

October is Women's History Month.....



*Nurses at Fort Selkirk
(Thornthwaite Collection Yukon
Archives)*

Yukon Nurses: A History of Compassion and Caring

Nursing activities in the Yukon were first carried out by aboriginal people using traditional knowledge, and later by lay nurses who came amongst the gold seekers.

The Gold Rush also became the impetus for a smaller

rush... of nurses prepared to help people whose health was threatened by the harsh and unsanitary conditions during the trek to the Klondike and after their arrival. Even before the Gold Rush, nurses were not unknown in the Yukon.

One of the earlier trained nurses was Mrs. Stringer, wife of Bishop Stringer, who no doubt put her skills to good use amongst aboriginal people and whalers during the Stringers posting on Herschel Island. Two of the first delegations of nurses to travel to the Klondike arrived in 1898 to find a typhoid epidemic on their hands. Three Sisters of St. Anne's came from Alaska to staff a new hospital being built in Dawson City.

The Victorian Order of Nurses also sent four nurses along with the Yukon Field Force. They traveled by train from Ottawa to Vancouver, by boat to Wrangell, by foot on the Stikine Trail to Teslin Lake, where they built scows and traveled by river to Fort Selkirk and by steamer to Dawson. While making the arduous journey, they provided nursing care to members of the Field Force and other travelers. Their arrival in Dawson provided even more challenges. They found the hospital consisted of two small log buildings and a tent, with virtually no supplies. About ten people a day were dying from typhoid. One of the nurses also contracted typhoid herself.

Despite it all, the nurses quickly set to work caring for the ill until the epidemic waned with the onset of winter. Colder weather brought new problems... frostbite, gangrene, scurvy, anaemia, rheumatism and work injuries. Other infectious diseases such as measles, diphtheria and smallpox spread through a population already weakened by poor nutrition, poor sanitation and the hard work of surviving the trails and creeks.

The next major rush of nurses came during the construction of the Alaska Highway during World War Two. The U.S. Army built its own hospital and hired nurses to staff it. The Whitehorse Hospital and its nurses continued to provide care for the local people, the civilians who worked on the highway and the families they brought with them.

Today, aboriginal women are beginning to make history as more of them pursue nursing careers. Many northern nurses still face the challenge of working in small and relatively remote communities, sometimes with fewer resources than they would prefer. And like their predecessors, the emphasis remains on the promotion of health, the prevention of illness and the care of the sick and injured.



*Whitehorse General Hospital,
1940's (Ryder Roth Collection)*



*Whitehorse General
Hospital Today*



*Hospital Staff, 1948.
(Ryder Roth
Collection)*



Herta Richter
(Herta Richter Collection
MacBride Museum)

Herta Richter: A Collector of Northern Nursing Experience

When Herta Richter began working in Fort Good Hope, NWT in the late 1950, she likely never dreamed she would spend most of the next three decades in the North.

She also probably never imagined that her diaries and belongings would become part of collections at the Yukon Archives and the MacBride Museum. Herta grew up on an Alberta farm and received her nursing diploma in Alberta in 1955.



Herta Richter (Herta
Richter Collection,
MacBride Museum)

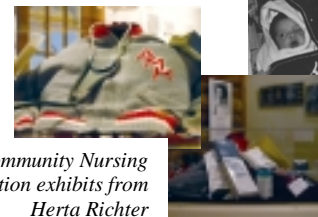
She worked in both Alberta and the NWT in the early years of her career and after 1964 remained in the North. Before her retirement in 1986, Herta had worked in NWT communities such as Fort Liard, Spence Bay, Fort Resolution and Yellowknife and in Yukon communities such as Old Crow, Pelly Crossing, Mayo, Elsa, Carcross and Whitehorse. At least one of Herta's nursing adventures made the news. In October 1959, a newspaper published the story of a 7-year-old boy in Fort Good Hope who had badly broken his arm. Herta was the only medical worker there and she became the centre of a team who pitched in to help.

Herta sedated the boy and X-rayed his arm, a local pilot flew through fog to fetch the doctor from Norman Wells and the schoolteacher helped Herta cheer the boy while they awaited the doctor. While the women's movement was making headlines outside the North, Herta was quietly living an independent challenging lifestyle in remote northern communities. Upon arrival in a community, Herta might find the nursing station badly in need of repairs and equipment. Circumstances dictated that she quickly make friends with the local people, which she seemed to have no trouble doing.

An evaluation of her time in Old Crow describes Herta as having a good rapport with the community and as being very involved in local activities, while maintaining an immaculate nursing station. Her diaries are filled with notes about baby clinics, vaccinations, school and home visits, vision tests, broken teeth and medications dispensed; as well as baby births, funerals, holiday celebrations, weddings, churchsales and berry-picking outings.

Herta enjoyed working alone in smaller communities, despite occasional entries in her diaries like this one: Snow and blowing snow all day. Paths all drifted. No one to clinic. She rejoiced in small victories: Cleaned the ice off back step; with some table salt. Success." And she noted close calls with wildlife: The bear in the kitchen in Elsa was in Beatrice's kitchen and ate up Johnnie's birthday cake. When Herta died in 1993, her collection of First Nation artifacts and medical objects was donated to the MacBride Museum and is featured in this fall's exhibit, Many Hats: The Passions and Pursuits of Yukon Women.

Diaries, photos and other materials were donated to the Yukon Archives. Both collections form part of the picture that historians continue to compile about life in the Canadian North.



Community Nursing
Station exhibits from
Herta Richter
Collection, MacBride

Corinne Cyr: Nursing in the Yukon, Before and After the Alcan Highway



Corinne Cyr, Third from left, with U.S. Army Doctors. (Corinne Cyr Collection)

Raised on a Saskatchewan farm, Corinne had graduated from the St. Paul's Hospital Nurses Training School in Vancouver in 1939, and then worked in both Vernon and Vancouver.

Her arrival in Whitehorse in 1941 was the beginning of a northern career that included epidemics, a threatening forest fire and the construction of the Alaska Highway. Corinne adjusted well to the challenging

working conditions in Whitehorse's 20-bed hospital. Nurses lived at the hospital and were always on call, having to report where they

would be during their day off. There were no phones, so off-duty nurses often had to fetch the doctor when one was required. When the support staff had days off, nurses filled in. That meant doing the cooking, the cleaning and stoking the furnace with four-foot logs every six hours. What a change from Vancouver! says Corinne.

Only about 400 people lived in Whitehorse during the winter. I learned to curl and play bridge. We attended formal afternoon teas and dressed up in long gowns for formal dances. I thoroughly enjoyed life in a small town and in a small hospital. Things changed in 1942, when military and civilian workers descended on the Yukon to survey airports and build the Alaska Highway. A new hospital wing was built, more nurses were hired, and there were more patients to care for.

At about this time, Corinne had her first brush with one of several epidemics. Travelling by boat between Dawson City and Whitehorse, Corinne attended to a sick crew member who turned out to have measles. The doctor in Whitehorse ordered the boat quarantined until everyone contracted the contagious disease. Corinne was the only one allowed off, only because she had already had measles. Within weeks, Corinne found herself caring for soldiers when measles swept through an Army camp. She was then sent to Teslin to nurse that community through a measles epidemic. We had excellent cooperation from the Teslin people.

An RCMP member came with me when I visited all the homes every day. Two Catholic priests volunteered to look after dogs, which were very important to the native people. If they were taken care of, the family did not have to worry about them while they were recovering. Teslin was one of my best experiences in nursing. In 1953, Corinne again nursed through an epidemic, this time polio. In 1957, she became Whitehorse Hospital Matron. During this time, a forest fire threatened the community and the hospital. Under Corinne's leadership, the hospital prepared to evacuate to Carcross, filling a White Pass Railroad boxcar with basic hospital supplies, until the fire scare was over. Corinne continued to work off and on for Whitehorse Hospital until 1970.



Nurses on Steps of WGH Nurses Home, 1948 (Ryder Roth Collection)



Whitehorse General Hospital Nurses' Home 1947 (Ryder Roth Collection)

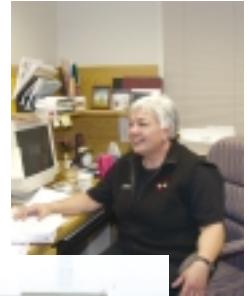
Donna Hogan: A Pioneer First Nations Nurse

Yukon First Nations people survived for centuries without the health care system we depend upon today.

Trained nurses were unknown. But in many instances, First Nations women filled that role.

Midwives assisted with childbirth. Specialists, often women, were knowledgeable about curative herbs and practical remedies, such as sweat bathing, teas, poultices, cough syrups, eye washes and salves. First Nations women have begun to work in the field of nursing, but in the Yukon there are still very few.

When Donna Hogan of Whitehorse became a nurse in 1982, she became a modern-day pioneer, breaking new ground for aboriginal nurses still to



Donna Hogan at work at Whitehorse General Hospital 2002



come. A few First Nations nurses came before me, such as Marilyn Van Bibber from the Selkirk First Nation, but there were not many, and there are still not many now, says Donna. Donna's inspiration came partially from her father, who used to joke that he wanted three nurses in the family, to look after him, his wife and the rest of the family. When her father became ill, Donna was motivated to take a nursing assistant program in Whitehorse, graduating in 1975.

I worked as a nursing assistant at the Whitehorse Hospital for five years until I was offered a wonderful opportunity to take my training even further. The federal Northern Careers program helped pay for the costs of obtaining my nursing diploma from Grant MacEwan Community College in Edmonton. When Donna returned to Whitehorse, she worked as a general duty nurse, then a supervisor, and has been the Director of First Nation Health Programs at Whitehorse General Hospital for nine years. Donna believes in the importance of having First Nation nurses to help care for First Nations people.

Donna Hogan (right) after receiving her nursing diploma, with her mother Ella Rear, and her daughter Joella 1982. (Donna Hogan Collection)

Sometimes the hospital environment is frightening for First Nations people, especially elders. It helps to have someone there who can make a real connection.

Donna has made those connections many times. She recalls an elder who was sick and dying in the hospital and who requested her presence. This elder's mother was the midwife who helped my own mother during my birth, says Donna. That connection was important to her, and I was honoured to be with her when she died.

Donna dreams of having First Nations nurses working in each community. When I was a child, I never thought I could become a nurse. It seemed unattainable. I want today's youth to have those big dreams. Donna appears at health career fairs and does role model presentations to ensure students know about nursing opportunities. She was instrumental in starting the Yukon First Nations Health Career Scholarships and looks forward to the return to the territory of several young First Nations women taking nursing training now.