Florence Hamilton (nee Haymen)

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

Florence Hamilton was 81 at the time of the interview in 1982, living in a Senior Citizen's Complex in Truro, Nova Scotia. She was born in 1901 in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, daughter of a railroad conductor and a seamstress. At the time she was blind in one eye and a diabetic. However, she was self sufficient, independent and very active. Her husband was in a nursing home in Tatamagouche. She had 2 children, one of whom lived in Tatamagouche as a practicing lawyer.
Her nursing school was the Victoria General in Halifax. However, she did teach school for a year after completing Grade X1 and before entering nurses training. She was 19 when she enrolled at the Victoria General.

Choosing nursing as a career:
From the time I was a little child about I would say 5 years old, I was just possessed about nurses, nurses' pictures and everything was nursing. I was continually looking at magazines and worshiping the nurse in her uniform, and from the time I was that young, I made up my mind I was going to be a nurse. That was my (aim). And besides, my parents and grandparents-they always thought I should be a nurse too, because I was so good when anybody was sick- they said I could always help them- isn't that strange? Always longed to do it and I was never happier than when I was making somebody comfortable.

Missing home:
I had been home for the year, teaching, and I had a very happy time because I lived in the country and we had the Sons of Temperance Lodge, and that was a big thing in those days. And I was Worthy Patriarch and I thought that was wonderful, to be a 'worthy patriarch'. And in those days the Worthy Patriarch had the responsibility of everything really. We had a lovely time, and I was very happy.
And besides, I had taken music and I played the organ in church from the time I was 14 until I was -until I went away, I played the organ in church. And I had to be there and be at practice and all that, and I did miss everything- I used to cry- I was so lonely.

First day in training:
It was in January, 1920. The first time I went into the hospital, to me it was an awful let down. It was an awful let-down because I had never been in a hospital and the first thing they gave me to do was to clean sliver, and I can still remember that pile of silver, and I worked and worked for 2 or 3 hours, maybe-that's what it seemed to me. So that's about all I did the first day. And of course, they took me around to see the hospital. We had a uniform of blue- it was, I would say about an 'alice' blue uniform with a white stripe, and it was tight fitting here (around the waist) and quite big. And it was long, way down about, I'd say, to about there (not quite to ankles).
And we had black boots-not shoes-black boots. It was hideous when you think of it now.

We bought out own uniforms, and then we had, we made our aprons- I made my aprons myself. But the dresses were made by the hospital. And we had to pay for them.

The Superintendent/Loss of Dreams:

We had Miss Strum- she was our superintendent. She was an old 'battle-axe' too. She taught us, yes, and all she ever taught us was keep the bedpans clean, and I was so disgusted, after teaching school. To come down to that, nothing but learning about bedpans. I thought she was too severe on everybody. Well, she taught us, that's the only teacher we had. And she hardly ever smiled. If you had any trouble, if anybody had any trouble, they had a death in the family or anything like that, she was right there-she was very lovely to everybody. But she was too severe. And she'd come in the corridors and she was very tall, nearly 6 feet and she'd run her fingers over the doors-show us the dust. Well, we weren't supposed to get up a ladder and climb up and dust the place, but I don't know what she thought, but anyway... I thought she was too hard on like that and she'd be rubbing her fingers all over the place all the time was walking with you down the corridor.

Once in awhile we'd have a skating party or something, and they'd ask the boys, (the doctors, "we all just loved the boys") and I'll have to tell you one incidence that I consider now was very funny. They put me in the infectious disease, and that's only just a short walk from the hospital, and, oh an awful looking place, just an old building, it was terrible. And they put me in there to look after two little kids,(who) had scarlet fever. I was all alone with those two children, day and night, nobody hardly came near but the doctor and the minister, and I was there, oh, I was there for about 3 weeks with those children until I was so exhausted and so lonely and everything else. So this brother of my friend, his name was MacLean, J.L. MacLean, he just died recently, they both went to the States, really, so he came and he said, "you shouldn't be here all this time," he says, "you're tired out". And I said: "Yes, and I'm lonely and everything, I don't like it. And, I think that somebody else should have a turn", I said. He says:" I'll go to the superintendent and I'll tell her". He went right up to Superintendent and told her. Next thing I heard: "You're getting out of that place and you're going to this other floor" and so on. I was tickled to death. So I had been in that place for so long, not able to go anywhere, not even to go for a walk, so the girls and I were all very friendly, and we got together and we said: "let's make a party". And I was always the leader in anything like that because I just loved making a party and all that. I said: "Let's make a party". And, "who will we ask?', we said. Well, some of the girls said: "Well, I'll ask my boyfriend", and somebody else said: "I'll ask my boyfriend". Finally everybody asked their boyfriend. Now, I, at the time, I wasn't very chummy with my boyfriend, so one of the girls said, who was in training, her name was Colwell of Colwell Brothers now (she was a lovely girl), she said: "Well, I'll ask my brother to come for chaperone for you, for a friend for you". I said: "that would be lovely". So he came. His name was Garnet-you've heard of them. So he came and we had an orchestra- we hired the hall- I knew people who would hire out this hall, and they'd make lunch and get the orchestra, and we'd pay for it. So, I got that going. We managed to have it on our night off. And we had to be all through and back to the hospital by 12 o'clock at night.

And we had the time of our lives. And we weren't supposed to tell the superintendent, because we considered this was our own business, and that's what we thought. And so we didn't tell her anything about it.

So, my land, there happened to be somebody there from the paper and they took everything down, everybody's name down, everything we did, and it was in the paper the next day. Well, the fat was in the fire. Miss Strum saw it. And she knew I was one of the ring leaders, also another girl with me, and she asked me if I'd come to the office. Well, I knew what it was, and I was just ready for her, you know, what to say and everything, and well, I got in there, and to tell you the truth I didn't care, because I would go back to teaching school, and I didn't care really. So, I was all ready. So she asked me all these questions, just one after the other, she just fired them at me, you know. So, then after she got all through, then I had my say. I said: "Miss Strum, I was teaching school, I was playing the organ in church, I was going to the lodge, I was taking part in everything". I said :" Since I came here I haven't had anything in the line of social life". And, all she preached to us was: "Go to the pictures, go to the pictures". Well, you can't go to the pictures all the time. And I remember I went to the pictures one day and I lost my money. I dropped my purse and lost my money. And that discouraged me.
I had my say and she listened to me, and it was right. She said we should have more parties. But they didn't- they never had them.
And I had such dreams of the hospital life, you know. I thought everything would be the way I pictured it, you know, in the magazines, and read about it, and then we had to put the soiled sheets in the bathtubs, in a bathtub full of water with creole, and we had to get all that off of it and make it fit to go to the laundry. I was thoroughly disgusted. Well, I didn't think I should have to do that, I thought there'd be maids to do that. We had to dust everyday. We had to sweep the floors, those long corridors, of softwood.
Well, that's one thing I did like, was the dietitian work. I was there for two terms like, and just loved it. And I would do what I was supposed to do, make desserts and all that, and I loved the lady who was in charge, she was a Mrs. Fraser from New Glasgow, and I just loved her, she was so kind and thoughtful and she'd say to me: "Now when you've finished your work you can do anything you like, and what would you like to do, would you like to make some fudge?", she'd say. And I'd say: "Yes, I'd love to". So I used to make fudge a lot and give it to my friends.
Well, I didn't think she was teaching us very much, really. The only thing, one thing that helped us, I think, she wanted us to read the paper and if we saw anything that was particularly educational, she asked us to, if we'd give a talk.

Death:
Well, as I got along further, when people died, oh yes, one of the first jobs they gave me was to sit with a little dying girl. (After just a matter of days in training). And it just broke my heart, you know, because I never saw anybody dying, and a little girl at that. It just broke my heart. I had to take her pulse all the time, and just sit with her and give her sips of water and wipe her brow and all that...We learned that first thing-taking temperatures and taking pulses.
One death that I minded was a little baby- the parents came over from Scotland or England and they had this dear little baby- a year old. She contracted pneumonia, she came in to the hospital and I had looked after her. I minded that terrible.

Tricks:

I did an awful thing one time. I don't know how this cat got in the place but there was a cat got in. He wasn't supposed to be there at all. So I says: "I'll settle that". And we had all kinds of bells- you used bells instead of lights in those days. And I got the cat and I tied the bell on the cat and I sent him off, all through the corridors. That's what I did to get rid of the cat.

Laying out:
My second year or so, they said that I was extra good at laying out people, but I hated it. Laying them out-getting them ready to be taken away. And, I was extra good at it, they said, and they sent all the kids to me to learn it. And I was so depressed that when anybody died I didn't eat my meal that came right after that- I didn't eat my meal, and I was very depressed , and if I saw anything that looked a hearse or anything, I was...I was alright as long as people were living and getting along alright, but if they died I was... and I'm still like that.

Child birth:
I was across the street at the maternity hospital. I didn't care for it. I didn't like it. I thought it was a hard thing to see (delivery). Well, I nearly fainted just like I did when I went to the operating room first. But anyway, I got along well once I got into it, you know. There'd be a graduate there, a Salvation Army lady, and then we'd be helping. But anyway we had a good training, and I did very well in it. They were such nice people to begin with. And they didn't give you the impression that they were severe, you know, they were kind and loving, and I liked it. Miss Strum always...I always thought she was too severe on everybody.

Working too hard:
I was always tired. Seven in the morning until 7 at night. And then we were off a couple of hours. We had holiday, three weeks. (We were) paid $8.00 the first year a month, and $10 the second and $12 the third. I got along pretty well until I had a breakdown and I always felt I had diabetes then. It was kind of nervousness and exhaustion. I was so exhausted I wasn't able to do anything really. And I was off for about 3 weeks. We had to work too hard, I think. I always thought we should have had more recreation-that we should have had something planned and had something all through the three years.

Teacher and nurse:
There were some children who had to come in and they were losing their schooling and they had quite hard diseases like osteomyelitis and something like that...they'd be in for a long time, they asked me if I'd carry on their education, which I did. And, I just loved that- I was so interested in those children.

Nursing sicknesses:
I think I was satisfied once I graduated. But, I wasn't very happy, I would say, for the first year. And I would have given it up only for my friends who encouraged me, Dr. Marshall especially. He encouraged me to "stay a little longer", he'd say. Because I'd gotten sick and was off, and everything. I can remember having a whole bunch of doctors around my bed and Dr.MacKenzie and all those big shots, H.K. MacDonald and all of them. And then when they got through they didn't know very much more

than when they started, and I always felt that it was diabetes and they never got at it- because I discovered that later.
I got in bed of a nurse they had sent to the San. It always worried me, but then I thought, "Oh well, they're nurse here, and doctors and they wouldn't put me in a bed that wasn't right". But, anyway, I was positive for TB all my life. And I always blamed it on that, but it might not have been. They asked me: "Have you been up against TB?". I said: "oh yes,". I said: "A nurse caught it". We had a lot of TB at the VG.

Writing school exams, then graduation:
I came to Truro and worked. I was the first supervisor at night in the Colchester Hospital. In fact, a nurse, the head of the hospital came after me to ask me if I would take the job before I was through at the V.G. I came home to my home, my brother had died and I came home. And my time was all in, so I came home and stayed and then I went back and wrote and finished up. Well, then they came after me wanting me to go. I said: "No, I can't go until I graduate". So they held the job for me, and I took on the job. And it was only a big house on Prince Street here. And it belonged to Dr. MacKinnon. So, I was here and then they built the new, the first hospital in Truro, and this lady who was head of the hospital I was in, she was Superintendent of the new place, so I automatically went in as the first night supervisor, you see. Yes, 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.. Right. I liked night work better.
There was a lot of cancer, a lot of cancer, and there was a lot of gallbladder. They weren't doing a great deal for pneumonia, although we had some very ill patients and they got better-poultices and all. They got a steady stream of poultices, you were just continually putting those on...flaxseed. And, there was a lot of arthritis in those days, too, and they used lead and opium fomentations...everything was right there that you used and you just put it on and you heated it up and put it in the case and put it in and got it hot and then rang it out and then put it on.
At that time there would be perhaps a little cottage hospital, about 15 (patients) perhaps. But, I had both floors, up and down all night long. It was hard. I used to make rounds, that was the most important part first, go and see everybody, and there would be a lot of things, perhaps for me to do and telephoning and all this. And, if anybody died or a baby was born I was always like the head of it.

Post graduate course:
I think I was in Boston (at the time of the 1929 Depression). I put my name in to have what they called a post-graduate in those days. And it was 6 months, General Nursing. So, I had my name in to the Phillips House- the MGH (Massachusetts General Hospital), so I was there during the Depression, and it didn't seem to matter, really, to us very much because they didn't have money, but they gave us coupons, and so we did all our shopping and everything by these coupons. Seems strange now, when I think of it. But, it didn't affect us really, we were quite secure- we had a good place to live and we had everything- we had our money still, although we didn't get much money like they do today. We didn't make much, I think it was about $100.00, a month.
There were a lot of wealthy people and I suppose if they couldn't afford it they wouldn't be there. They paid a lot for their (care)...they paid, it doesn't seem much today, but they paid about $20.00 a day for their room- the special, the Phillips House. It was

expensive, but they got good care and the poor people went to another hospital. They went to the city hospitals and they could be free.

Married life:
I came back to get married and I kept house. I said: "I'm going to have my children and look after them, and then if there's any time left I might do nursing". But, I wanted to look after my children, which I did. I wouldn't let anybody else look after my children. So, I brought them up. Well, anyway, I had a lady who my husband took responsibility of looking after, which meant that if I married him I had the responsibility of that, which I had, and I looked after her and she lived to be over 90. But, anyway, I looked after her until she died. Well, then my husband's mother was living out in the country and she had a housekeeper. Well, we built a little house and we moved her in next door to us so I also had the responsibility of her, until her death, and all that. So, that's what I did. So, I had plenty of nursing.

Good nurse:
You have to be dedicated to be a nurse, to be a good nurse. There's good nurses and poor nurses. You have to love your work or you can't do it.