

WOMEN & HEALTH CARE

Until very recently, most people did not call or visit a doctor in times of sickness, unless the situation was severe enough that death was a real possibility. Sickness, injury and even birth was seen to largely in the home, and overwhelmingly by the women of the community.

Women have always played an integral role in the healthcare of Newfoundland and Labrador's citizens – from the mothers and midwives of time immemorial, to the nurses and nuns of our earliest hospitals and missions.

Trained and untrained, volunteer and vocational, frontlines and home front, practitioner and benefactor – women have always been the primary healthcare providers throughout the history of this province.

While their contributions are critical, undisputed and highly praised, the health of women has often been overlooked, misunderstood, and even stigmatized for much of history, both here at home and around the world.

Consider that menstruation and pregnancy were considered "taboo" topics, due to their proximity to concept of sexual activity, which was considered improper and shameful.

That women were and still are less likely to be taken seriously by medical professionals, leading to a higher chance of misdiagnosis, underdiagnosis, and death.

That pregnancy and birth, until very recent medical developments, were the largest killers of both women and children.



The Sisters of Mercy Home for Working Girls, 1916.

That, while we enjoy many benefits of universal health care today, this was not a reality for women who lived in poverty in the late 19th and early 20th century.

How community female healers of Indigenous and traditional cultures were stigmatized and devalued as men set out the standards of what was and wasn't "real medicine."

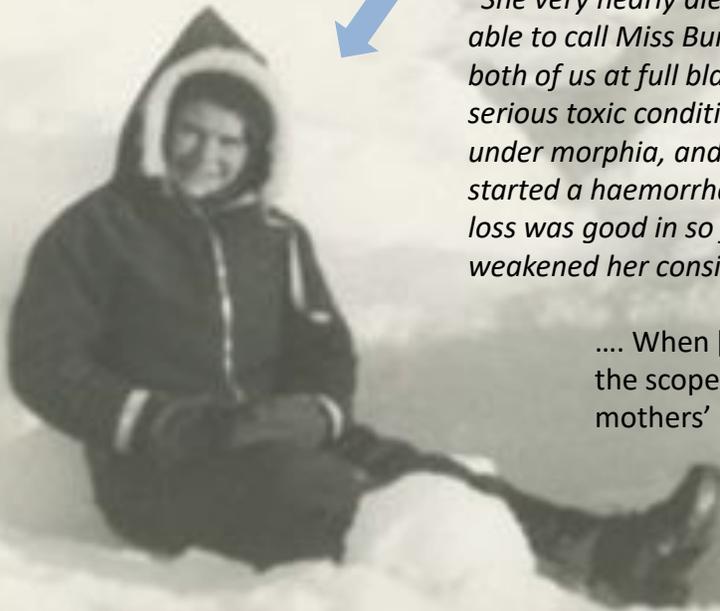
How those suffering from mental illness were sent out of sight and out of mind to asylums, known as "loony bins," and "funny farms," and the "crazy house."

And finally, how the marginalization and disenfranchisement of women reinforces centuries of deeply entrenched misogyny and sexism within the very systems that are supposed to keep women and families healthy.



Some deliveries were harrowing experiences for both mother and nurse.

In a letter written in 1947, [Ivy] Durley described a “bad spell” with a woman in labour shortly after her arrival:



“She very nearly died on us. Was a [toxemia] with eclampsia [sic]. I was able to call Miss Burgess and together we tackled her. I applied forceps but both of us at full blast could not budge the head. On account of her serious toxic condition, we could not try anything further, so had to put her under morphia, and start frantic plans for her removal to St. Anthony. She started a haemorrhage later which we eventually controlled by 2 am. This loss was good in so far as it reduced the likelihood of further fits, but weakened her considerably.”

.... When [nurses] recognized that a complicated delivery was beyond the scope of their practice, they did whatever they could to save mothers’ lives and transfer them to the nearest hospital.

- Heidi Coombs-Thorne, “Grenfell Mission Nurses,” *Canada’s History*, Aug-Sep 2017.

WOMEN’S & CHILDREN’S HEALTH

Child Welfare Association (CWA) formed in 1921 to provide for the physical and social needs of the nation's young. Born from the Women's Patriotic Association (WPA) during the First World War, once hostilities ended in 1918, the WPA turned its attention to promoting child and maternal health care.

- Heritage NL



Unidentified Innu Mother and Baby, Harrington Harbour (Quebec)



Unidentified Inuk Mother and Baby, Grenfell Mission



Unidentified Mother and Child, Grenfell Mission Hospital Ship

MIDWIFERY

Obituary

MARY WEBB



tely seven hundred children into the world. In those days when travel was a problem she travelled by dog team, horse sled and on snowshoes to get to the people who needed her most. Her life style for survival included hunting, trapping, and making of crafts.

Along with her native tongue "Micmac" she was fluent in French, English, and Gaelic. She is survived by her three daughters, twenty-four grand children, forty-one great grand children, and sixty-six great great grand children.

The body rested at St. Anne's Church in Flat Bay. Funeral Services at St. Anne's Parish with Rev. Father Molloy officiating.

Mary Webb, 97, died June 3 at Sir Thomas Roddick Hospital in Stephenville. She was born in Codroy Valley on May 7, 1881. Being the oldest Micmac Resident of Bay St. George, she made many contributions to the community. In her career as midwife she brought approxima-

Obituary for **Mary Webb**, 1881- 1978, Indigenous Mi'kmaw midwife in and around the Flat Bay area on Newfoundland's west coast.



Midwife, mother, post-mistress, and church organist, **Charlotte Fanny (King) Vey**, 1882-1959, known as Aunt Fanny, working in and around Random and Long Beach, delivering her first baby in 1932, her last in 1953.

Occasionally, as spouses, but more typically as midwives and nurses, women carved a niche for themselves that was indispensable in Newfoundland and Labrador...If a midwife/nurse was the only professional practitioner in a region, she would assume the *de facto* role of doctor. Indeed, sometimes these women even performed limited surgery (minor amputations, suturing, tooth extractions, obstetrical work) and prescribed medications.

Another insight to the local understanding of birthing and motherhood can be drawn from casual remarks by a couple of midwives: pregnancy was not a topic for polite conversation. People were either silent about it, or referred euphemistically to it as "being sick."

- J.T.H. Connor, *Rural Medical Lives and Times*, 2008



Olga Blanche (Seward) Smith, 1898-1943, was a mother, midwife, church organist, store manager, post-mistress, and music teacher for the people of Gooseberry Cove, Trinity Bay. She was a midwife for 20 years before her death and delivered around 400 babies.



Mary Meager Southcott
(1862-1943)

Nurse, volunteer, and suffrage leader, Mary Southcott founded the General Hospital School of Nursing (1903) and the Newfoundland Graduate Nurses' Association (1913), opened a private hospital for women and children, and served as the President of the Child Welfare Association; she made significant contributions to health and welfare in the first half of the 20th-century.



NURSING

Margaret Alexandra (Rendell) Shea

Margaret Rendell Shea became Newfoundland's first professionally trained nurse when she graduated from Johns Hopkins Hospital Training School in Baltimore, Maryland in 1897 at the age of 34. Margaret had studied for two years to obtain her degree. She was appointed Matron of the General Hospital in May 1898, but resigned two years later to be married.



The Grace Maternity Hospital, opened in 1923 on Lemarchant Road, St John's, was the first of its kind on the island.

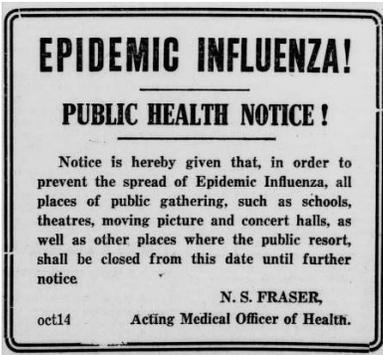
Unidentified Nurse on her way to a case, Grenfell Mission





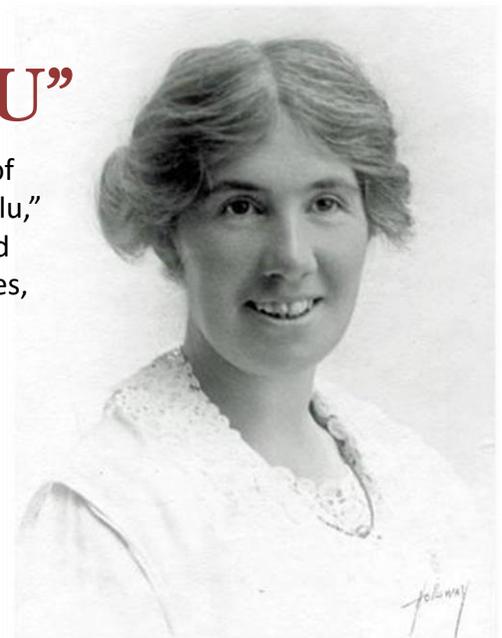
Inuit Household at Okak, Labrador (1893).

In the fall of 1918, 207 out of 263 people at Okak died of the Spanish Flu, leaving just 56 women and children. With no adult men living, the survivors resettled in other Inuit communities or Grenfell Mission boarding schools.



“SPANISH FLU”

Women were at the forefront of treating victims of the “Spanish Flu,” both informally as mothers and daughters, and formally as nurses, and volunteers.



Ethel Dickinson
(1880-1918)

Beloved teacher and volunteer with the VAD during the First World War, Ethel Dickinson volunteered for emergency services at the King George V Seamen’s Institute during the “Spanish Flu,” where she contracted the disease while treating others. She died October 26, 1918.



Staff at the emergency Grenfell Hall Hospital, King George V Seamen’s Institute, St. John’s (1918)

TUBERCULOSIS

Tuberculosis was widespread in Newfoundland and Labrador and was the leading cause of death in adults until the late 1940s. ... In a wartime public lecture, Dr. Alex Campbell reported that 48% of the deaths in Newfoundland in 1916 were due to tuberculosis. Before the discovery of effective antibiotics to fight TB, the best defense was a healthy immune system and avoidance of those who were infected, two conditions that required improved standards of living along with a concerted public health campaign.

- Heidi Coombs and Terry Bishop Stirling, "Discharged Medically Unfit", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 12.2 (Fall 2019).



"Annie," tuberculosis patient at the Grenfell Mission, 1910.



Three **Unidentified Nurses** at Jensen Camp, St. John's. In October 1916, to meet the increasing demand for tuberculosis treatment facilities for servicemen, Adeline Browning and the Women's Patriotic Association (WPA) established Jensen Camp on Blackmarsh Road, with ten beds for incipient cases. The Camp was named after Private Phillip Jensen.

In 1911, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire began "blazing the trail" for Sanatorium treatment in Newfoundland by setting up a summer camp for women with tuberculosis at Mundy Pond – the Tuberculosis Camp for Women and Children.



Three **Unidentified Women** receiving open-air treatment, Grenfell Mission.