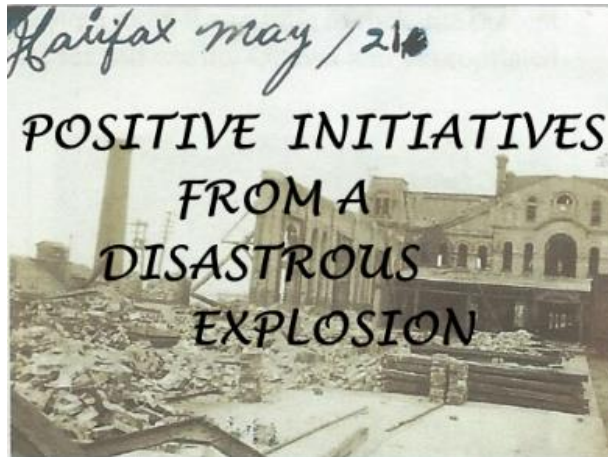


POSITIVE INITIATIVES FROM A DISASTROUS EXPLOSION

June 2024 by Gloria Stephens

(The following was a presentation that I gave during the Canadian Association History Nursing annual conference held at St Mary's University, June 22, 2024. The pictures are from the power-point used)

The writing on this picture was by my father, so obviously he took the picture. The destroyed

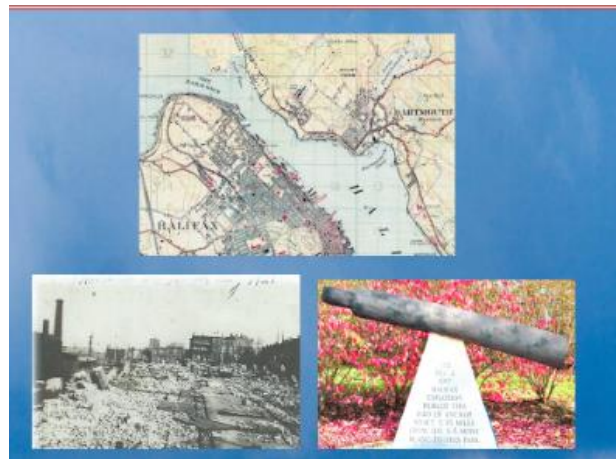


building was caused by the largest man-made explosion before the atomic bomb, December 6, 1917 at about three minutes after 9 am. The building is what is left of the North Street Railway station on the main trans-Canada CNR line. Only the highlights of the explosion will be discussed here because the presentation will be stressing the 'positive'. My theory, that if one searches deeply enough into a bad situation, there can always be something positive found. This will be demonstrated throughout. When one finds a positive that

brings 'hope', which many a Haligonian did find in spite of all the horrendous destruction, then life's situations can be faced and concurred. A patient gave me a poem when I was in 'training' at the VG and here is how it went: "He who has hope, has life and he who has life, has everything". This I have kept all these many years.

The explosion occurred when two war ships collided, the Imo, a Norway ship leaving the Halifax Harbour and the French ship, Mont Blanc arriving.

The map shows the narrow part of the harbour where these ships collided, causing the Imo to lose power and to drift to shore and partially sink, while the Mont Blanc burst into flames. This caused a great interest and folks gathered on the shore and others rushed to windows to view this amazing large ship on fire. Unbeknownst to everyone, this ship was loaded to the 'gunnels' with high explosives. (Any ship entering the harbor with explosives was to fly a red flag but this was not the case here.) Within 20 minutes the Mont Blanc blew up causing this enormous devastation. In seconds 2000 dead, 9000 injured, 25000 homes and buildings either completely destroyed into 'match-box' splinters or so damaged had to be removed. Windows throughout the city were blown out. Parts of bodies, injured, dying or dead were immediately covering the ground. As a matter of fact, many bodies were never found. Fires



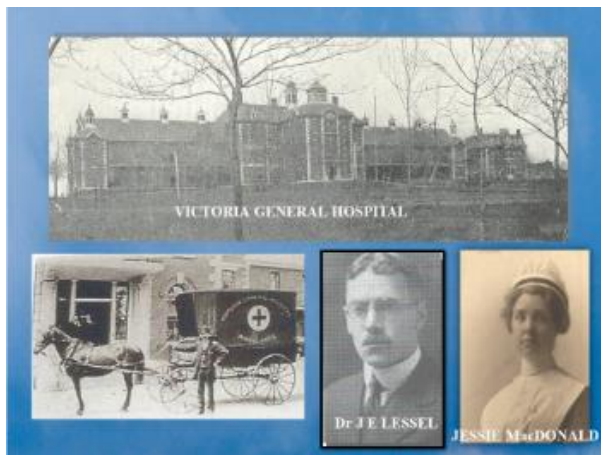
broke out everywhere. Clothes were ripped off people, those able to walk were in a daze, suffering enormous shock, and many children became orphans. The blast was felt throughout the Maritimes. Unfortunately, this was not the end of the disaster as early evening and all night Halifax experienced the worse blizzard they had in years. Some injured could have been saved but for this blast of nature as they now froze to death. Several bodies were not discovered until spring time.

The anchor shaft in the above picture was from the Mont Blanc weighing about 1500 pounds and flew about three miles across the city landed across the North West Arm in a grassy field. As children, we used to cycle over, sit on the shaft and eat our lunch and make up stories about the anchor. The area now has high-rises and known as Regatta Point and the anchor is part of a small park with posters explaining the story.

The first responders were from the Maritimes and these local nurses and doctors and citizens kept things going before help arrived from outside the Maritimes. Clothes, food, blankets etc were brought to the hospitals and to the many first-aid tents that were quickly set up. Well-known and documented was the arrival of doctors and nurses from Massachusetts and especially the Massachusetts General Hospital. Nova Scotia has for years paid tribute to these doctors and nurses for their assistance.

Something that might be of note: Nova Scotia reciprocated to the Massachusetts population when on request, the VG hospital sent 18 nurses to assist in the 1918 influenza epidemic. Within this group was a senior student nurse, Ethel Redmond, VGH class 1918 and for her extraordinary nursing care, she was awarded a Citation by the Governor.

The hospitals were filled to over capacity with in a very short time. The largest hospital at the time



was the Victoria General and others were the Infirmary and two military hospitals, the Cogswell Street hospital and Camp Hill. Camp Hill had just opened in September and as the saying goes; 'hardly had its feet wet' when within a 24 hour period after the explosion, the staff looked after 4200 folks with a variety of injuries, others dying or already dead. Folks arrived by any means and the horse driven ambulance was useful as well.

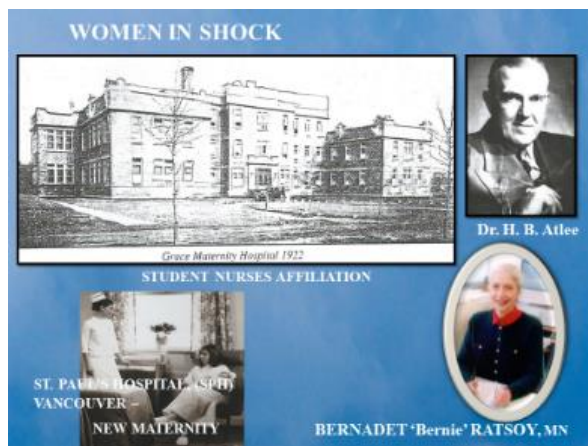
Dr Lessel, the only anaesthetist at the time taught 4 VGH nurses how to give ether under his guidance and supervision in order to keep the three operating rooms going 24/7 for three days, until help arrived from other places. (*A point of interest – the first time ether was given in Canada was at the Halifax Poor House when Dr Parker amputated a woman's leg in the mid- 1880's. The ether was administered by a dentist from Pictou, Dr VanBuskirk*) The picture of nurse Jessie MacDonald, VGH grad class 1915, who was the Operating Room Supervisor, assisted Dr Murphy in surgery and while they were operating the explosion occurred and the skylight above smashed into pieces cutting his hands badly but after changing gloves, carried on. Fortunately the patient was unhurt.

The hospital morgues soon filled to capacity and large school basements were utilized for this purpose. Naming two schools, Chebucto Road School, which is currently the NS Conservatory of Music, and the Acadian School on Argyle Street. This school could be a full story in itself as it has a fascinating history, for an example; it was used as a morgue after the sinking of the Titanic, Joseph Howe was a graduate from here. In the movie “King of Siam”, the teacher portrayed was a woman from Dartmouth and she had her Art School situated first in this school, Anna Leonowens. The building currently is a restaurant called the Five Fishermen and there are many stories of ghosts roaming the halls. The method used for identifying the dead was the same procedure used for the Titanic victims.

As mentioned before many were in complete shock and this included pregnant women and many aborted, many died of haemorrhage, still-born and infants died - all because of lack of medical care and proper hospitalizations. Before all this happened doctors and supported by nurses fought with government that it was necessary for Halifax to have an independent maternity hospital.

Well, the first **positive initiative** for patient care came from the effects of the Halifax Explosion – a maternity hospital was built and opened in 1922.

The Grace Maternity under direction of the Salvation Army was the first independent maternity hospital in Canada. The lead doctor, Dr H B Atlee. He had the reputation as being ‘The Father of Modern Maternity Care’. He brought in many innovative ideas and called the program: Family-Centered with definite protocols that the women had to follow and also stressed the need for specialization of doctors and nurses, the need for a separate space for premature babies and a nursery and he spearheaded the development of a school of maternity nursing at the Grace. His reputation went far and wide.



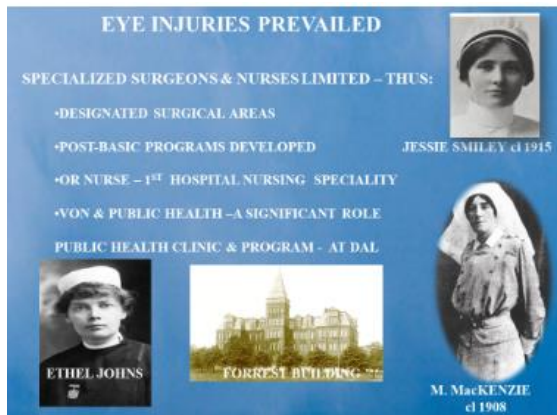
The picture of ‘Bernie’ Ratsoy of St Paul’s hospital, Vancouver, was asked to set-up a maternity department. She came to Halifax to study Atlee’s method, returned to St Paul’s and duplicated his method here.

Another positive aspect was establishing ‘Affiliations’ for maternity training at the Grace , both medical and nursing students, stopping the need to travel either to Boston or Montreal for this experience.

The most prevalent injury were eye and facial injuries because of folks at windows and glass hitting their face directly. Fortunately, a Nursing Sister had just returned from England who had specialized in this type of care so she was an exceptional assistance to the doctors in setting up surgery to either remove eyes, repair and to treat the many different facial injuries.

This was a VGH grad, Jessie Smiley. In a two week period, 250 eyes were removed and many eyes were attempted to be saved. Hence, there were a lot of blind folks after the explosion so

Halifax really promoted and supported CNIB and assisted in getting this organization well established. Also the ideas of separating the surgery and wards into ‘specialized’ units started from this time.

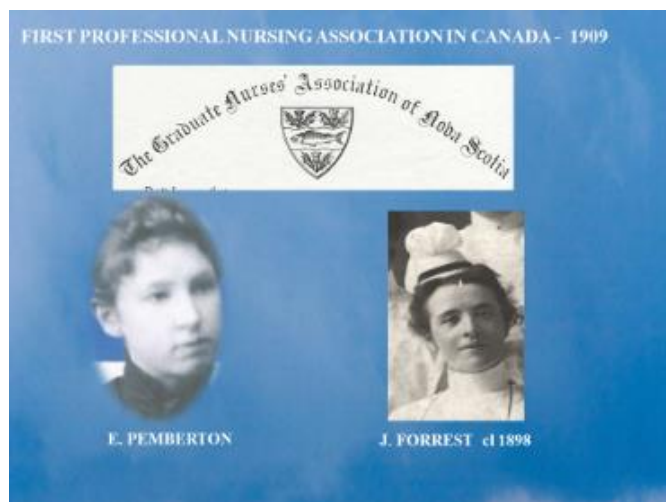


Therefore doctors started specializing as did nurses and with specialization came the need for improved education so Post-Graduate programs sprung up, the operating room nurse was the first hospital specialists. For many years until the 1950’s OR nurses made at least \$10 more a month than did ward nurses. Soon other areas became specialized and unions formed so this was then spread evenly across the board. This was another POSITIVE INITIATIVE which arose from the explosion.

VON and Public Health nurses were significant in assisting the citizen’s following and years after the effects of the explosion. They ‘came into their own’ so to speak. In the above picture, right is Margaret MacKenzie a VGH grad 1908 and Nursing Sister who served in that horrendous battle Gallipoli where conditions for everyone, were so bad there are no adjectives to describe. For her courageous efforts she was awarded many medals. When she returned she obtained a Public Health Certificate and became the first Provincial Director of Public Health, 1922 to 1954. When I first graduated she was my supervisor for 6 months and I felt honoured to have had the opportunity. In 2009 the College of Nursing presented the Centennial Distinction award to Margaret’s family for her many accomplishments over the years for nursing.

Dalhousie set up a public health clinic in the Forrest building, pictured in the centre of the above picture. There is a picture in the VGH Nurses archives of MacKenzie and Ethel Johns on the steps of this building. I am showing this because Johns is a renowned public health nurse who lectured all over the world but mostly remembered in starting the first nursing university degree program in the Commonwealth, at UBC in 1919. She also received recognition from the Federal Government in 2009 as ‘Being a Person of Historical Significance’.

Previous to all this happening, the local nurses of Halifax had gained more education and prominent nursing care duties, so they began to be restless for more responsibility. More respect and recognition for what they did as nurses. Spearheading this idea to further the concept, Eveline Pemberton who had a small hospital in a house on North Park Street and she also was a supervisor at the VGH. She gathered about 18 nurses and together they approached government and after many meetings finally were granted through an Act the association was formed:



‘The Graduate Nurses Association of NS’. Another Nova Scotia initiative: ‘*The first nurses professional association in Canada*’. The first president was a VGH grad, Jobena Forrest, class 1898. She also in 2009 received the Centennial Distinction award from the College of Nursing. Nurses who were members were recognized and called ‘Senior Nurses’.

At this time many Nursing Sisters had returned to Halifax who had valuable experience dealing with trauma cases and highly stressful situations. This became a great source of relief to the local



nurses and doctors. Working alongside these nurses were the local nurses and all went far beyond their usual ‘Duty of Care’ that in the past was definitely in the ‘sole jurisdiction of the physician’. These nurses removed glass from wounds, sutured wounds, splinted fractures, gave anaesthetics, identified the dead, delivered babies, comforted the dying and pronounced patient’s dead, and comforted the families in distress. All the while not knowing if they had a home left or if their loved ones were alive or dead.

As things settled down, these nurses were not prepared to go back to the ‘status quo’ process of giving care. They convinced the nursing leaders to take up their cause. Catherine Graham, VGH grad class 1895 was President of RNANS (which stemmed from the first Association- GNANS) worked with government and were finally granted through a Legislative Act in 1922, allowed nurses to append RN after their name if they had successfully passed the provincial examinations.

Frances Fraser was the first Registrar in Canada, a VGH grad, class 1908 and she presented the first certificate to Eveline Pemberton who is documented at CNA to be the first RN in Canada.

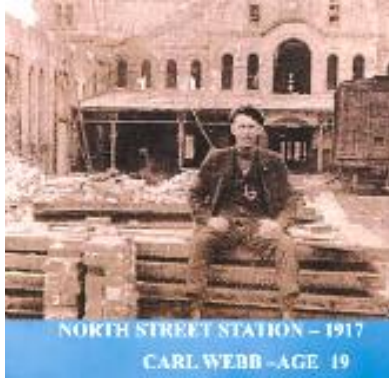
The positive initiative from the explosion in this regard: *First nurse association; *Expanded practice and *Specialization for the nurse

With this nursing beginning, this quote seems appropriate:

**NURSES AND OUR
PROFESSIONAL STANDING
HAS CONTINUED TO MOVE
FORWARD - REMAINS ONE
OF THE MOST ‘TRUSTED’
HEALTH CARE PROFESSION**

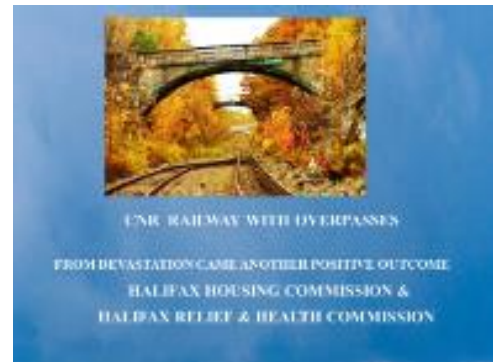
With your indulgence the next three vignettes are personal stories -

This picture below is the North Street Railway station with my father sitting in the rubble and with his crane he removed what was left standing. The CNR then decided to have the main line pass through the south end of the city and in order to do this several mounds of solid rock had to be blasted thru. This was one more positive of the explosion because at the time employment was at



a low and this gave opportunities for many jobs with money to rebuild, support their family and to keep the physical body and mind active which helped somewhat with all the varied emotions following this explosion.

As this rock was cut through the area is still known as 'the cut'. There are 7 such bridges over the cut for the railway to



pass.

Well, another important POSITIVE INITIATIVE from the Halifax Explosion is two-fold; immediately the city council organized A.-'Housing Commission' to help the citizens find shelter, to build new homes and this was used from 1918 until 1950 and B.- 'The Relief and Health Commission'. This commission was assisted by Massachusetts and the Rockefeller Foundation.

I mention the Housing Commission for a reason which I will explain in the next slide.

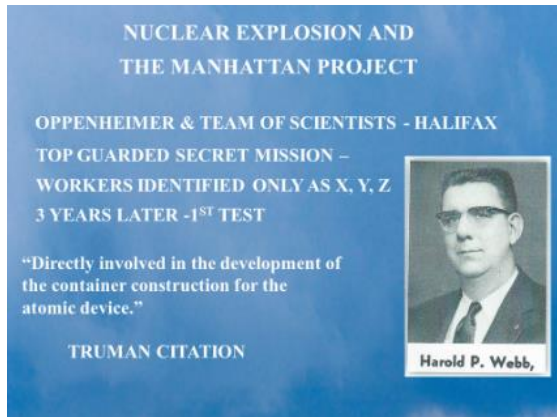
In the Armdale area at this time there was a Butler farm and the farmer said to the Housing Commission, here is a piece of land to which you could build a house for those who have lost everything. The Housing Commission built the house pictured in the left lower picture. Lumber was obviously scarce so if a house was to be built one could go to the north end and salvage any lumber that was useable, so this was done and the beams of this house are from houses destroyed during the explosion and some of the walls, as well The basement dirt, upstairs not finished but

livable. Unfortunately, no one would come to live in it because it was too far out of the city. *(Currently, this house is just off Chebucto Rd, up a short distance from the Armdale Rotary)* So railway men who were working on the cut camped here for a few years. One man was about to be married and his bride to be said if you expect me to live in that house in the woods, there will be no wedding. He knew my father who had just married and my parents saw the potential and purchased this house from the Housing Commission for \$300 down and for 39.19 a month paid for the house. Hence the receipt from the Housing Commission in this picture. There was only a path from Chebucto Rd to carry the furniture etc and over the years mother fought with City Hall for at least a dirt road, a street light and it wasn't until after WW2, about 1953 that a paved street with a sidewalk was put through and houses built throughout the woods which surrounded the house.



The house, in this picture, to the right is the same house with a few renovations as it looks today and should I live to another 5 year this house will have been in the Webb family for 100 years – remarkable for a city home.

This next story could be a conflict as to be positive or negative depending on a person's point of view but I am considering it to be positive:-



2. 'The Manhattan Project'. It was a study here in Halifax by sciences such as Oppenheimer and others to study the effects of the Halifax Explosion, the amount of TNT and how quickly the devastation occurred and how much. Three desert areas in the States were selected for the study and testing. There were 125,000 persons involved and only documented as X Y Z as no names were used. One such person was my Uncle Harold Webb, my father's brother. He was a metallurgist and he was responsible for designing the casing which held the bomb. The reason that I believe this to be positive

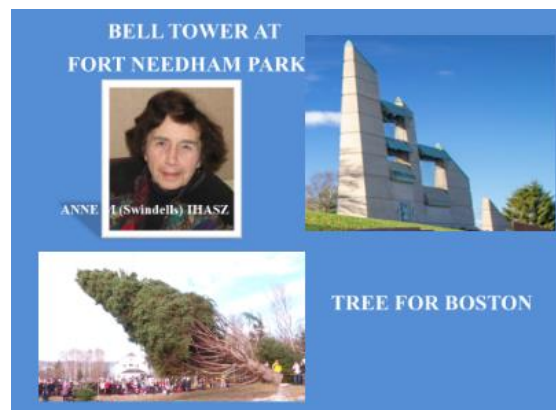
– it stopped the WW2 war in the Pacific. Unfortunately it was an 'act of war' and caused so much death, disease and destruction for the Japanese citizens and this part is regrettable. My Uncle suffered greatly following this with nightmares and guilt, as I am sure others did the same. Harold received a Citation from President Truman and letters from President Jack Kennedy. During this study he and his wife Clara were to celebrate a special wedding anniversary and he was not permitted to leave but on the very day, to his pleasure and surprise, a helicopter took him from California to Ohio for afternoon and then back.

The next story and last one is about a friend, Ann (Swindells) Ihasz and her family. Her story is to represent thousands who could duplicate something similar regarding the explosion.

3. – Ann's Grandparents, the Uphams lived in the north end and the morning of December 6 Annie her Grandmother was in the kitchen cooking breakfast with three children. Her husband Charles worked nights and on arriving home went upstairs to freshen up for breakfast and with him was a three year old and a school girl who was home because of the flu. (*This girl became Ann's mother*) Suddenly half of the house was gone including the stairs. Charles quickly rolled a piece of linoleum, grabbed the two children, put the linoleum out the broken window and slid down to the ground just as the rest of the building collapsed and fire erupted burning to death his wife and three children. This family lost 32 members from the explosion, a familiar story.

The family were members of St Matthews's church and it was completely destroyed and was replaced by the United Memorial church and the bells from St Matthew lay to rust in front of this church for years. (*United Memorial was the combination of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches as both were destroyed and so many of their congregation killed they had to combine, so this United Memorial church was named and used before there was a United Church of Canada*)

In 1985 the government decided to build a monument to honour the explosion victims at Fort Needham,



which looks over the narrows and one can see exactly where these ships collided. So the Upham family had the bells restored and donated to this memorial, hence the name ‘The Bell Tower’ and these bells ring at noon daily with a beautiful sound. Also Ann’s father donated three stained-glass windows when the United Memorial church was built. This church recently sold and the Swindells family members had these windows removed and are now rededicated in the Hope United church on Connaught Ave., Halifax. In the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic there is a full window display called the ‘Upham Window’ and among other items is Charles’ night shirt still with the soot and burned areas.

Every year since 1971 the government of NS send a large spruce tree to Boston as a ‘thank you’ to the medical and citizens for their compassionate assistance following and years after the explosion.

In 2007 the Nursing History NS Society started and when the 100th anniversary of the explosion



was to be celebrated, we wanted to participate in some way. Several things occurred; nursing stories gathered in a binder; a bus load of nurses were sent to Boston to participate in the ‘Tree Lighting’ ceremony held every year and we were hosted so well by the Mass General Alumni nurses. We also donated a bench to the Rose Garden at Fort Needham. Sitting on this bench is Ida Berry, treasurer, Beth Thomas, a grad from Mass General and myself as president of NHNS Society. In fact we hosted several American nurses from the

Massachusetts General for this event which was held December 6, at 9 am. A sermon is held same date and time each year. On the plaque we wanted to make sure that the local nurses were honoured as they seem to be missed when acknowledgements are passed out, so the plaque clearly states “Honouring the nurses who courageously provided nursing care and comfort to the explosion victims and their families during the first days before help arrived from afar”.

Well, in conclusion, it is so apparent that nurses are always available to assist in any situation, any call and go far beyond their ‘Duty of Care’, always moving forward, committed, therefore this quote of Florence Nightingale is so appropriate and my favourite one:

“Nursing is a progressive art in which to stand still is to have gone back. Progress can never end but with a nurse’s life”.

Then I showed a book written and published in 1862 by Florence Nightingale, “Notes on Nursing”, which we have in the VGH School of Nursing Archives and so honoured to have this valuable copy. Also our Alumni years ago, donated a considerable amount towards the development of the Nightingale museum in London, England.

**NURSING IS A
PROGRESSIVE ART IN
WHICH TO STAND STILL
IS TO HAVE GONE BACK.
PROGRESS CAN NEVER
END BUT WITH A
NURSE’S LIFE”**