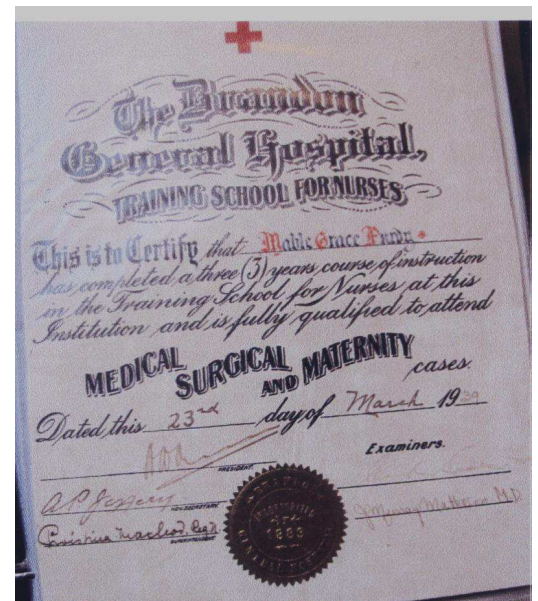
Mabel worked with the VON, did some Private Duty nursing and also worked for a time in the local hospital in



Truro. While working in Truro, Mabel along with other nurses worked diligently against the 12 hour day and to make the work day an eight hour day.



CERTIFICATE,  
MANITOBA ASSOCIATION  
REGISTERED NURSES,  
Aug.1, 1939



BRANDON GENERAL  
HOSPITAL- CERTIFICATE

COLCHESTER REGIONAL HOSPITAL, TRURO, NS  
DARTMOUTH POLIO CLINIC

A request came to all hospitals in the province from the Polio Clinic in Dartmouth for nurses as they were desperate for help. The Clinic was set up at the NS Mental Hospital as there was a separate building available there.



THE BARN



NURSES RESIDENCE &



POLIO CLINIC & HOSPITAL

NS MENTAL HOSPITAL STRUCTURES



ENTRANCE TO HOSPITAL - right



Steep hill in winter to the Hospital  
& Clinic



## MABEL TO THE POLIO CLINIC

When Mabel saw the physical condition of the children in the clinic, she decided to work at the polio clinic and to give assistance in the much needed care of these unfortunate children.

Mabel on the Steps of the Clinic



## THE NURSING STAFF & WORKING CONDITIONS

The nurses lived in residence on the hospital site. The shifts were 12 hour days and nights with one afternoon off a week. The pay was \$4.00 an hour. The uniforms were the responsibility of the nurses to purchase but could be laundered at the hospital facility. The hospital provided aprons which were to cover the uniforms as protection against the polio virus. Gloves were not worn but the staff was encouraged to wash their hands frequently. Masks were not worn either. Actually there were no particular standard precautions described to protect the 'workers'. There was no instruction /inservice provided as to how to treat patients, the learning was by working alongside another nurse, except for those who were able to take the Sister Kenny course in New York. Mabel said, the nurses did not have a fear of contracting polio but had a fear of contracting Tb, at the time. Generally, there was no fear or concern for their own health; they just concentrated on the patient's condition. Mabel said, everyone was so busy during the shift that there was no time to worry about oneself. The team generally worked well together, the doctors gave the nurses credit for their work, especially Dr. Dever. Like all working situations, a few Head Nurses were difficult to work under, said Mabel. Once a nurse left the employment of the clinic there was no follow-up as to their health. Mabel worked at the clinic 1942 to 1945.

## DR. CECIL KINLEY



The Polio Clinic was the charge of Dr. Cecil Kinley and there was a staff of other doctors, often it would be Interns who worked at the clinic.

One day a young patient fell and fractured his arm. Because of the severe muscle spasm in his arm the usual treatment of applying a cast could not be done. Hot packs were administered immediately and changed frequently and by the time the spasm left, the arm was set without any untoward effects, said Mabel. Dr.

Kinley then went to

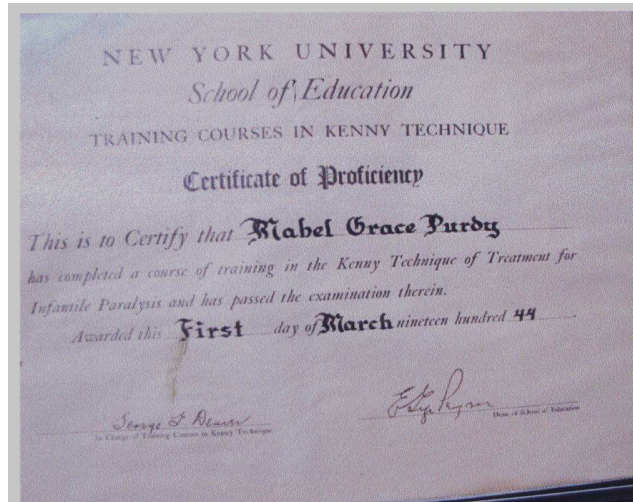
Rochester to gather further information on the treatment of polio victims.

When he returned he sent two nurses to Rochester, NY, to learn the 'Sister Kenny Hot Pack' treatment. The nurses returned to the Clinic to teach others the methods. The nurses exercised every affected muscle before and after applying the hot packs, as seen here in the picture.



## MABEL & SISTER KENNY COURSE

One day Mabel noticed an advertisement in the Canadian Nurse Journal for physiotherapists to enroll in the Sister Kenny course in Rochester, NY. Mabel explained that she was a nurse and worked at the polio clinic so she was accepted into the course. The hospital gave her a 'leave of absence' but the full financial cost was her responsibility. The course was for two months which included an extensive muscle & joint anatomy section, special exercises and massage therapy to



stretch the muscles and also application of the hot packs. A written exam at the end and with successful completion a certificate was awarded. Mabel, March, 1944. She was the only nurse and Canadian among six different nationalities. One teacher was Norwegian, anatomy was taught by an Italian, and Physiotherapy teacher was from India etc.

## SISTER KENNY

Sister Kenny visited the clinic while Mabel was there. Sister Kenny examined all the patients, described the necessary muscle exercise and hot pack treatments for each individual patient, this she did while the class observed. Mabel said that each class member hoped that they were not asked a question. Sister Kenny had rather a demanding manner and if one was asked a question it was better to know the answer correctly. She asked to see our fingernails, said



Mabel, and if too long was instructed to have them cut immediately. Sister Kenny stressed the importance of keeping the patients free from apprehension and fear and to watch for rigidity of the neck and back. When examining a patient in the acute stage one should never include stretching, squeezing or manipulation of limbs. Involuntary shortening of muscles causes limitations of motion. Early diagnosis and early treatment is important as a few days delay can make a big difference to the patients recovery and minor disability occurring. (The patients in the Dartmouth polio clinic were patients who had delayed diagnosis and treatment. They were cases from the epidemic of the early 1940s). Sister Kenny herself had polio but no paralysis. A doctor told her that she accidentally found a treatment with the hot packs to relax the spasmed muscles and he told her to keep fighting to convince the medical establishment that her treatments do help the patient's recovery. Patients in muscle spasm and no treatment within three weeks are likely to have severe disability and paralysis, the class was told. Sister Kenny's





lecture stressed the use of frequent changes of the hot packs, stimulation of the muscle and to re-educate the muscle to work in different ways.

Sister Kenny pushes back the knee to give full flexion to the large thigh muscle.



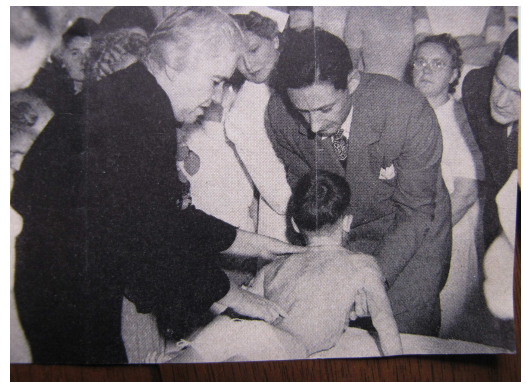
Sister Kenny prompts patient in re-learning the use of leg muscles by having the patient concentrate on her knee



She rotates the patient's foot to re-establish muscle tone to the ankle

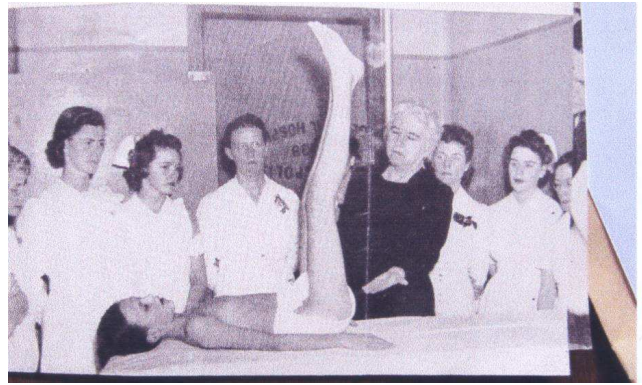
## SISTER KENNY – NEW JERSEY

At the Jersey City Medical Centre Sister Kenny demonstrates her technique to a class of physiotherapists, nurses and doctors.



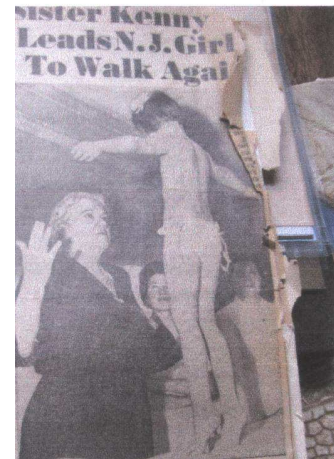


Stressing a point at the New Jersey Clinic



### CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL SOCIETY – LOS ANGELES

Sister Kenny encourages a patient to stand on her tip toes and thus the little girl stands for the first time since she was stricken with polio. This occurred at the Children's Hospital Society in LA. The course was given by Sister Kenny and was financed by The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis.



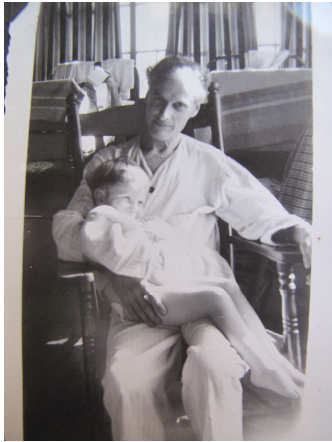
### THREE FIGHTERS AGAINST INFANTILE PARALYSIS



Here are three fighters against Infantile Paralysis; President Roosevelt, Basil O'Connor- President National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and Miss Kenny at the White House. (International News Photo)



## DESCRIPTION OF THE DARTMOUTH POLIO PATIENTS



THE YOUNGEST AND OLDEST

The ages ranged from 2 to 72 years all with a variety of disabilities from mild to severe spasms. There were a few that required the use of the Iron Lung machine. Nursing patients who required the use of the Iron Lung machine, was like giving care to patients in a coffin, said Mabel. The machine was a long wooden box and the patient's head was all that was exposed. The attitude of the patients was generally upbeat, non-complaining, cooperative and not difficult to nurse. It was a 'Happy Place' even surrounded with so much physical misery



9 YEAR OLD BOY

Here is an example of a patient in severe neck and back spasm.

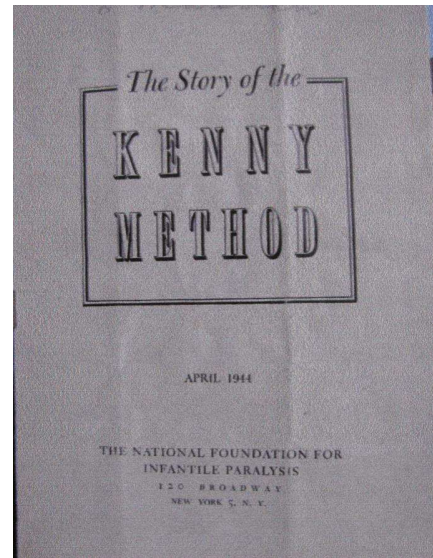
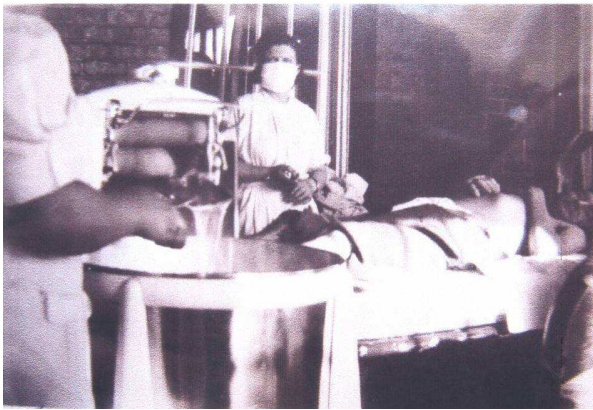


## A PATIENT'S DAY SCHEDULE:

- exercises, massage, hot packs
- education programs- school work by volunteer teachers
- entertainment- as the children became restless and some were home-sick being away from home for long periods of time. Often the parents could not visit, either because of work commitments or financial restraints of the 1940's.
- Kiwanis provided a lot of support especially for special times like birthdays, Christmas, Easter etc.
- VON were a lot of support at this time

## TREATMENT OF PATIENTS

Specific exercises and massage of the affected muscles were performed routinely several times a day with the applications of 'Hot Packs' applied to the legs and arms as required according to the Sister Kenny protocol. (Mabel has a copy of the this manual 2013)



These packs were changed about every 20 minutes per session. The packs were heated and washed in a 'washing machine' and then the packs wrung out by a wringer on the machine. The wool for the packs was donated by Mercy Company of Nova Scotia. This was 'wet-

work' and often one's uniform became wet to the point of having to change, so each nurse had a quantity of uniforms and aprons available.

Some cases could not be helped by any method because there were delays in the diagnosis causing a delay in the treatment therefore the nerve cells were permanently damaged.



It was important to keep the patient free from stress as much as possible, so a lot of individual time was spent with each patient.

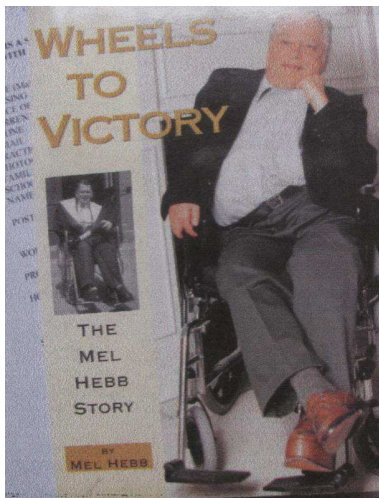
Sunshine and relaxation was also an important aspect of the patient's treatment, so whenever possible the patients were taken outside, even if it was a great struggle to get the patients out and then back inside with the limited equipment available at the time.



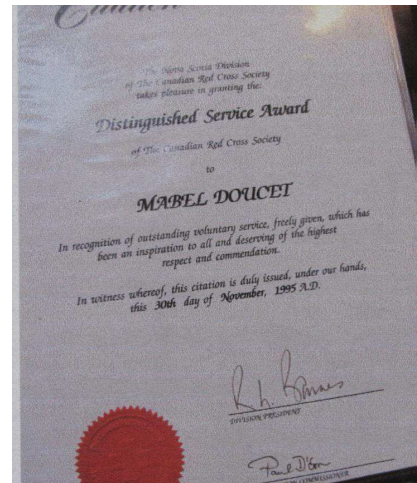




It was a struggle pushing the old beds up the make-do ramp. The nurses had to be strong in many ways, physically, mentally and emotionally in order to cope with these patients day in and day out with only one day off a week.



Many books have been written about the polio epidemic in Nova Scotia during the early 1940's and here is one patients' experience with the dreaded disease; "Wheels to Victory" by Mel Hebb.



Mabel received this citation from the Canadian Red Cross Society- Service Award, March 10, 1980 and March 30, 1995 a Red Cross citation- Distinguished Service Award

### THREE GENERATIONS OF NURSES



Three generations of nurses: Mabel, centre, her daughter, Marie a graduate of the Victoria General Hospital School of Nursing (1976) and Mabel's Granddaughter Sarah, graduate of the Dalhousie School of Nursing (2005). In 2010, Mabel was granted by the College Registered Nurses NS, the Centennial Award of Distinction for her nursing career.

(This picture was on the cover of Focus, the College Registered Nurses Newsletter Journal)

The Polio Clinic at the NS Hospital closed when a new clinic was designated at the VG Hospital site, about 1950. The next chapter will focus on the VG POLIO CLINIC.

## NOTE:

Mabel Doucet was interviewed for this document April, 2013 by Gloria Stephens, President of the Nursing History Nova Scotia (NHNS), which was formed in 2007. The interview was also taped and the tape is filed with the NHNS.



## THE INTERVIEW

Mabel and Gloria

## THE PICTURES

All the pictures in this document are from Mabel's scrapbook, which were taken by Gloria.

## MORE FACTS ABOUT MABEL

Mabel married John Cecil Doucet and they had four children: Albert Douglas, John Crawford, Marie Christine (Barnes), and Sheila Mabel (Cudmore) (Longard)



GLORIA STEPHENS, graduate of the Victoria General hospital, class 1953A, Halifax and University of BC. Gloria is a Founding member & Past President of the BC Operating Room Nurses Group (BCORNG), the Operating Room Nurses Association of Canada (ORNAC), Past President; and the Nursing History Nova Scotia (NHNS), President. She has published many articles and has written the history of the BCORNG & ORNAC. She is also a Founding member and chair of the Association Health Sciences Archives & Museums of NS. She has won many awards throughout her nursing career; such as: RNABC Award Excellence Nursing Practice and the Award Excellence Nursing Education; YWCA Woman of Distinction and ORNAC's prestigious award Isabelle Adams Award Excellence in Nursing Practice.



