

The History of St. Helena Hospital

Chapter V – Nurses Training and Root Beer Floats

When the Rural Health Retreat opened its doors in 1878, modern nursing was still in its infancy. Hospitals on the East Coast had just begun to open training schools for nurses, and Battle Creek Sanitarium initiated a program in 1884, just 11 years after the graduation of the first nurse in the United States.

The first mention of a school for nurses was in October, 1887. Again, in May 1888 the need for a training school was discussed, and the Board adopted the following resolution: “Moved that we have a two-year course, beginning with a special term of four months; that we admit from six to ten willing and competent persons to this course, who are to work their way; that those who do not wish to pay their way by working, will pay a tuition fee of \$2.50 per month.”

The original schedule of classes included physiology, Christian temperance, Bible study, hygiene, cooking and physical culture. Classes were supplemented by almost endless hours of work at the bedside and in the treatment of patients. Thus, the St. Helena Sanitarium and Hospital School of Nursing was established and became the second school of nursing to be established on the west coast, as well as one of the oldest continuously operating programs. In 1959, the School of Nursing was moved to the campus of Pacific Union College, where the education of nurses continues to this day.

In 1891, just 30 years after Florence Nightingale opened her school for nurses in England, five young women and one young man were enrolled as the first class of nurses at St. Helena Sanitarium and Hospital. During the first six months the students received board, room and laundry privileges, but no remuneration; in the last six months they received board, room, laundry privileges and \$20 a month, which was considered a very good wage at that time.



An article in the *Stockton Evening Mail* of October 2, 1893, written by former patient W.E. Turner, included this statement in regard to the Sanitarium: “One of the purposes of the institution is the educating and training of young men and women to be nurses, health treaters, hygienic cooks, missionaries and medical students. There are now at the Sanitarium about thirty of these young people taking their regular three-year course.”

Leonora Lacey Warriner, a graduate of the class of 1901 who later became director of nurses at the Glendale Sanitarium (now Glendale Adventist Medical Center), described student life at the turn of the 20th century. “We did not have a single classroom in which to meet; classes were held in the old dining room under the store and laundry, and in a shed-like laboratory building up on the hill above the sanitarium, when it wasn’t being used as a morgue. Obstetrics, apart from book work, we learned as best we could, whenever a confinement case came in.

Surgeries were conducted in physician offices on days when patients were not being seen. In order to prepare the office rooms for the next day's surgeries, the nursing students would come in the evening after the physicians had seen all the patients for the day and remove the furnishings, carpets and curtains. Working until midnight or 1:00 a.m., walls and ceilings had to be washed down with bi-chloride solution. Doors and windows were sealed and the rooms were fumigated for six to eight hours with formaldehyde solution.

Housing for students for the first quarter of the century left much to be desired. Women were placed in attic rooms in the cupola or in other areas of the campus. Housing for male students was above the market, dubbed the Crow's Nest. In 1918 the nurses' residence (now known as Crystal Springs) was built, and was a delight to the students. Double rooms consisted of an inner room with two study desks, a cot and chairs, a wash basin with running water and two closets. It opened onto a screened-in porch for sleeping. The present windows on the building were not added until later years.

In the mid 1930's, Eliel Cottage (now the Foundation office) was turned into a men's dormitory. Lucile Lewis, a 1941 graduate of the St. Helena Sanitarium and Hospital School of Nursing, remembers that during her freshman year, "five fellows lived there unsupervised! Among other enterprising ventures, they developed a root beer making operation, filling used Cutter IV flasks with their product. They were very generous in sharing their root beer with the girls—root beer floats made from the boys' root beer and cafeteria ice cream were a favorite treat."

Up until 1926 male nurses were not allowed to perform such tasks as taking temperature, pulse and respiration. They were assigned to chop wood, deliver and return specimen jars, and set up cots for nurses for cot duty (nurses were often assigned to sleep next to patients in case assistance was needed during the night.) Olin Bray, a male graduate of the class of 1928, reported that they gave hydrotherapy treatments all day and did cot duty at night for alcoholic and psychiatric patients.

From 1891 to 1959, the school produced 770 graduate nurses, of whom 122, or almost 16 percent, were men. Many of the graduates went on to attend medical or dental school, and scores of them served as overseas missionaries. As the years progressed, the curriculum grew with the times. Affiliations with other hospitals were developed and students were sent to Children's Hospital in San Francisco and Highland Hospital in Oakland to provide them with broader experience in caring for patients. The school earned a fine reputation for excellent training and graduates maintained a high standard—ranking in the upper third of all candidates taking the State Board examinations in California. A report by the Educational Consultant from the Board of Registered Nursing in October, 1949, rated the school in the top 25 percent of the nation's best programs in a survey of 1,200 schools nationwide.

It would be difficult to estimate the contribution made by the graduates of the St. Helena Sanitarium and Hospital School of Nursing and Pacific Union College. For the past 112 years, education in the healing arts has produced countless dedicated men and women who have devoted themselves to caring for the sick, restoring them to health, and educating them in healthful ways of living. The heritage of healing continues to this day.

Sources: *A Century to Remember*, Lucile Lewis, RN;
Days of Old, Leonora Lacey Warriner, R.N.;
1956 Caps 'n Capes Nursing School History