

# Newsletter

Fall 2008

Volume 21, Issue 2

## *Vera Roberts: Nurse in Canada's Circumpolar Region, 1955-1989*

*By Joyce Schroeder MacQueen*

When Vera Roberts died in 2004 and left a large sum of money to CAHN/ACHN for nursing history research in the far north, most CAHN/ACHN members had never heard of her, even though she was the recipient of many awards for her contribution to nursing in Canada's circumpolar region. I first met Vera in 1991 at Laurentian University where I was giving a presentation related to nursing history. She told me about her work in the far north and I realized she must have important archival materials. She assured me that her niece would look after them, but invited me to visit her in Elliot Lake, where she had retired, to see her things. I hoped that she would attend our Sudbury History of Nursing Group. These plans never materialized; we corresponded briefly and met once by accident at a Humanist meeting in Toronto. I learned of her death in 2004 through the *Globe & Mail* and submitted her obituary to the CAHN/ACHN *Newsletter*. Later CAHN/ACHN asked me to write a short biography of Vera Roberts.

This spring, therefore, I travelled to Thunder Bay and spent two days in the Vera Roberts Archive at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine Library at Lakehead University. This Archive is in a separate metal cupboard in the main part of the Medical Library. The lower part of the cupboard consists of two file drawers of papers (diaries, correspondence, reports, etc.). The top is three shelves of artifacts and slides. Vera's parka is there, her nurses' bag, and the Arctic nurses' uniform. There are embroidered/beaded fur boots, and gloves. There is a soapstone, seal oil lamp, and a unique Inuktituk eye chart. Kept in the office next door, and seen through a window, is a long spirally-twisted Narwhal tusk (licensed). Stored somewhere else are a muskox head and a polar bear skin (licensed). Vera specified in her letter donating the archives that they were to be available and displayed. In order to get a picture of Vera's day-to-day work in the north, I concentrated on her diaries - they were there for the years 1982-83, and some notes for 1985-87. My husband Gailand, who has worked with me on archives in Britain, sorted through the rest of the materials. There were copies of many of the letters and reports and we were allowed to duplicate them, which speeded up our

work immensely. Everything I read attested to Vera's practicality, concern for patients and nursing staff, and vigilance for their rights. Reading, however, raised many questions for me about who Vera Roberts was. For example, why did she never in any of her writing mention the 24-hour winter darkness?

Fortunately, one of Vera's nieces, Jacqueline Scott, was interested in being interviewed about her aunt and lives in Thessalon, within driving distance from Sudbury. This gave me the opportunity to find out about Vera's background and her family relationships. I discovered that she had very light, freckled skin and did not like sunshine. When she holidayed in sunny places she wore a hat, long sleeves, slacks and gloves. Beatrice and Sam, her older sister and brother-in-law in Sault Ste Marie, and their four children (David, Joan, Jennifer, Jacqueline) were her family in Canada and she visited them frequently. I expected that she would have regaled her nieces and nephew with exciting stories about nursing in the north. Apparently, that was rare. Vera enjoyed sitting quietly knitting, and only talked when she was really interested in the topic. She could seem remote. During her last illness, however, when she stayed with her youngest niece, Jacqueline Scott, she did talk while they walked her little dog, Mikijug (pronounced Miki-u).

I have also conversed by telephone with Vera's colleague, Miss Ora Babcock, who was a close friend of Vera's and took over Vera's position when she retired. They were both on the Committee on Nursing in Medical Services, and Babcock reports that "Vera was a great person. She had a wealth of information and knew everything about nursing."

The purpose of this article is to introduce CAHN/ACHN members to Vera Roberts. Grants from the Vera Roberts' Fund will allow others the privilege of exploring her nursing in greater depth.

Vera Roberts was born in Yorkshire, England in 1926, the youngest of 5 children. Her father was a miner, and, unusual for the time, her parents separated. As the youngest, Roberts was expected to look after the mother who was a very difficult woman. She had to quit school before completing the equivalent of high school.

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Vera Roberts  
1926 - 2004



Vera Roberts' personally signed and registered crest.  
Dum Spiro Servio -  
While I have breath I will serve.

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## *Vera Roberts- (cont'd)*

This is difficult to imagine, considering the many university degree programs that she later completed. According to her resume she attended a Salvation Army college before entering nurses' training. Her older sister Beatrice was a nurse, which may be why Roberts chose that path as well. In any case, she did break away from her mother. She graduated from nursing with a gold medal and a Gynaecology Prize in 1950, and midwifery a year later. She arrived in Canada in 1954. Most of her working life was spent in the circumpolar region of Canada beginning in 1955. She wrote: "I have travelled by dog team, boat, road, and plane, and have conducted clinics in tents, cabins, odd corners in various building, used tables in cafes, and local bars, - anywhere I could find a spot. I have examined patients and delivered women on the floor, when a bed or bench was unavailable. Equipment often had to be made or adapted." Roberts worked on an Eastern Arctic Patrol ship assisting with medical surveys; as a Nurse-in-Charge in various nursing stations and Director of Nursing in far north hospitals; as a Regional Nursing Officer for Medical Services; and as a Zone Nursing Officer.

Roberts had a penchant for organization. For example, she organized the hospitals in her territory so that a nurse could move from one hospital to another, needing little orientation. Materials were kept in the same place, policies were similar. After retirement, she was called back on contract and was very pleased that her system was still in place and functioning.

In 1983, as a Zone Nursing Officer she flew across the Baffin area inspecting all the nursing stations. They stopped to refuel in Hall Beach where she had worked previously. Roberts records that while waiting she "visited with Rose [Irkadyak] in the truck . . . Though I do not understand Inuktituk we smiled, held hands - and felt a very close bond, during the reunion. She seems remarkably well considering she is over 70." This diary entry is one of many demonstrating her relationships with the people of the far north.

Roberts worked to provide culturally-relevant health care and attempted to have communities make the decisions that affected them. In one rare instance, a nurse was physically attacked when she opened the door to a night-time caller. Roberts travelled there and met with the Community Council. She explained that it was their problem, and they needed to meet with the community and work out a solution. If they could not guarantee that

the nurses would be safe, the nurses would be moved to another community. The first solution suggested was that the nurses carry pagers - an expensive proposal that laid the solution on Medical Services. After further discussion, the solution finally reached was that any patient coming to the nursing station at night would be accompanied by a designated community leader who would also be on call if a patient arrived unaccompanied.

By 1982, the time of her diary, she had been in the north for over 25 years and the frustrations of working within Medical Services were evident. In January 1982 she was in Frobisher Bay, north of Labrador. A conference was being held in Yellowknife, north of Alberta, a very great distance, indeed! She received a Telex "indicating I must attend as my expertise!! was needed." Travel in January is unpredictable: there were flight problems on Monday the 11<sup>th</sup>, she got to Montreal on the 12<sup>th</sup>, there were more flight problems and she got to Winnipeg on the 13<sup>th</sup>, and then caught an evening flight to Yellowknife, arriving at 2100 hours. The next morning the meeting at the Regional Offices was shunted from the 9<sup>th</sup> floor to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, and then back to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor where the meeting started. They discussed narcotics and drug control, she explained what she had done and they asked for a copy of her work. They discussed the hepatitis study, she explained what she had done and they asked to distribute the paper she had written. She vented, "Am getting tired of doing work, which is then sent to others. . . . If today was what I travelled all this way for, and at this expense - it was a waste of time, energy, & money, which I could have put to better use."

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Vera Roberts, graduate nurse and midwife from Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, UK. She graduated in 1950 with a Gold Medal and Gynaecology Prize. This picture was taken in 1954 just before she came to Canada.

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## *Vera Roberts (cont'd)*

Another source of frustration was the use of native populations for health research. For example, in April 1982 she reviewed the Breast Feeding Study proposed by the Medical Services Branch and considered it “an invasion of client privacy for something unrelated to client needs, with the potential to jeopardize nurse-client relationships.

The study would add an unnecessary work load to the nurses, seemingly only to satisfy the research desires of Branch nutritionists. The questionnaire in my opinion would not produce valid data, in Baffin at any rate. One gets tired of the number and type of researchers being imposed. Everyone seems to want to do ‘research’ amongst the Eskimo (sic) of Baffin.”



Vera Roberts, 1985, being honoured by colleagues and friends for 35 years as a registered nurse, and 30 years' work in Canada's north. Walden Restaurant, Edmonton, AB.

In October 1982, she previewed a questionnaire for program evaluation, which was more than 60 pages long and would have to be either translated or done through an interpreter. “Of course,” she said, “they only design the study. We are the ones who have to carry it out. Typical - of Ottawa.” In February 1986, she exclaimed, “Somehow, here we have got another research project wanting blood from babies during [the] period we are trying to get immunizations done.” No wonder she was frustrated.

Roberts was a lifelong learner. She struggled with math and statistics on her own. She received the *Globe & Mail* and the *Financial Post* by mail, and read a variety of books. In July 1982 she was reading Edward de Bono on lateral thinking, in August she was reading Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of needs. She stated, “I like the idea that the level of complaints indicates the level of motivation of the worker and of the health of the organization. The higher the level of ‘grumble’, the more have the lower needs & conditions been met.” Also in August she attended a computer camp at Geneva Park and was totally frustrated by the quality of teaching. In September she read a book on Einstein.

In between and during concentrated periods of work, she earned a Diploma in Nursing Service Administration from the University of Saskatchewan (1961); Diploma in Public Health Nursing from the University of Windsor (1964); a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Lakehead University (1969); and in 1981 a Master of Science in Administration from the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana. Some of this study was long-distance, off-campus work.

In December 1982, many diary entries related to tiredness. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> she recorded, “Still feel exhausted when I get home to the point of nausea.” Her tiredness was often related to the air quality in the offices at work. She was, of course, working very hard. On 24 February 1983, she worked at the office all day on the draft of a document for Ottawa, went for supper, and then worked at the office until 9 p.m. She wrote, “Couldn't take the office anymore.” So she worked at home from 10 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. and was back at work at 8:00 the next morning again facing the bad air - “Almost as if one can't breathe.” On 23 March 1983, she took her first sick day since working with Medical Services. On both 13 July and 3 August she described colleagues smoking so much at the office that she was “nauseated ill.”

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## CONGRATULATIONS!

*To The B.C. History of Nursing Society for officially becoming incorporated as of Sept. 19, 2008.*

*Check them out at:  
www.bcnursinghistory.ca*

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## *Vera Roberts- (cont'd)*

In 1986 she began to receive recognition for her incredible service to the health of those in Canada's north, beginning with the Order of Canada that year. She was very pleased with this and her other honours. She received the Gold Medal of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada in 1987; the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Medal of Canada in 1992; and in 1995, the Nightingale Medal of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Roberts was a member of many Humanist and Unitarian organizations. According to her curriculum vitae, early in her life, before she studied nursing, she took theology at a Salvation Army College. Her niece has no knowledge of this, though there were Salvationists in the niece's father's family. Roberts may have been Anglican when her nieces were growing up, as she presented them with Anglican prayer books. In any case, she became an active Humanist and was president and chaplain of the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship (1971 to 1972) following receipt of her Bachelor in Science in Nursing from Lakehead University.

Roberts retired in 1989 and moved to Elliot Lake to be close to family. Sam, her brother-in-law, died while she was still in the north. She was in Sault Ste Marie with Beatrice during her sister's final illness. Her niece, Jennifer, lived in Elliot Lake and became the executor of Roberts' will. She

lived with niece Jacqueline during her last illness and Jacqueline accompanied her to many appointments. Jennifer and Jacqueline, with Roberts, designed her tombstone and discussed her funeral. During this time, Roberts' closest brother died and she chose Jacqueline to go to England and make sure that her brother was buried with honour. At the end, when Roberts was in hospital, either Jennifer or Jacqueline

visited every day. For a single career woman, she was blessed with this family. Sadly, Vera died of leukemia in 2004, aged 78.

*I would like to thank CAHN/ACHN for paying my expenses to Thunder Bay and Thessalon; Jennifer Dumond and the staff of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine Library; Mrs. Jacqueline Scott, Vera's niece who lives in Thessalon, Ontario; Miss Ora Babcock, Vera's colleague who is retired in Matapedia, Quebec, and Dr. Gailand MacQueen for work in the archives.*



Vera Roberts with Mikijug, who gave her much pleasure in retirement.

## Conference Invite

Dear Colleagues,

*We cordially invite you to attend the Agnes Dillon Randolph Inaugural International Nursing History Conference, March 20-21, 2009, at the University of Virginia's School of Nursing in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA. The conference promises to be a wonderful way to meet international and American nurse historians and hear their latest research. Please see our website for the Call for Abstracts, Registration Form, and additional information:*

*<http://www.nursing.virginia.edu/Research/cnhi/randolph>*

*Respectfully yours,  
Barbara Brodie, PhD, RN, FAAN*

*For more information about the Vera Roberts Award offered by CAHN/ACHN please visit our website at:*

*[www.cahn-achn.ca](http://www.cahn-achn.ca)*