



The *Great* Canadian  
Catholic Hospital History Project

Documenting the legacy and contribution of the  
Congregations of Religious Women in Canada,  
their mission in health care, and the founding and operation of Catholic hospitals.

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Projet de la *Grande* Histoire  
des hôpitaux catholiques au Canada

Retracer l'héritage et la contribution des  
congrégations de religieuses au Canada, leur mission en matière  
de soins de santé ainsi que la fondation et l'exploitation des hôpitaux catholiques.

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**St. Boniface Heroines of Mercy:  
Commemorating the Centenary of the Grey Nuns of St. Boniface  
1844-1944**

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1844

St. Boniface

Heroines of Mercy



1944

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1844

1944

St. Boniface' Heroines of Mercy

Commemorating the Centenary of  
the Grey Nuns of St. Boniface

by

By *Sister Mary Murphy, S.G.M., R.N.*





On the evening of January 6, 1816, a grand ball was being given by Lord and Lady Selkirk, in their home in Montreal; the soft music and graceful minuets were interrupted by a strange visit.

Jean Baptiste Lagimodière, a "coureur des bois" dashed into the ball room. He had come 1500 miles on foot to put a message in Lord Selkirk's hands. Rival furtraders and hostile Indians were threatening the existence of the colony Lord Selkirk had founded at the forks of the Red River and the Assiniboine in 1812. The governor of the far-away colony had sent for help and military protection.

As a token of gratitude, Lord Selkirk invited the "coureur des bois" to mention the favor he most desired, in return for his service; digging down into the pocket of his buckskin coat he brought out another letter. It was from the Catholics of the lonely colony — asking for priests. Lord Selkirk read it, bowed his head thoughtfully and said: "Yes, you shall have priests, the greatest need of my colony is religion."

Consequently, the Mission of St. Boniface was established in 1818 on the east bank of the Red River, by Father Joseph Norbert Provencher, who later became the first Bishop in the west. He found it exceedingly hard to better the lot of the poor people, especially the nomad Indians and halfbreeds. From the outset he was convinced of the need of Nuns to teach the children, and train the young women to become housekeepers and home-makers. He wrote in vain to Nuns in Quebec, France, Belgium and the United States. In 1843 he went to Montreal. While telling his troubles to Bishop Bourget the latter exclaimed: "You need Grey Nuns up in that country — they never refuse anything — let us go and ask them."

Nihil Obstat.

Antoine d'Eschambault, ptre  
Censor Librorum.

Imprimatur.

Georges Cabana, Archevêque Coadjuteur  
de Saint-Boniface, Manitoba.

May 13, 1944.

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Grey Nuns belong to a religious congregation founded by Madam Youville, a pious widow of Montreal in 1738. Though of gentle birth, this lady had met with sorrow and hardship all her life. When free to do so, she established a refuge known as "l'Hôpital Général de Montréal" for the poor and the outcast of every description. Moreover, the Grey Nuns supported these poor people by their own industries such as sewing, gardening, candle-making; They kept a farm, and a lime kiln, and even like St. Paul, they engaged in making tents.

The Bishops went to our motherhouse in Montreal and explained the situation at Red River. Promising not to let them starve, they begged for three Grey Nuns — to teach school, to take care of the sick, to sew, spin, weave, cook and sing; adding, one of them should know music, and one at least should be able to teach English.

There were only 38 Nuns in the community at the time, and they had never founded a mission. After a month of calm deliberation and earnest prayer, they reached a decision. All were in favor of the foundation, and from the many volunteers, four were elected as follows:

- Sister Marie-Louise Valade, Superior, age 35.
- Sister Marie Marguerite Eulalie Lagrave, age 36.
- Sister Anasthasie Gertrude Coullée (St. Joseph), age 24.
- Sister Hedwige Lafrance, age 26.

Among them, they possessed the talents desired by the Bishop. Sister Lagrave having "a good knowledge of medicine"



Mother Youville.  
1701 — 1771

was designated for the care of the sick. On November 7, 1843, preparations were begun "to leave Canada" the following spring.

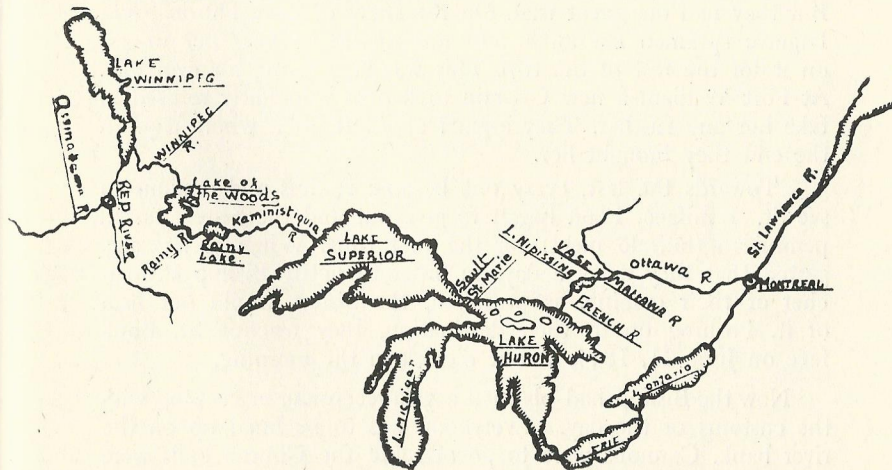
At this point, let a question be answered. Why did they undertake this enterprise? Why did they choose to go far away to a poor country? There is only one answer. They did it for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else in all the world will make a girl become a Nun. They came to the Red River Valley to teach poor children to know God, to love Him, and to serve Him. That was the secret.

### The Trip

After bidding farewell to all they held dear, the four Grey Nuns set out on April 24, 1844. The chronicles say "the parting was very sad."

The trip was made in two canoes belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company. A gentleman of the Company travelled with them, of whom it is noted "he was very kind."

The canoes were unmoored and bounded out in the sparkling water while the "voyageurs" sang their gayest song to cheer the Sisters. Off they went down the Ottawa River, Mattawa River, Vase River, Lake Nipissing, French River, Lake Huron, Lake Superior, Kaministiquia River, Rainy River, Lake of the Woods, Winnipeg River, Lake Winnipeg and Red River.





The route their baggage took was different. Loaded into a steamship belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company, it was sent to England, then back across the Atlantic in the direction of Greenland, down Hudson Strait, into Hudson Bay, down another river into Lake Winnipeg, and down to the Red River.

The Sisters' trip took fifty-nine days. Like all pioneer trips it was hard. Some days it stormed and rained, other times the heat of the sun was hard to bear.

Shooting the rapids, terrified the Sisters. There were seventy-eight portages to make, which meant everyone had to get out, carry their things overland from one river to another sometimes quite a distance. The mosquitoes were bad in the camping places, the nights were chilly, the ground was hard to sleep on, and the noises of wild animals often awakened them at night.

From the many notes left to us about the trip, let us recall only a few. "It makes my heart ache" says one "to see the men putting harness on, to pull the cargoes across the portages, but there is no other way." Another writes "Last night we camped near an Indian village. We were a real curiosity for the natives, and they came to visit us. We entertained them by singing. They were at the river bank to see us off this morning at four o'clock." Again we read: "We are enjoying the scenery; we read or sing as we paddle along sometimes we knit or do fancy-work." But they had one great trial. On the shore of Lake Huron Sister Lagrave sprained her ankle and was unable to bear her weight on it for the rest of the trip. This was very trying for everyone. At Fort William a new Captain took over who flatly refused to take her any further. They argued about it for a whole day. In the end they brought her.

Towards the last, every one became restless and anxious to see St. Boniface. Food began to give out and the Sisters tasted pemmican (buffalo meat) for the first time. When it was suggested that they delay a day, in order to notify Bishop Provencher of their coming, as promised, the Sisters would not hear of it. Pushing on to their destination, they reached St. Boniface on June 21, 1844, at one o'clock in the morning.

Now the Bishop had planned a gala reception, in keeping with the customs of the day. Everybody was to be lined up on the river bank. Cannons were to go off, and the Church bells were

to ring. We can imagine his surprise when aroused in the middle of the night and told the Sisters had arrived. No doubt he was a little disappointed about the reception that was not to be, but good Bishop Provencher hastened joyfully to welcome the Grey Nuns. Father Mayrand was with him carrying a friendly lantern.

### Pioneer Nursing

Although the Sisters' first concern was teaching, we will pass it over and glance at early nursing activities.

Epidemics: Epidemics: The first to occur after the arrival of the Sisters was in 1864. They closed their school and ministered to the sick and dying throughout the land. They describe it as "an epidemic of dysentery and measles." An old record states: "In the space of three weeks, Bishop Provencher buried 96 persons young and old." In 1854 and 1856 mention is made of widespread epidemics of whooping-cough, scarlatina and influenza. From year to year note is made of fevers, vaguely described as: slow fever, bilious fever, malarial fever, and trembling fever.

There was no hospital at the beginning. When Sister Lagrave put her crutches aside in October 1844, she began visiting the sick in their homes, going in a Red River cart to those living far out. In a report of the first decade (1844—1854) it is stated the Sisters made 6000 visits to the sick in their homes since their arrival in St. Boniface.

What did the Sisters, the first nurses in the west, do for their patients? It is true, in the face of severe epidemics, not only the Sisters, but the world itself was helpless. Otherwise, their nursing field was very useful and interesting. They introduced health hygiene by educating the natives to take baths and to keep themselves and their homes as clean as could be expected at that period. For the very ill, they did as our nurses do today — they made their patients comfortable. Medicine was a highly developed art, not only among the natives, but among white people too. Nearly every plant that grew on the prairie had a special virtue, many of them extremely effective. Wild mint, golden rod, gentian, plantain, blood root, pumpkin seeds, rose-berries, wild strawberries, corn tassels, rhubarb, dandelion, black currants, milkweed, cherry bark, spruce sap, and a host of other things were made into poultices, ointments, and tasty concoctions, each for a specific ailment. If the patient needed a "turkish



bath" they put a real hot stone in a bucket of water and "sizz" the steam was on. There were many other interesting things.

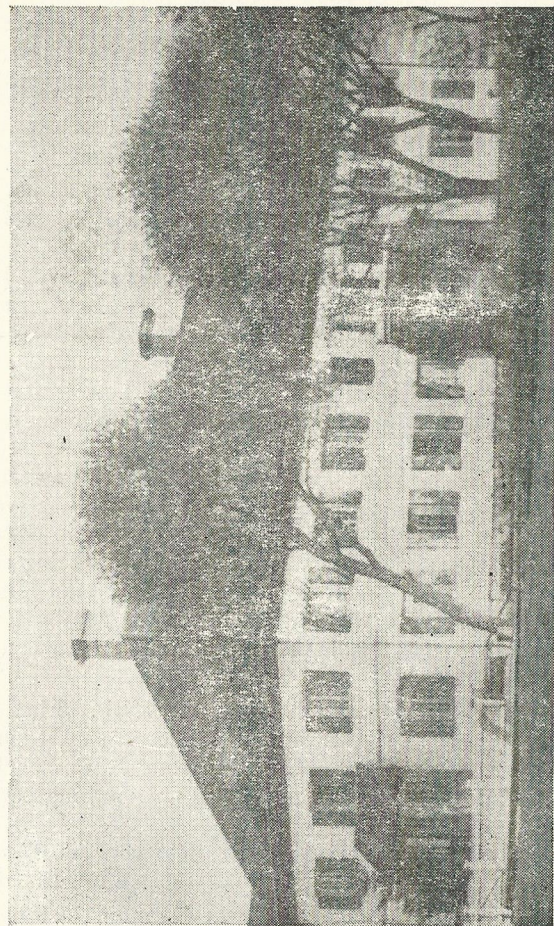
"L'Hôpital Général de St. Boniface" was opened in 1847. It had been under construction practically since the arrival of the Sisters. The setbacks it encountered would fill a volume. It was a very good house, and the only one the Grey Nuns had at Red River for a number of years. It is the present Provincial House. Like our motherhouse in Montreal, it was always opened to the poor and the sick and the orphaned. Even when the Sisters moved in, it is recorded they brought two old ladies with them.

The Register of the inmates and patients admitted and treated in "L'Hôpital Général de St. Boniface" since 1847 has come down to us. It is very interesting. A form of diagnosis is attached to each case. Turning the pages over we find the terms ulcers, paralysis, exhaustion, sore eyes, cancer, inflammatory rheumatism and inflammation of the lungs the last term obviously being tuberculosis in many a case.

There was also the old age group. One 96 years, another 98 years, and Granny Micouche declared she was 120. Social service cases were not lacking. In 1858, a young widow with five children asked for shelter. They had come a great distance and the door was opened wide to receive them. The old book says: "The little widow is a great help to us, as she is a good hand at making mocassins." In those days everybody in the west wore them — including the Sisters.

In 1860, Reverend Father Joseph Goiffon, a young French priest was lost in a terrible blizzard and was badly frozen. Brought to St. Boniface both legs were amputated by the Doctors from Fort Garry. The patient not only recovered, but he procured wooden legs and continued his missionary career. When St. Boniface Cathédral was opened in 1908, he walked in the procession.

Mental cases also appear on the register. In the fall of 1874, a Grey Nun took an insane lady to Rockwood Asylum (Kingston, Ontario); all the expenses were paid by the government. No doubt Rockwood was our nearest mental hospital at the time. To reach it they had to go by steamboat from St. Boniface to St. Paul, Minnesota, and thence by the railway that passed through Chicago.



Provincial House, St. Boniface



## Pioneer Sisters

The first four Grey Nuns lived to see their efforts blessed, while many other Sisters came to meet the needs of the foundation. Sister Lagrave died in 1859 of cardiac failure. Sister Valade died in 1861 of cancer. Sister St. Joseph and Sister Lafrance both lived to a ripe old age, and, enjoying good memory to the end, they handed down to the younger generation the treasured stories of the past. They are all buried in St. Boniface.

### The Story about Sister St. Theresa

Her family name was Theresa MacDonnell. She was born in St. Andrew's parish in old Glengarry, and became a Nun at the early age of 16.

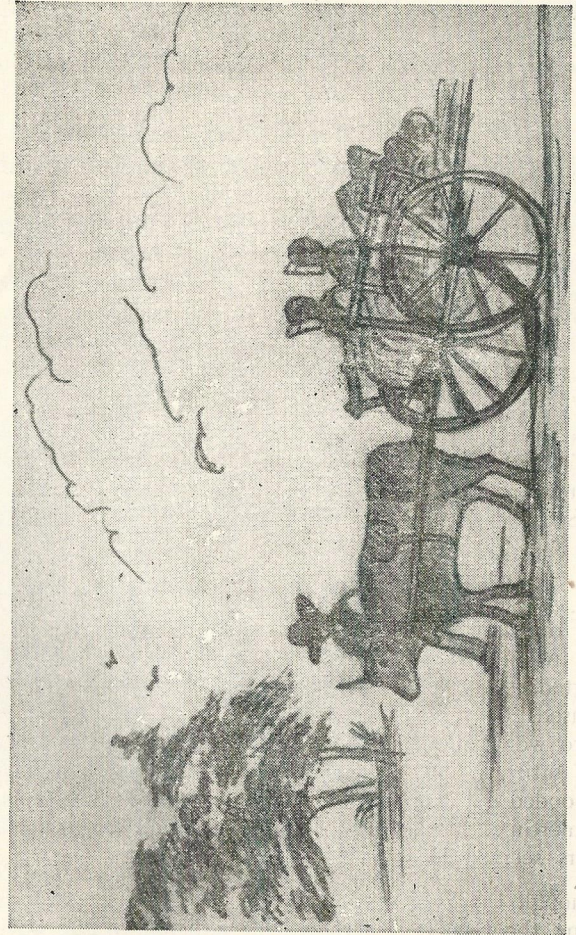
When she came to Red River in 1855, Sister Lagrave's health was failing. Sister St. Theresa took over the visiting of the sick and became extremely popular. Like Sister Lagrave, she was called "Sister Doctor" by the old people, as the word nurse seems not to have been used then. Old timers say those Sisters were very efficient, not only in the art of kindness, but they could almost work magic with herbs.

Sister St. Theresa had "only been loaned for five years" by the Grey Nuns of Ottawa to Red River. As Sister Lagrave had died in 1859, the Superiors asked for an extension on Sister St. Theresa's time. The permission was refused. Orders being orders, Sister St. Theresa and her companion Sister St. Marie left with Bishop Grandin to begin wending their way to Pembina where they were to join a caravan going east. The water route had been abandoned after 1845.

But the halfbreeds took a hand in the affair. First they requested the Superior to have Sister St. Theresa stay, then they interviewed the Bishop for the same purpose. It was explained to them that Sister St. Theresa had to go and nothing could be done about it.

"Nothing could be done about it! The very idea!" Such seems to be the modern version of what the halfbreeds said.

The little party wending its way to Pembina stopped to prepare the mid-day meal on the wayside. What was their surprise to see a group of horsemen coming around the bluff. The chronicles state: "There were 15 of the most important half-breeds in the Settlement" and dismounting they made a circle



Travelling in the early days



around Sister St. Theresa, and the chief said in a very solemn tone of voice: "Sister, you are our prisoner, come with us, we will not harm you." We are told, the man looked very determined and the Sister had nothing to do but obey. Conducting her to another Red River cart they had awaiting nearby, they had her step in. Having Miss Celeste Lajimodière for her companion, the 15 braves escorted them back, reaching "L'Hôpital Général de St. Boniface," just as the sun went down.

Sister St. Theresa died in St. Boniface on November 4, 1917.

Sister St. Marie was also provided with a lady escort and reached her destination safely.

Although it is impossible to mention all the old Sisters, we must not omit Sister Laurent. Coming from Montreal as a very young Sister, she lived in St. Boniface seventy-six years. She devoted most of her years to the sick and was known far and wide. A story is told of a teacher, who asked her young pupils what charity was. A little child stood up and said: "Sister Laurent is charity."

Names of other pioneer Sisters (to about 1861) are as follows: Sisters Conolly, Cusson, Withman, Gosselin, Fiset, L'Espérance, Curran, Mary-Xavier, (Dunn), Dussault, Royal, Ethier, Clapin, Sobiesky, and Meilleur. They all lived to a grand old age.

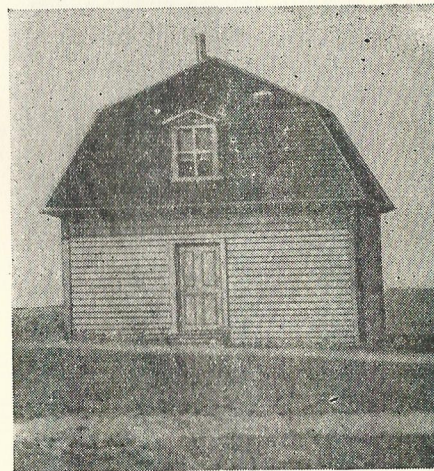
### Good Bye to the Red River Valley

The old days had their charms. The valley was a grand place to live in when the weather was fine. The people were kind-hearted, everybody felt at home, and they all did just as they pleased. They never worried about money, for there wasn't enough to worry about. If they made a decent living they were perfectly satisfied. So what matter if we were snowed in all winter, flooded out every spring, and pestered by grasshoppers in the summertime? "Why look on the black side of things?" the old timers seemed to say.

Although the Sisters were usually left to their own devices in tending the sick, it is certain they adhered to the advice of Ecclesiasticus (XXXVIII): "Honor the physician for the need thou hast of him: for the Most High hath created him." Frequently the Sisters sought, and received advice and help from

the Doctor at Fort Garry. In 1846, two carpenters fell from the roof into the cellar of the new convent, then being built. We are told the Doctor came at once, in a canoe, and the patients recovered. Mention is also made of the Doctor supplying medicine during an epidemic. In 1859 Dr. John Bunn is referred to in the chronicles as "a faithful friend to the Grey Nuns for a number of years."

The Sisters had their hands full in the 60's and 70's. The number of visits made to the sick and the prescriptions filled are almost incredible. Besides visiting sick soldiers and prisoners, they also took part in vaccinating the people. In the year 1870 alone, it is recorded that the Sisters vaccinated 3,232 persons because there was an outbreak of smallpox up north. Epidemics were a terrible hardship.



*The Hospital 1871 — 1877*

The white settlers as well as the natives had their share of sorrow. One old timer told me she had four little brothers that all died the same week with black diphtheria. Her father had to dig their graves, and bury them himself in the darkness of night. Old days were like that.

In 1870 the country passed out of the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company, and became a part of the Dominion of Canada, receiving the name Manitoba. The white population was rapidly increasing. The Grey Nuns found it necessary to set a house aside for the exclusive care of the sick. It accommodated four patients only. But that wee hospital was destined to become the St. Boniface Hospital we know today.



## Let us go for a Spin

Very often we must go abroad to find out what is happening at home. Disregarding time and place, let us be off.

England — the year 1844 — “If I should determine to study nursing and devote my life to that profession do you think it would be a terrible thing.” That is Florence Nightingale speaking — God bless her.

France — do you see that young chemist dabbling in a wine vat, trying to find out why the wine went sour? That is Louis Pasteur. Listen to what this text book says about him. (Garter 1939): “The development of modern bacteriology began with the work of the great French scientist Louis Pasteur (1822 — 1895) whose life probably had more influence on future generations than any man that lived except Christ.”

England — 1867 — The Father of Modern Surgery — Lord Lister is speaking: “Inflammation and pus formation in wounds must be due to microorganisms and therefore can be prevented if the microorganisms are rigidly excluded from the wounds.”

That statement formulated modern surgical technic.

Germany — 1895 — listen to Mrs. Röntgen scolding her husband because he came home late for supper.

“But, my dear,” he explains “I discovered something.” So he had. It was the X-Ray.

If we could continue our roaming, we would find all the wonders of the new century in preparation; anesthetics, serum, anti-toxins, radium, electricity, telephones, and many other marvels that were soon to revolutionize the care of the sick, especially in hospitals.

## The New Era

The coming of the first railway (the soo line) in 1878 opened the way for settlers, immigrants, homesteaders, and many others who came to make new homes in what was often then called “the wild and woolly west.”

The 4 bed hospital of 1871 was replaced by one of 10 beds in 1877. Then the first part of the present structure was erected with a capacity of 60 beds. A newspaperman of 1887 describes it as “not only spacious and modern, but even elegant.”

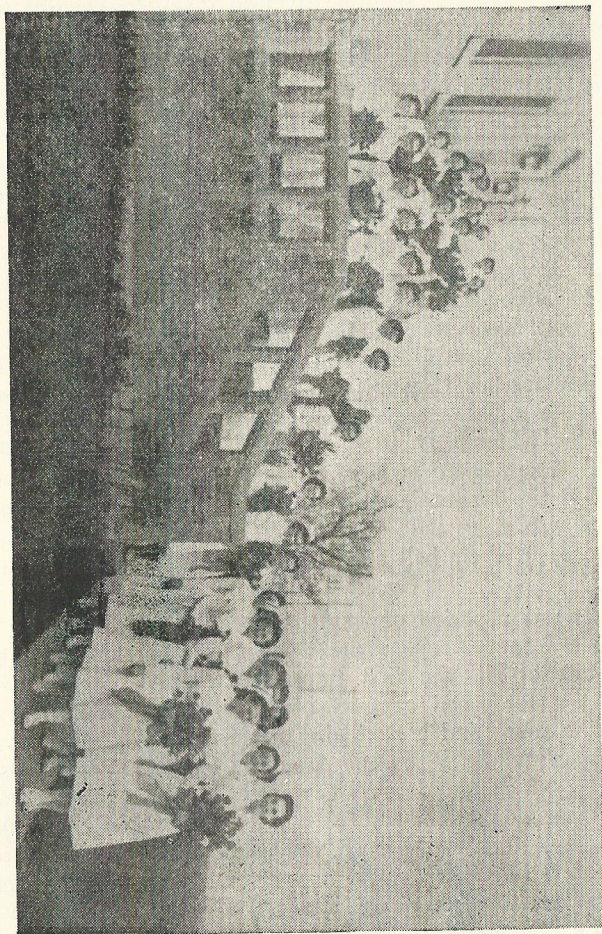
The time had come when providing beds was only a part of the treatment. The Grey Nuns realized this, and looking into

the future seemed terrified for a moment. They studied the situation very carefully. Archbishop Taché who was a very holy and farsighted man, favored progress. Moreover, it had been the privilege of St. Boniface Hospital from the very beginning to open its doors to exceptionally well qualified Doctors who were fully aware of the scientific advances of the day. With their kindly and judicious assistance, the stage was set for the astounding challenge of the twentieth century.

Modern antiseptic surgery came first. Notwithstanding what the newsman said about being modern, there was no operating room. A large bay-window was used very conveniently however; the chronicles minutely describe the spraying of the walls, the ceiling and the floor with carbolic acid and formalin, while the surgical instruments were sterilized in the wash boiler on the kitchen range. Records prove that many successful major operations were done in the early 90's at the bay-window. That it served other purposes is evident from this drawn-out notation: “The Governor General of Canada visited the hospital today. He made a very sympathetic speech from his throne in the bay-window, which was artistically decorated with red, white and blue.” Then there is a story about an emergency. The Sisters phoned the Doctor (‘phones came in the 80's). It happened he was at a Charity Ball. But the old book says: “four doctors came at once, in their ball suits, and diligently performed the operation.”

It was a period of tremendous adjustments. More railways came and more people came. Booms were followed by hard times. In spite of all, the first transverse wing was erected in 1893, giving a total bed capacity of 125, two operating rooms, a dressing room and a sterilizing room. In 1894 the first resident intern came. In 1897, the training school for nurses was established. Time does not permit, at this moment to follow the development of the nurses training school from 1897, to its present highly organized state. But we cannot pass over the early days in silence. The initial course of training covered two years. The subjects taken were: Anatomy and physiology (Junior and Senior) pathology, hygiene, principles and practice of medicine, materia medica, disease of the eye, ear, nose and throat, diseases of children, surgery and bandaging, gynecology and obstetrics. Examinations were written and oral. The names of the





Doctors giving the lectures were announced in the local newspaper. Sister Parent was the first Superintendent of Nurses. In 1899 there were 8 nurses and 8 orderlies, one of the latter received a "Nursing Diploma". There were also 24 Sisters, 1 Intern, 8 working men and 25 working girls. On December 31, 1899, there were 104 patients. The set-up was entirely different from now. Patients were cared for in their homes as well as in the hospital. Not only the nurses but even the Sisters went to the country when called by a Doctor.

There are notes left us about "Graduating Exercises" of the long ago. They run like this: "Our dear nurses that had to go in front of the faculty yesterday to stand their last examinations acquitted themselves with success. Today a very enjoyable picnic was held in their honor and all the nurses had the day free. In the afternoon they went into the bush and picked blueberries. In the evening they shot off sky rockets."

How times have changed.

### The Twentieth Century



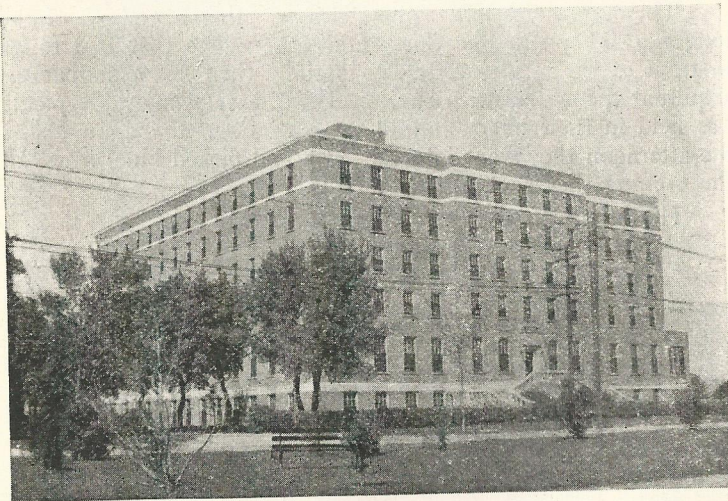
*An early Graduating class  
with the Intern.*

In 1899 an addition was made for the laundry. In 1900 St. Roch's was remodelled and provided 50 much needed beds for infectious diseases and tuberculous patients. Electricity arrived at this period. In 1905 the street car service was extended to St. Boniface from Winnipeg. The same year the large south wing was added, bringing the bed capacity to 350. Before the official opening of the wing the beds were filled. Another extension was made the following

year. Place was then made for the X-Ray and the laboratory. In 1913 the new powerhouse was built. In 1914 the central wing



of 1893 was demolished and the massive structure of six stories replaced it. Building continued, in 1922 St. Roch's was again enlarged. In 1926 an interns' residence was built. In 1928 the Nurses Home was erected. In 1931, a Sanatorium for tuberculous patients was built. In 1938, the new Out Patient building was added. In the meantime, the Old Folks' Home, the original hospital we may say, beside the Provincial House also expanded and now shelters 415 inmates.



*St. Boniface School of Nursing. 1928*

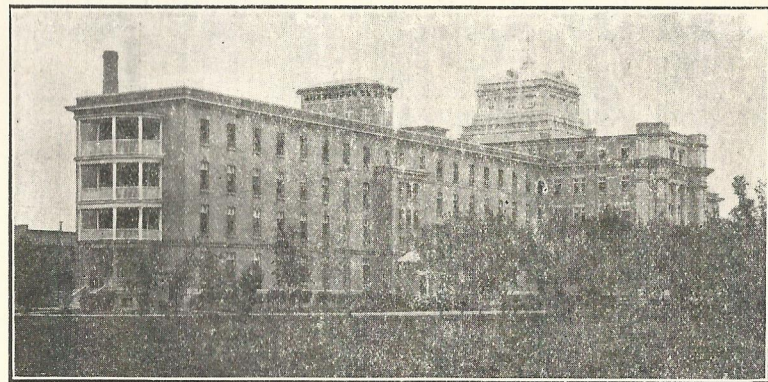
To make a long story short, the institution just grew and grew under the pressure of providing more beds and all the modern equipment for the treatment of patients. We endeavored also in every way possible to favor the education of the nurses and the interns working with us in the turmoil of expansion. Not only St. Boniface Hospital, but all the hospitals throughout the land have had to meet great demands and shoulder heavy responsibilities. The words organization, standardization, specialization, and centralization, and similar terms, are of deep significance to those who have had to "bear the burdon of the day and the heats."

Although the Grey Nuns have several hospitals in the west,

we will confine this sketch to St. Boniface. It now accommodates between 550 und 575 patients. This does not include the Sanatorium which accommodates 300. There is also a large Out Patient service at St. Boniface Hospital. There is always a waiting list, mostly for surgical beds. This morning there were 75 names on the list.

In 1880 the average stay per patient in hospital was 32 days. Now it is about 12 days.

The present personnel of St. Boniface Hospital is 50 Sisters, 40 Graduate nurses, 175 student nurses, 25 interns, 7 orderlies, and a great number of professional and non-professional technicians and helpers. There are 3000 meals served daily in the hospital from the main kitchen.



*St. Boniface Hospital.*



## Conclusion

The Grey Nuns have deemed it a gracious gesture on the part of "The Canadian Nurse" to ask for a contribution to its worthy columns on this memorable occasion.. We trust this pen picture will be of interest to the nurses. Between the lines you will read much profound history of the hard and happy days of long ago.

The Sisters gladly take this opportunity to greet all our nurses and all the old friends of St. Boniface Hospital. We are especially mindful of those in military uniform all over the face of the earth.

It is a grand privilege for the Grey Nuns to celebrate this Centenary. We thank Almighty God for the blessings bestowed on our humble efforts in St. Boniface, and for the honor of training 2000 of the grandest nurses in the world.

This little verse seems to offer an appropriate ending to our ramble of One Hundred Years.

"As travellers look back at eve,  
When onward darkly going,  
To gaze upon the light they leave,  
Still faint behind them glowing.  
So as the years roll gently on  
And all things do remind us,  
'Tis sweet to catch one fading ray  
Of the days we've left behind us."