

Winnie Meadows (nee Brenton)

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

Winnie Meadows was an interesting woman who was well known in the community. While finding my way to her home strangers directed me easily. Her husband wanted me to interview him instead, insisting he had interesting stories to tell about his work life on the trains. I finally convinced him to let me interview Winnie and he left the room unwillingly. She was born September 30, 1900 in Middle Stewiacke, a place called Cloverdale. Her parents were farmers and also sold lumber. She said she walked three miles to school and part from going to Rhode Island to take a business course, her formal schooling did not extend beyond Grade X. She was 37 when she married and had 3 three children. She lived with her husband in the house she came to "as a bride". During the interview she spoke frequently of her women classmates although she only briefly mentioned the two male students in her class. I interviewed her on June 17, 1982.

Early work career:

So they encouraged me, and sent me to this school in Rhode Island and then I went to work for a man who hollered and jumped around and scared the wits out of me...I was timid, you know. I was brought up on a farm and wasn't used to this kind of racket. And one day he called me, Mr. Sherman was his name, he called me to his office, I can see him yet, he had kind of a crooked eye, and he said "sit down", and I did, and he said "Miss Brenton, I see you're a woman, you're a girl who hasn't much confidence. Tell me a little about yourself". And, I did. I told him that I didn't have confidence so much, I really wanted to be a nurse sometime and when I got some money ahead... and he talked to me and he said: "I'm going to give you a little slip, a little piece of poetry". He said: "I can see that you are a fine person but you haven't the confidence in yourself". So he gave me a little card, it's in the attic and someday I'm going to find that card. I carried that card all through the rest of my life and it said on it, this is an important thing that I think you should put down, that "if you think you are beaten you are, if you think you dare not, you don't, if you would like to win but you are afraid you can't it's almost a cinch that you won't". And do you know I went by that.

It influenced my life, it did really and I have never, he died many years ago, now maybe you would know who I am talking about, his nephew was Sherman Adams, well, maybe you'd be too young, he was Governor of New Hampshire and then he and Eisenhower got into some kind of political shamoal and he went down in politics. You know that didn't amount to anything. But, he was the only one that left that I knew of the family and I would like to have got in touch, tell Mr. Sherman sometime how much influence that little talk had on me. (After a year and a half) then finally I came to Nova Scotia. I went into the Royal Bank first and worked a year, no I think a year and a half, and then I negotiated with the Victoria General, and my mother said "Oh, can't you be something else?"

Well, I guess I'm myself. My mother said: "you know, the girls... you want to be something different don't you because that was all I heard". But that did not influence me, believe it or not, it did not. I wanted to be a nurse. Well, I was twenty-seven when I was in training. I never looked back. When I got in there I was happy.

Nursing School:

I tried Rhode Island but my educational things was, well you know, I really didn't want to go there, my mother was here and she was getting along in years and my brothers and sisters. So when I called, when I put my name into the Victoria General, they accepted me right away.

I wasn't exactly refused (Rhode Island), I think I did get word later ...my sister went to them or something, and I think they would have taken me in but I didn't really want to go there, I'd lived there before. In those days there was a long..., you didn't even call up in those days, you didn't use the telephone. You were really gone. You went to Yarmouth and took the old boat over to Boston all night and threw up all night and were scared that you were going to die.

Nursing Matron:

What a person (Miss Strum). I was old enough, you see, to think, to see her good qualities. Pretty strict, she was, in fact, I see her yet coming down sniffing when she smelled tobacco in the wards. Her office was right in the old building, right on 42, and of course 42 were surgical men who were all better and of course they all wanted to smoke. That was dead against the rules. I can see her yet with her Royal Victoria cap, no black band, they didn't wear black bands, going through sniffing and then bawling them out, watch out for the cigarette, watch out for the pipes. Of course, now you buy tobacco with other wards and everybody smokes.

It was terrible (the non-smoking rule), because my brothers smoked, my father smoked, all my relatives would sit down after dinner and have a smoke.

I did lots of times (break the rule and let the patients smoke). I watched for the training school office door, as we say, maybe I shouldn't say this, but I did.

Dress

Well, I looked like nothing on earth. Well, my mother made my uniforms for probation, but after that, after we had our caps, we had this long skirt down to about mid-calf, no below mid-calf. And a stiff white apron and a collar and long sleeves and cuffs, which we had taken, I was without my cuffs more than I had them. Because I couldn't work with long sleeves, you know, getting into things. I paid \$18 for a pair of shoes and I nearly died. Eighteen dollars for a pair of duty shoes and I had two pair in training. They were old fashioned. They looked like an old ladies shoe. They were very comfortable, they were Wallace Brothers. (The collar) burned my neck, Stiff, nasty thing. And then we got our bibs when we got our caps, we got our bibs. We threw away our old uniforms, our probationary uniforms. Well, my probation uniforms were rather nice. My older sister who was a nurse, graduated in the States, she helped my mother and they made them. They were pretty... gray and white. Gray with white stripes and I thought they were kind of pretty. (They did not have to all look alike) as long as they were striped material, that was all. But, after we got our caps and our bibs (two months after entering training school), they were all alike. (The uniforms) were provided by the nursing school. Our aprons we brought with us, of course, but the bibs were provided and the uniforms, I am sure, yes, I know they were. Mrs..., I can't think of her name now, she always had her mouth full of pins, why she didn't swallow them I didn't know but...She was the seamstress. Chittock,

Mrs.Chittock.

First day:

My first day in training, I was put up in the old, among the night nurses somehow. I don't know how I came to be put up there. I went in early, there was another girl from down your way, I can't think of her name, she only lasted, she didn't, she was homesick, but I went in on December 15th and the class didn't come in until January the 1st, but they, you know, as I am trying to tell you, in those days your work was what counted, helping you see, do you understand? You see, I didn't have any classes until the first of the

year when my whole class came in, but we did a lot of work, we did all the work. Students did all the work. Mopped the floor with a dry mop, dusted. Well, the first thing I did, there was a girl who used to be in Stewiacke, her father kept hotel and she was on the same ward with me, and I thought this was great. And, she said: "Now Winnie, we start with the beds up here". And, of course, I grabbed the bed clothes off and threw them, she said: "Oh no. You fold them up and take them off". I thought, "oh gracious". And she said: "There's a way to be taught", Well, I would like to be taught. "Well", she said "You will be in class, you'll be taught in class, in the meantime I will tell you what to do. You'll fold them up and lay them over the back of the chair". She showed me how to make a bed. That was great. I caught right on. I loved it. We had these stiff collars, probation collars, and when you would go in to empty pans, you go to, the water would come up and go down and everybody always gets a bath in there, it always gets down the back of your neck. Well, that soon got away. And, that was my first day. We had twelve hour days. I went off duty and I checked up my things I came back to the ward and I felt quite at home watched them. They put the medicines out, I old 16 , old 17, women's ward and at 7 o'clock a girl from my old, Middle Stewiacke, or Brookfield, came on duty and I was glad to see her and I was very happy going off duty and I thought this: I am so glad I came. My first day, well, I guess I did everything I did all the rest of my life.

The girls on the floor taught me that (how to take temperatures). And I often think of my first day and how happy I was. Christmas was coming on and they were talking about getting trees up, you know, in the ward, and it was a very happy time.

I loved it. Well, an old man died for one thing. It kind of took the wind out. I was moved from 17 Women's up to 42 and oh, there was a lot of people there and I remember Mr. Lawrence with a broken back and I remember a little fellow off the boat from Pakistan who wanted everything so spotlessly clean, you know, and I remember a very happy week before Christmas and after Christmas then there was a big class that came in after Christmas and we carried on from there.

Subjects studied

At first, the first winter there was mostly practical nursing and that was right down my alley, you know, I loved it. But, then we got into in the spring MatericaMedica which held me up on account of my academic. I passed it though. I studied and goot through. And I loved Anatomy and Physiology, I have my books up in the attic. You ask my favourite, I don't know, I think maybe Physiology, maybe.

Well, now, in those days we didn't have the girls who went to McGill so they, who did teach us, a Miss Jones, and she was homely but she was a sweet old thing, she looked like she was an old maid. And Miss Strum taught us the history of nursing and I was up to the Florence Nightingale service in the first of May and I could almost know what the man was going to say because I had had it all in my history of nursing. Nearest the 10th of May, gather at a service and renew vows (the Florence Nightingale Pledge). Oh, we have every year, we renew the pledge and they sing and take up the collection and different nurses read scriptures and one has a prayer. Florence Nightingale Service but they put special emphasis on the older nurses. We have a lunch afterwards and renew old acquaintances. You know, the oldest girl this year was eighty-six. Last time we were to a meeting she was an old girl ninety.

Nurses' Residence/classmates/nursing instructor

Miss Strum lived right on the corner where you would go in the door and she could see who came with you and everything, but that didn't worry me much. And we had an old housekeeper, Kit Power, and she was a pet, she was great. And the maids, the different chamber maids, we liked them and it was a place of fun, we had lots.

Very, very close (to classmates) In fact, I had close friendship with a girl in the next class to me and we were very, very good friends and when she, when I married and came here shortly after the war broke out, in 1937 as you can remember (I wasn't born yet, I thought, but did not mention!) and she went to South Africa. South Africa asked for Canadian nurses and there were 300 who went from Canada. And she went and I would have loved to have gone with her but, of course, I had a baby.

Ann and I weren't of the same class but she dropped out a year on account of sickness and when she came back she graduated from my class and she passed away. I nursed her later, when the children were small. She passed away with cancer of the breast.

(Miss Jones), well, we made fun of her to begin with. We didn't have any sense and when I look back now and I think what a great person she was. She told us one time about the things she had learned (while bathing a rich Lady) giving a bath and she left the soap in the water and Lady said "oh my, don't waste that", she said. We laughed about that. But, you know as you get older and keep house yourself, you don't laugh about those things, they are real, they are really for real.

A very practical person, a very fine person, yes, she was, Miss Jones. She was from Toronto, Toronto General. And Miss Strum was a very fine person. Oh, I can hear her yet. One times she was off about someone getting married, she said "Well, all I can say is God help them". They were all spinsters and Miss Page was a spinster. Well, evidently, I don't think anyone would want them. Played tricks

We had a fellow (patient) from down in Bridgetown, he was a boxer...and I was on night duty and he went away somewhere to visit or something and we made a woman for his bed when he came back. And I had a long blue sweater, I took my cuffs off, and I made it, and some of the men made a head for it and we put it in Harold's bed. And he came in and the lights were kind of down, it was after nine I guess, and he went over to his bed and he said "well, missus" he said "since you are here ahead of me, you just lay over a little and I will get in beside you". And of course that caused a great laugh. He knew, yes, he knew she wasn't a real woman. Oh, yes, we had lots of fun, lots of fun off duty and lots of fun on duty.

He (Dr. MacDonald) said: "a nurse had to see a lighter side for the sake of the patient and for the sake of everybody". And, you know I agree with him so much as I get older.

First death:

If I may tell you of my experience of my first death. We had no preparation, I had my cap, I think, three days or something. I thought I had the world by the tail. I was posted, Miss Strum posted that I was to go in the emergency room to sit with a Miss Hatt, from 9 to 11, we had to do an x-ray and then take some girl off to specialty, everybody had to do their part. We used to have to do that an awful lot and I thought gracious, she is a very sick woman. However, I dressed carefully, I laid down for awhile after seven and at nine o'clock I got up, and I dressed myself, and I put on a sweater and I went out and the moon was shining, I will never forget that moment. I looked up at that and I thought how will I go over there alone? I will be alone with that woman. And, I looked up and I thought if you were ever with me please be with me tonight and evidently he was because afterwards did I feel a calm when the time came. She passed away about ten minutes before eleven and I never felt a qualm and I have never ever since.

It wasn't terrifying at all. I wasn't prepared, no, I don't think anyone is. I guess I was in training about two years, and a girl came in just as we were going off 7:00 that night from way down Peggy's Cove somewhere, she had pneumonia. She was full of pneumonia and when we undressed her you could see all the stripes down her body where she had had a baby and she still had a

lump here and (from a) poor fisherman's place where she didn't get good gut care and we went off duty of course. And the morning we come on, her bed was empty. And that was one of the saddest things I ever experienced in training, to think that girl died on Christmas Eve when she could have been saved, you see.

Time off:

Well, we didn't have too much off, we had three hours off in the day time, or two, two hours off, and on Saturdays we had three and on Sundays, every other Sunday, we had four hours off. And we usually went out, we went somewhere. But, we had so little, at night we were tired when we got off and we usually sat around and carried on and giggled.

There were a lot of girls who were, had gone to the San (tuberculosis sanatorium), there really was, there really was, now I, maybe I shouldn't be saying this but there were, I can tell you several that went to the San and a couple that never got better. I think the work was poorly arranged, maybe, and I think that the long hours...

I think we did sick days, although we had to make up our time, I had to make up a lot of time at the end.

I would be tired, I would be tired at the end of the day. I think it was maybe hard work. I don't criticize. I don't. The only thing is, I think the method today is better.

Work experience and responsibilities:

Your intermediate year you gave medicine, in your senior year, you always, the senior nurse always gave the medicine.

You got up in the morning and you rushed to breakfast and you looked at your chart when you came out where you were to go because you might be two months some place but you could change. If you were to change you would go there and you would do, just do general work, general routine. A lot of housekeeping work.

I didn't know the difference because I have heard my older sister say they scrubbed the floors. We dry mopped, no, we didn't have, we didn't have to wash dishes. We had to get lunches out at night, but we had to serve all our trays, which they don't now, and I don't know, we had a system but I do remember being tired. We didn't question it because we didn't know any different.

Affiliation at the maternity hospital:

I didn't think they were quite as nice. You know, I was in charge of a ward there for a little while, the west Ward. But no, the food wasn't as good (as the V.G). Oh, I don't know, I guess we learned as much. I think I did because I did an awful lot of that on my own later (maternity nursing). We were taught by doctors. Dr. P.A. MacDonald, who said that the mother must lie still for two weeks because that was the only rest she got. It's a wonder she didn't get away with eternal rest, I don't know why she didn't. And E.K. MacLellan was there and Dr. Caldwell, and we thought we had a pretty good grounding. We saw a caesarean; we saw breeches, we kept it up since, you know.

We always thought that the VG (students) got the bad end of it but I don't think we did. Some of them had boyfriends and the Salvation Army (Grace Maternity Hospital) didn't believe in that and I guess we were taught all right, we must have been, because we learned a great deal there.

Religion and the patient:

I remember one night, we always had to have our patients see a clergyman, that was a must. And I questioned it sometimes. I had nothing against a man making peace with his maker but was it a good thing? Now, I remember one night in particular. I was thinking about it not too long ago, about a man that came in for Dr. George H. Murphy. He was the finest person, George H, the finest man. And I forget what he had. We had to prep him, I know. Maybe it was, he was an oldish man, possibly it would be a bowel obstruction, it

could have been, I don't remember. And, I remember I had to have a priest come in and Dr. Murphy came in and he said: "Hmm, are you nearly ready?" And I said: "Yes, but the priest is coming". And, he said: "that's right, my girl, we will wait for the priest".

Well, the priest came and and gave him the last rites and told him and then we took him away. And, to my mind, it was getting on my nerves, I thought they should do him first. Now whether I was right or wrong I never knew but that always kind of stuck in my craw. I wonder if it should have, you know...it was all right because the man got better.

Well, I wondered what it would do to them, knowing that he as getting the last rites. Would he be upset about it? ...But I remember questioning that at one time. I didn't ever mention it to anybody.

Working during the Depression as a private duty nurse in Nova Scotia:
You didn't ask them for money. Maybe they would give you a bag of potatoes. One woman gave me a jug of soft soap which I was scared to death of. It was great satisfaction...mind you, kid of hard on us.

My brother had a market and he had lots of mean and potatoes and the people called needed me and I went (private duty nursing). The only time my brother and I had any words at all was one time I was out somewhere, I worked a great deal, and somebody came for me to go out to the river. A woman was very sick out there, and my brother didn't call me to go and I said: "Walter, don't you ever as long as you live, while I live here, ever do that to me again".

Oh, he thought there was too much work for me and he knew that they didn't have any money, he said, I said: "don't ever let that happen again", and he never did, he never stopped me, he never interfered again.

Poverty:

People were laid off, trained railway men were laid off. Times were hard. They were hard (1930s). Look, we often sit here at night and talk about it. If they couldn't pay their taxes their place was sold out from under them. These people wouldn't offer me any (money), they didn't have any, but some people did try to impose. But, you learn every day, you will find out that as you get older that you learn so much, especially as you get as old as me, you learn an awful lot.

A good nurse:

I would say the first thing is caring.