

Pioneer Nurse Tells Story of the Early Years



Agnes Guthrie was one of North Dakota's pioneer nurses. Originally from St. Paul, she attended school taught by the Sisters of the Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota. The Sisters asked her to come with them to Bismarck to help them at their new hospital. She was just 16 years old. In 1985, she wrote this article at the age of 91.

“You won't believe this, but I started with the first nursing class at St. Alexius Hospital

back in 1915. Students came from as far away as St. Paul and Minneapolis. The teacher had to come from Chicago where she was Superintendent of Nurses at Chicago Hospital.

St. Alexius had just completed moving from the Lamborn Hotel downtown to the outskirts of town on 9th Street. The new hospital had two floors of patient beds – about 25 in all. On the first floor was the chapel, where I used to sing in the choir. Also on the first floor was the Sisters' residence, kitchen and some office space. The second floor was all medical, and surgery was on the third floor. There wasn't a need for larger maternity departments because not many women came to the hospital to have their babies in those days.

Nursing at that time was different than it is now. We learned the same things as they do now, only it's more advanced now. You see, ours was just an ordinary nursing career, nothing fancy like nowadays. No lab work, no x-ray room or that kind of stuff. Believe me. It was primitive in those days.

We would work 10 hours a day then you would take a couple of hours off to rest. Then you might come back and work 24 hours or maybe you would work all night. I tell you, those were hard days.

When I came to North Dakota, Bismarck was a rapidly-growing town of 500. In those early days, there was a lot of typhoid, pneumonia and lots of children's diseases. We had quite a clientele to take care of, that's for sure. We learned a lot because we had to do it all ourselves.

I graduated as part of the first class of the St. Alexius School of Nursing in 1918. One of the doctors asked me to give anesthesia for him, so I did that for the next three years, working in his office in the afternoons.”

Agnes continued working in Bismarck for six years. She then moved to San Diego, where she worked for three years before moving back to St. Paul. Several years later, on her way back to San Diego, she stopped in Bismarck to visit St. Alexius and Sister Boniface, who was very special to her. Sister Boniface introduced Agnes to the man she would later marry. They lived together in Bismarck.

