

SPRINGHILL HOSPITAL AND MINE DISASTERS: FEATURING NURSES

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(Information from the VG Nurses Archives)



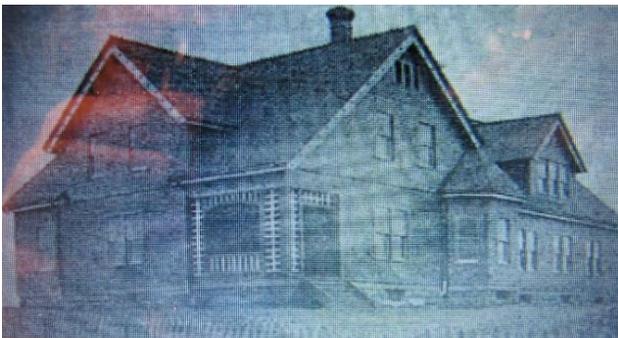
Dr John William Cove was brought to Springhill, NS by the mining company as a Medical Officer in 1873. His first duty was to the miners but he cared for their families as well especially during epidemics of influenza and diphtheria at the time. He delivered over 3000 babies during his time in Springhill. To make a proper living he organized a store where he sold medicines, soap and he also worked as the local dentist. He had 13 children and 8 died as a result of either influenza or diphtheria. He and his wife eventually moved to Amherst where he died of Bright's disease. The population grew from a few

hundred to over 6000 in a very short time as the mines became more productive. Hence Dr Cove could no longer cope with the work load so another doctor was brought in by the mining company, Dr J A. Byers.

Because of the towns growth Rev. W. C. Wilson recognized the need of a proper hospital and went about gathering funds with the support of Dr Cove.



REV. WILSON



The All Saints Hospital in Springhill, NS was built in 1893 and over the years had many renovations. The original hospital was completely replaced in 1963. The Training School was started about 1900 and closed in 1947.

The first graduates were Elizabeth Jones and Frances Newman in 1904. As soon as they graduated they had to leave the hospital to make room for new students.



ELIZABETH JONES



FRANCES NEWMAN



Dr. Wardrope With Graduating Class

In the picture is Dr. Wardrope with a graduating class. Dr. Wardrope married a VG graduate, Kathleen Mumford of the VG 1900 class. Kathleen was a Head Nurse at the VG (1902 -1904) before going to Springhill where she married Dr Wardrope.



About 1905 Isabel Mumford, VG graduate, class 1896 became the Lady Superintendent at All Saints and Dr. L. Murray was the physician in Springhill at the time.

An interesting story about Isabel; before arriving in Springhill she was a Head Nurse (1902-1904) at the VG hospital in Halifax. During the Nova Scotia typhoid epidemic of 1904 she was called to leave her position to nurse victims in King's County on Brooklyn Street. She reported; "When I went for a walk, a neighbour followed me and sprinkled whitewash in my footsteps to kill the germs". Dr Murray and Isabel married. In 1914, Dr. Murray joined the staff of the NS Hospital in Woodside, so they resided then in Dartmouth. Dr Murray died in 1948 and Isabel in January 1969 in Moncton, NB. Isabel was born in 1872 and at one time was the oldest RN in Atlantic Canada.

Margaret MacKenzie, VG class of 1908 was Lady Superintendent at All Saints hospital 1910 to 1915. Before this she was Night Supervisor at the VG hospital for three years. When WW1 was declared she joined the Canadian Army Medical Unit and served for two years on the Island of Lemnos. Here they received the wounded from Gallipoli, the heaviest of fighting in the most terrible conditions. The unrelenting heat, no sanitation, poor diet, lack of proper medicine caused illness and death with the soldiers and medical staff. The Matron, who was a Nova Scotian, Jessie Jaggard died, age 44 from these conditions and over-worked. Margaret then was transferred to France for several years. She received the Mon's Star and many other medals. On return to Canada, Margaret attended University of Toronto in Public Health and became the first Provincial Public Health Director. She died in Halifax, 1969, age 87.



Alice Hyatt VG class 1918 became Night Supervisor at All Saints hospital in 1919.

Another VG graduate nursed at the All Saints Hospital in Springhill, Dorothy Johnson VG class of 1943. She was born in Liverpool England. Her father was a miner in England, and when they arrived in Canada the family went directly to Springhill, where he worked in the coal mine. Dorothy completed her early education in Springhill before entering the VG School of Nursing. Dorothy left All Saints hospital after several years and then was a nurse at Mount Allison University. She retired from nursing while working at Mount Allison University in 1983. Dorothy died in 2003 in Springhill.



All Saints Springhill Cottage Hospital as it was in 1960. After an inspection the government condemned the place and ordered a new hospital to be built.

This new hospital opened in 1964 as a self-contained unit.

All Saints Springhill Hospital



The town was progressing well in all respects but unfortunately it did not last. The first town tragedy occurred in 1891. The coal mines had operated since about 1873 and men and boys worked the mines. The boys ranged in age from about 12 onward as being a miner was the only means of earning money in the area and that was hardly enough to survive. The pay ranging from \$1.95 to maybe 5 per day in a special case. There were two shafts joined at the 1200 foot level, #1 and #2 where a fire broke out causing an explosion, at noon, February 21, 1891. One hundred and twenty five were killed and many more injured and burned. The investigation showed that there were sufficient and functioning gas detectors present so the ignition source was never determined. A Relief Fund was organized and funds came from all over the world, including a generous amount from Queen Victoria.

The next mine disaster occurred in November, 1956 in shaft #4 which was a twenty five year old shaft. A 'mine train' carrying a load of coal dust to the surface, from the 5500 foot level, broke away and as it fell back down into the mine it caused a downward blast of ventilation air. Several cars broke loose and as they fell, broke a power line causing an arc and the coal dust ignited in a

blast of flames. Thirty nine miners lost their lives but eighty eight were rescued. The #4 shaft was



sealed forever. Bill Miller and Don Ferguson are two who survived.



BILL MILLER DON FERGUSON

Nurses were sent from the VG hospital to assist with caring of the injured and identifying the dead. In the picture on the left is a Senior student VG nurse assisting one of the injured. (The cap band is blue which seniors wore before receiving the black band).

The coal mine at Springhill, Cumberland County, is known as one of the deepest in the world and since the 'Bump' in 1958 has been filled with water and no longer in use. The mine was owned by Cumberland Railway Coal Company which was founded in 1884. Since 2015 the property is owned by the Nova Scotia Government.

Springhill's third disaster - In the evening of October 24, 1958, the most severe 'bump' in North America occurred in # 2 shaft more than 5000 feet below the surface. (A bump is like an underground earthquake). This devastated the town and surrounding area as the main source of income was no longer available and many left the town for that reason.



'Drager Teams' from all over Nova Scotia, parts of Canada and the United States came to assist with finding survivors. Some survivors were discovered at the 4100 foot level. It was so difficult to reach the men because the shafts were almost completely collapsed or full of debris. In areas where the shafts completely collapsed the miners would have been killed instantly others would soon die from gas fumes. 75 miners were lost in this disaster. By early morning of the 25th 75 miners were rescued and brought to the surface. Of these survivors 19 had serious injuries and taken to hospital by helicopters. Five days or more passed but the Dragermen would not give up, fortunately, because about twelve men were located on the other side of a huge rock wall. A rescue tunnel was made and these men were brought to the surface.



In the picture on the right is Ethel Greasley (Hauld), VG class of 1952B , comforting Dragerman White. He was one of the supervisors of a team

freeing the trapped men. Everyone worked long exhausting and anxious hours for days and into the nights before the efforts were completed. Many VG nurses were sent to care for the injured, assist in identifying the bodies and giving support to the grieving families as they did in 1956. One such nurse was Joan M. MacCully (Drysdale) VG class of 1955B. Joan assisted with the injured at the time of the disaster and then continued to nurse patients in the All Saints Hoapital for quite some time before returning to Halifax and marrying Dr. A. Drysdale.

There were many courageous activities and stories of brave folks following the aftermath of the



explosion. Maurice Ruddick, was one story; even though suffering a severely fractured leg, he kept singing to help keep up his spirits and those of the other 11 trapped men down in the mine. It was pitch black, wet with dripping water, no food or water, cramped space and stifling heat. They were in this situation for 12 days. A terrifying experience. At least no fire this time. Ruddick was named the ‘Canadian of the Year’. He was the only blackman at the time to work in the mine.

Melissa Fay Greene wrote a book: “Last Man Out”.

The bodies of the dead were brought to the surface in sealed airtight coffins because of the decomposition of the bodies caused by the dampness and heat within the shafts.

Several dignitaries visited the site such as; Premier Robert Stanfield and Prince Philip, who had been at a meeting in Ottawa.

The town of Springhill was awarded the ‘Carnegie Medal for Heroism in 1958, recognizing all the volunteers who came to the assistance of the survivors and their families. Also a statute of a miner to honour those who lost their lives in that devastating explosion of 1891 where 125 lost their lives.

A worthwhile visit to Springhill would be to spend time in the Miner’s Museum, the Anne Murray Centre, a non-profit registered charity which provides employment for the locals and funds to support the town activities. Many musicians have written well-known songs about the town of Springhill and the mine disasters.



The town of Springhill had many men and women serve during WW1 and WW2 and to end this



story will feature one such woman, Janet S. Calder (Campbell). Janet was a VG graduate from the class 1909. Janet was a Nursing Sister during WW1 serving with #7 Dalhousie Medical Unit in France and England. She received recognition for her duties and bravery while nursing the wounded and decorated with the Royal Red Cross 2nd Class Medal, the Queen of Belgium Medal and was ‘mentioned in dispatches’. When she returned from overseas, she was Superintendent of Nurses in a New York hospital and then the same in Sydney, NS. Janet died in 1976 at the age of 96.