

# **Preserving Nurses' Cultural History: Nursing Uniforms and Professional Identity**

**2021 UBC Nursing Symposium from the UBC School of Nursing Consortium for Nursing History Inquiry and the celebration of 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for BC History of Nursing Society**

**Parade Co-ordinators:**

**Sheila J. Rankin Zerr**

Past Adjunct Professor, UBC Nursing

Sheila is a nursing historian, an author and an honorary life member of the BC History of Nursing Society. Sheila has taught nursing history for more than 40 years, using costume to help stimulate the interest of students and others. Almost all the costumes you will see here are from her personal collection.

**Lenore Radom: Program Planner & Script writer**

**Margaret Scaia: Moderator & Power Point Manager**

**Special Mention of Glennis Zilm** who has inspired and written previous Fashion parades and has been a resource for this event.

## **Hello!! Welcome to our Costume Parade – called “Preserving Nurses’ Cultural History”**

This parade, mainly Canadian history, and closely tied to BC nursing history, illustrates some typical attire worn by nurses from the 1640s to the present.

It indicates influence of women’s dress on nurses – and in some ways nurses influencing women’s dress!

For this presentation we will use Mannequins only to give you the best overview of past to present. Interestingly, the study of nursing costumes reveals that nurses regularly have been in the forefront of women’s fashion and change. For the past three decades, Sheila Rankin Zerr has been looking into why and how nurses moved to traditional uniforms and then moved away from wearing them – and more recently to a resurgence of interest in uniforms for nurses.

Rankin Zerr’s study of attire worn by nurses throughout the ages reveals a great deal, not only about their struggles for professional status and recognition, but also about their roles with their contemporary society, and about their independence



## **COSTUME #1 circa 1640s**

### **Jeanne Mance – Canada’s “first Lay Nurse”**

**Jeanne Mance**, born 1606, was founder of the first European-type hospital in Canada, and co-founder of the city of Montreal. The daughter of well-to-do French parents, she had been educated at a convent where the nuns were, typically, the keepers of knowledge about health care. She received further instruction in nursing care while assisting the Sisters of Charity in 1638 during a severe epidemic.

She arrived in Montreal on May 17, 1642, where she set up a tiny hospital inside the fort to attend to the wounded and sick. By 1644 a larger hospital had been established. Jeanne Mance administered the growing Hotel Dieu operations until her death in 1673.

This costume is typical of Jeanne Mance’s time for day wear, but we have very little information about what she wore in her hospital or the care she gave personally.



## **COSTUME#2 circa 1840s**

### **Canada's First Nations Lay Nurse personified by Amelia Douglas.**

Early fur traders and pioneer settlers in Canada depended heavily on the skills and knowledge of aboriginal healers and their knowledge of herbs and medicines. **Amelia Douglas**, who represents these healers, was born in 1812 in northern Manitoba. Her mother was a Swampy Cree healer, who Amelia learned a great deal from.

At age 16, she married fur trader James Douglas and later accompanied her husband to Fort Victoria where the Hudson Bay Company established a post in 1843. Her midwifery skills aided the colonists in the Victoria area with high praise. In 1858, when the new colony of British Columbia was established, James Douglas was appointed governor. The new Lady Douglas contributed in many quiet ways to support health care. This costume is typical of everyday dress worn by “**Women of Influence**” in Victoria from the 1850s to about the 1890s. (No hoops or crinolines, which were for fancy dress up.)

Notice the traditional First Nations beaded leather pouch. This would have been used to carry herbs and other potions to assist in healing work as was the chatelaine in this same time period worn by Florence Nightingale.



### **COSTUME #3 circa 1860s.**

#### **Florence Nightingale – “The Founder of Modern Nursing”**

In the early 1850s, Florence Nightingale braved opposition from her wealthy parents and attended a school for nurses in Germany. She brought back many ideas for reforms in nursing care and improvements for British hospitals.

This replica costume is based on photographs of her working in her hospital. This typical outfit worn when giving care to patients was a simple dress, with an apron, and a lace mantle or cap to cover her hair. Note the chatelaine: As most women’s dresses of the time did not have pockets, women used a pouch or pocket hanging from the belt for easy access to keys and other essential household items – the chatelaines worn by nurses often included scissors, pill containers, pencils, and other useful items.

When the Crimean War was on, in 1854, Nightingale took a band of 39 nurses to Scutari. Her work there established her and her new nursing methods. Her new ideas saved thousands of lives and made her a national hero – the **“Lady of the Lamp.”** **And we have proved again these “basics’ in the COVID 19 pandemic.**

Money raised in her name following the war provided funds to open Britain’s first “Nightingale-model school.” Canada and the United States soon adopted this advanced “modern” model. Nightingale introduced standard uniforms for nurses, both for her Crimean nurses and for the Nightingale school at St. Thomas’ Hospital in London. Before that time, those giving care to the sick in the early hospitals wore their own clothing, generally a typical dress of the working class, and nurses learned through a kind of apprenticeship program.

Lay nurses, in early hospitals established in Canadian cities, had followed these apprenticeship precepts.

In 1874, the Mack Training School in Saint Catharine's, Ontario, became the first Canadian school of nursing to hire a "Nightingale-trained nurse" establishing a model nursing school. This costume is also somewhat similar to the uniform of that early school. Today, Florence Nightingale is credited with changing the image of nursing and laying the foundations for modern nursing education.



This second costume is a beautiful replica of a **Day Dress** that Florence Nightingale might have worn, and was donated to BCHNS Archives by the late Lois Blais, who loved to wear it at our BCHNS Fashion parade events representing Florence.



## **COSTUME #4 circa 1905.**

### **Provincial Royal Jubilee Hospital Graduate in a Walking Out Uniform**

**SO, the uniform typical of a Particular School of Nursing Hospital has arrived!!!** It identified properly-trained nurses and emphasized their status as qualified professionals. Uniforms were also tied to the growing new knowledge about “germ theories” – recognition that disease was spread by bacteria – and that cleanliness and application of science could help prevent the spread of diseases and infection.

Once Canadian hospitals opened schools of nursing, they quickly established their own distinctive styles for uniforms based partly on the current fashions, as well, to vary from other schools of nursing...for example, the student “basic” dress varied in colour, solid blue or pink, with or without stripes. Victoria’s Provincial Royal Jubilee Hospital, instituted this British-style street-cape and bonnet; this feature lasted only for a short time and was unique **as no other nursing school in Canada had this particular style of “walking out” costume.**

It should be noted, after graduation, most nurses provided care in the home.

This replica of a 1905 uniform shows a cape and a remarkable little hat that fitted over the cap. The hat was tied with a large bow, which was a fashion accessory of caps from some British hospitals. And note how beautifully it fits over the cap, but can be removed when making the home visit to give care.

**Underneath the cape:**

This **uniform is typical** of the kinds of uniforms worn by graduate nurses from **many schools of this time**. The uniform consisted of a floor-length, long-sleeved white dress with 5-6 inch cuffs that could be removed. RJH graduates wore the square-cut bib with an ankle-length apron to protect the dress, which might be worn for more than one day. Note that there was very little or no starch used at this time – that came later. The large **cap** was gathered into the brim – and like the school pins that were given at graduation time, it was distinctive for that school.

**For cleaning**, many of the caps could be untied or unpinned so they would lie flat for ironing.

Almost all nurses wore high black boots and black lisle or woolen stockings.



## **COSTUME #5 circa 1914-1918**

### **World War I Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) Nurse with Veil Head Covering.**

In World War I (1914-1918), nearly two-thousand Canadian and Newfoundland women volunteered to go overseas to help care for the wounded with the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). In addition, about 25-hundred Canadian nurses signed up for military service with the Overseas Military Expeditionary Services of Canada – later the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. The St. John Ambulance Brigade/Red Cross also sent nurse volunteers overseas. The bravery and dedication of all these nurses and volunteers established them as heroines and helped change society's perceptions about the roles of women.

Red Cross nurses and VAD nurses wore the distinctive red cross on the veil. Our uniform is a reproduction of the authentic and distinctive uniform worn by a Canadian nurse serving with the Red Cross in a British hospital station; the original is in the BC History of Nursing Society Archives, it is too fragile and precious to be worn. The apron, veil, and one cuff are archived –other cuff was too bloodstained to be kept.

Most nurses who served overseas – whether volunteer or military medical corps – wore the veil-type head covering that completely covered the hair – a British-style fashion derived from Florence Nightingale's "mantle."

Nurses of World War I were influential in causing women's hemlines to be raised; floor-length skirts were simply unworkable in the mud of battlefields. So nurses hiked up their skirts to just above the ankle, **although that was modestly encased in a high leather boot**, this bold move helped set fashion trends around

the world and paved the way for the flapper look of the 1920s. (**Remember those episodes in *Downton Abbey*?!)**)

Their roles and bravery overseas set the stage for a more liberated and independent woman, and helped Canadian women get the vote!!



Note that our little cape has a “rose of Sharon” decoration on the back; the rose has various symbolic meanings associated with healing and God’s love for mankind.



## **COSTUME #6 circa 1920s**

### **Early Canadian Nursing Leaders – Jessie MacKenzie**

**The early 1900s saw the rise of strong, determined nursing leaders and the formation of professional nursing associations** that tried to create standards for nursing to protect both the public and individual nurses.

We have chosen to represent Canada's many strong nursing leaders of the early 1900s with **Jessie MacKenzie**. She had first become a teacher and then went to San Francisco to become a Nurse. Jessie was obviously a mover & shaker personality!! Upon graduation, she quickly started to re-organize **their** nursing education system along more modern lines!!

Royal Jubilee's School of Nursing had opened its doors in 1891. It was the first Nightingale-model school for nurses in British Columbia and was the first west of Winnipeg.

Jessie MacKenzie came to Victoria in early 1914 to oversee a new building program for RJH as the Training School Superintendent... that program was delayed because of the outbreak of the War. **In Victoria**, she established many new changes in nursing education, including library facilities, modern textbooks, demonstration classrooms, and a model maternity ward. She introduced obstetrical nursing instruction in a new, revised, reformed curriculum that met newly established national standards for education of nurses. Her demands for improved patient and nurses' facilities in the overcrowded hospital soon had her in constant conflict with the hospital's Board and physicians.

Jessie carried her influence well beyond hospital walls: she strongly supported a women's auxiliary for RJH; encouraged and lobbied for professional associations

for nurses; supported women's suffrage; formed an alumnae for RJH nurses; and was a mainstay for the newly formed B.C. Hospital Association. She worked provincially and nationally to raise both the standards of patient care and the standards of nursing education.

To Quote Sheila Zerr, "Reform comes with a price." In 1927, at age 60, she was forced by the RJH Board to resign – a move considered by many, simply to make her the scapegoat for the Board's financial problems.

This replica of a uniform in the 1920 – 30's is typical of many nursing administrators, especially those not directly giving patient care. They began wearing black, one-piece dresses – or, as in this case white. Note the sleeves would roll up; there was no nonsense about Miss MacKenzie when she was working with students and patients on the wards.



## **VON Victorian Order of Nurses**

### **COSTUME #7 circa 1920s**

The need to bring health care to remote areas, especially those not served by physicians, led to development of The Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) in 1898. The VON was established through the influence of Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Governor General. Nurses took “Motor Mechanics” courses in their program, and have said: “I never changed a tire in my life. I got out of the car—and every passing driver stopped to help the nurse!!!”

The VON over the years introduced a series of stylish hats that helped identify the VON nurses from PHN throughout the country.



## **COSTUME #8 circa 1920s-1960s**

### **Public Health Nurses**

In the early 1920s, provincial governments started hiring Public Health Nurses who could provide health care services in remote areas – often those without hospitals or doctors, and in areas where a single medical health officer served several remote communities. It is interesting to note here that, with the first class of the UBC baccalaureate program, AND First in the British Empire under leadership of Ethel Johns, there were 3 students, and in their final year, they had 3 choices to focus on...administration, teaching or Public Health....they all chose Public Health!!!

After the War, many of the returning military nurses took further education, either through the new post-RN public health courses offered at five Canadian universities or through VON or Red Cross programs for graduate nurses.

They provided post-natal visits for mothers and new-born babies, did school nursing, arranged for immunization to prevent contagious diseases, and supervised isolation of infectious disease patients, or often giving care to patients who could not be in hospital. Public health nurses often had the first cars in the community –but many travelled by foot or by horseback – or even by dogsled!!

This 1920's costume represents a heavy blue cotton, and could be worn with a cape – or, in some colder areas of Canada, with a heavy blue coat. VON & PHN uniforms were similar with their PHN or VON badge marking the difference. They looked Professional from head to toe!!



### **COSTUME #9 Public Health Nurse circa 1960s**

Fast Forward to the 1960's and we still see a "professional" uniform, but easy care fabric, much shorter hemline and of course **"The Hat"** still making its Public Health Nurse appearance. This uniform was worn by the late Norma Morrison in the north and donated by BCHNS member Carol Harrison.



## **COSTUME #10 circa 1940s**

### **World War II Nursing Sister Uniform**

This authentic WWII uniform, of khaki trousers & battlefield jacket, introduced a much more practical uniform in the field hospitals.

A turban fashioned from a WWII Khaki [ka-ki] sling was also worn by Nurses in the front-line, who found these much more practical than the veil. The use of trousers and turbans by military nurses was soon followed “at home” – reflecting and reflective of society’s attitudes to nurses and their roles in changing fashions.



### **World War II Nursing Sister Uniform**

As you see in the photo of Royal Jubilee Graduate Maxine Bredt, the **Beret** completes this uniform.



## **COSTUME #11 circa 1940s**

### **WWII Military Dress uniform**

The dress uniforms and the working dress of the Nursing Sisters of World War I had been blue – leading to the nickname for the Canadian nurses .. “bluebirds.” Many wounded soldiers have said “the most beautiful sight, when you realized you were still alive, was the sight of those ‘bluebirds’.” Dress uniforms in World War II – and those worn in the hospitals away from the battlefield areas – continued to be basic blue skirts, blouses with brass buttons and insignia, and white apron & bib, plus the white veil, and a navy and red cape when needed. Of course the fabric for working uniform was cotton, not the fine fabric of this “dress” uniform.

The BC History of Nursing Society Archives has a number of Nursing Sister uniforms, some of them irreplaceable and too fragile to use in our costume parades.



**At this point we'd like to acknowledge the Role of the Male Nurse,**

who has been part of nursing from earliest times. In the middle ages during the Crusades, they were **the** prominent care givers and have continued to serve in military zones. Today their presence in general nursing is increasing, but only after many years of struggle for recognition. They still represent less than seven percent of registered nurses.

The dress for male nurses, too, has evolved with changing times and fashions and fabrics. Originally black wool trousers and starched shirt, then changed to white trousers and tee shirts covered with a lab coat or jacket. **Today, unisex scrubs are the norm!!**



## **COSTUME #12 circa 1960s & 1970s**

### **BCIT dress : “The Mini Era”**

Nursing education in B.C. followed a national trend, starting in the early 1960s, to move nursing education from hospital-based programs to the developing community colleges. The B.C. Institute of Technology in Burnaby was the first community college to open in this province and also the first to have a School of Nursing.

Three-hundred applicants were screened to find the 60 who were accepted as students into the first BCIT Nursing class in 1967. The uniform at BCIT was representative of the simpler dresses of student nurses in that period; bibs and aprons were disappearing!! And the miniskirt – high fashion of the late 1960s and 1970s – was what young woman considered **typical dress.** .

This BCIT grad uniform was worn by an Instructor at VGH!!! So, Even instructors adopted the fashion, although many older nurses considered the hemlines had reached “shocking” heights.

**Instructors thanked heaven that pantyhose had also made an appearance by then!**



## **COSTUME #13 circa 1960s -1972**

### **RJH STUDENT UNIFORM “The end of the Bib & Aprons” era!!**

This authentic 3<sup>rd</sup> year RJH student uniform was typical of the remaining schools of nursing, although some had already gone to a simple easy care ‘dresses’.

Capes were similar in most Schools of Nursing but with their own emblem on the collar.

As you see, the only thing that changed over 100+ years was the hemline!!! and short sleeves!!

**We’ve included this lovely photo of the UBC student uniform of the same era as the RJH but with pink dress & flat apron.**



UBC BSN Nursing student uniform (1962-early 1970s) modelled by Patti Stevenson



## **COSTUME #14 “The Nylon Era”**

By the mid-1960s, hospitals no longer did the laundry for the nurses. Both graduates and students, usually now enrolled in college-based schools and not associated with one hospital, had to launder their own uniforms at home. Early synthetic fabrics – usually nylon or Dacron – replaced the heavy cotton dresses, bibs, aprons, collars, and cuffs that had been traditional since the late Victorian era. These had stood up well to industrial-type hospital laundries and “mangle ironing.” **BUT NOW, STIFF AND STARCHY WAS OUT!!**

This nylon one-piece more modern uniform is from the 1960s-1970s. Nylon uniforms were easy care, but early nylon was **hot** to wear. Furthermore, early white synthetic fabrics tended to turn “yellow” over a short period. Then came perma-press cotton – along with new-types of home washing machines and dryers, cotton was once again back in style!!

Most nurses stopped wearing caps about this time. With loss of the laundry services, caps tended to become soiled and vectors of infection – to say nothing of being hard to keep on with the changing hair styles. About this time, some uniform makers developed a standardized-style cap -- hard, stiff, and sometimes disposable.

The history of the cap and its various styles could be a whole fashion show in itself.



### **COSTUME #15    The 1970 Instructor**

This authentic “Easy Care” 1970s uniform was made and worn by Nursing Professor Sheila Zerr when she instructed students of the University of Ottawa during their clinical practicums in the hospital.

“Pant Suits” were also making an appearance as attitudes changed. As well, ‘security’ required ‘authentic badges’ issued by the hospital.

Nurses & Students wanted uniforms that were “free and easy” – which could be worn to and from work. Sheila fashioned a highly professional uniform for teaching, but many instructors were starting to wear “street clothes” to work.



**COSTUME #16      Current Times**

**2020 UBC Nursing Navy Scrubs.**

The distinctive white for graduate nurses had gradually disappeared, starting in the late 1960s. Colors and printed fabrics were introduced in Pediatrics, and then rapidly made their way throughout all clinical areas.

Original “Scrubs,” which had been worn by staff in the operating rooms since the early 1950s, became the “in-uniform” in the 1980s and 1990s. “They were cheap, scruffy, wrinkled, ill-fitting, tie-closed items that were ugly”, as quoted by

Glennis Zilm –**BUT** they became high-status items popularized by television actors such as young George Clooney when he starred in *Emergency* (debut in 1972) and the stars of the long-running soap opera *General Hospital*... **thus paved the way for what we now call Scrubs & has become the “norm” uniform of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

In the early 2000s, student nurses seemed to lead the way, opting for uniformity so they could be recognized on the wards for who they were.

Perhaps one of the most important issues of the uniform, **Or Lacking**, was the clear identification of **The Nurse**. The need for identification of the nurse remains an important issue TODAY... for the public, and fellow professionals. It is being suggested that nurses have a large and easily recognized identifying symbol – **such as this UBC Badge on this current uniform**. Perhaps this same need will stimulate changes to be seen in the future – allowing nurses to enjoy the freedom of comfortable, less formal working attire, yet reflecting our proud Nursing profession.

## **SUMMARY**

**This brings to a close** our parade of uniforms illustrative of the evolving **culture of nursing**.



Finally, we salute Sheila Rankin Zerr, who is the collector and keeper of most of these authentic uniforms, **AND** designer and maker of many of the replicas worn here today. Her expertise in the history of nursing uniforms is legendary and we have a deep gratitude to her for this contribution to the BCHNS.

*THANK YOU!!*