

From the Desk of the Historian

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Summer is a time for travel and as you read this column, I will have completed a vacation through Canada to Halifax, Nova Scotia in mid-June. This column is the paper I presented at Saint Mary's University at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing (CAHN) on June 23, 2024 - The Grenfell Mission, Labrador, Through the Eyes of Sophia V. Kiel, RN. The theme of the conference was "Nursing Crossroads: Action, Inaction, and Reaction."

Some of you may wonder why I am drawn to the Grenfell Mission and others may think, why not? The story and work at the Grenfell Mission captured my attention in 2007 when I began my archival career at the Center for Nursing at the Foundation of NYS Nurses in Guilderland, NY (just 10 miles/16.1 kilometers from our capital, Albany, NY). Three photograph albums sat in the collection of the St. Luke's Hospital SON Alumnae Association and one of our board members (also a St. Luke's alum) pointed them out to me. From that moment on, I was on a mission to preserve through digitization these albums – then 97 years on – now 113 years on. Receiving permission from this board member and alum to make a copy of all 3 albums of her services abroad for my own use for historical dissemination brings me here today. These statements are about the significance and connection to the themes of this conference.

Significance

- The challenges of everyday life at the Mission
- The challenges and inventiveness of the nurses providing care in this rural setting
- Bringing out of the archives and into the body of knowledge about the lived experiences of Canadian & American PH nurses as documented by Sophia V. Kiel as a member of the Grenfell Mission nursing staff, 1910-1911.



Who was Dr. Wilfred Grenfell? He was a medical missionary sent in 1892 by the United Kingdom's National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen in Labrador to "investigate living conditions among local fishers." What he found there were the appalling conditions of the local housing, and the absence of any type of medical care. On his return to England, he set about raising funds to establish a mission in Labrador and provide medical care and housing. His recruitment efforts far and wide are well recorded.



"Let me introduce you to Sophia Valentine Kiel. Miss Keil (Kiel) was the 5th of 9 children born to German parents Ernst Leberecht KEIL and his wife Maria Anna Sophia Reiss. Ernst immigrated in 1868 followed by Maria and daughter Margaret in 1873. Sophia V. K-E-I-L entered the world on 22 November 1879, 9 years after the opening of St. Luke's Hospital School of Nursing in the Morningside area of Manhattan.

The 1900 Federal Census for Manhattan lists Miss Keil as living on 2nd Avenue with her uncle's family and working as a cashier. Although it is not clear when or why Sophia changed the spelling of her

last name from K-E-I-L to K-I-E-L, perhaps the growing anti-German immigration sentiments may have played a part. By 1907, she graduated from the St. Luke's Hospital SON and began her career as a nurse and an avid photographer creating the photos I share with you today.

By 1910, Kiel finds herself in Labrador volunteering as a nurse at the Grenfell Mission and this photo was taken while at the Mission. Where Sophia went, her brownie camera was one of her constant companions.

The reasons Keil wanted to travel are unclear – perhaps it was a curiosity to see the world; perhaps it was part of her nature, but what is known – is her desire to help others as a nurse" (Hutchinson, AAHN, 2023).



Joining Miss Kiel on her adventure was her St. Luke's Hospital SON classmate Mary Missimer. Both Sophia and Mary are wearing their graduate caps as was the custom of all nurses who served at the Mission.



I feel it is safe to say that Sophia did some research about Labrador before she departed NY harbor, however, seeing the stark shoreline from a distance for the first time, she might have asked these questions: 'We're living where???' and traveling where???'



The seasons can be short-lived and during the long winter months, the ice can create hazards in the shipping lanes as these photos show. Kiel recognized not only the beauty of the glaciers, but the dangers as well.



As the late Karen Buhler-Wilkerson discussed in her book "False Dawn: The Rise and Decline of Public Health Nursing, (1989, 2021), goals for PH nursing were the same whether in the United States or Canada – to promote the health and well-being of those in need of care wherever they may live. In Labrador, that meant traveling in harsh conditions and what better way to navigate snow, ice and frozen lakes than by dogsled or on foot!



In better weather, the fishermen would be out netting a catch to feed those at the mission and other areas of Labrador. The mission schooner, "George B. Cluett" is near and dear to me as one who works in Troy, NY. George B. Cluett was the owner of Cluett Industries in Troy, NY – whose nickname is "The Collar City" because one of its main industries was making removable collars and cuffs. Cluett heard of the needs at the Grenfell mission through his wife's involvement with the Samaritan Hospital SON in Troy, NY. He outfitted this schooner with provisions which traveled many times between Troy and Labrador.

Keeping a concern such as the Grenfell Mission required "many hands to make light the work." Imagine looking out your window and seeing the 'lawn crew at work.'



Sophia captured Dr. Grenfell's way to cut grass and feed his herd of reindeer at the same time. Dr. Grieves raised and cared for the dogs of his sled team as valued members of this family and staff at Grenfell.



These photos of Battle Harbor Hospital in 1911 show how the mission grew since its inception in the late 19th century. Both patients and staff needed to be housed. Laundry needed to be done and bedding and clothing dried in the outdoors always smell fresher. What better use for the picket fence than as a clothesline?



We all know as nurses and historians, death is an ever-present part of life. Here on the lower right, Sophia captures the small cemetery at the Mission. Each loss would have been deeply felt.



As you can see from this photo on your left, the nurses' quarters were very spartan. Only the bare necessities as time spent in quarters was short. Self-care was also important to the health and wellbeing of the staff and this photo shows a rare moment of relaxation – and of course, the nurses remain in uniform.



In the upper right, Sophia is caring for a patient (I know it is her by her hair and her cap). The patient in the upper left has some type of injury that required the sheets to be suspended away from his lower extremities. Men had a sun porch they used as part of their recuperation.



The harsh living conditions – poor housing, poverty, severe climates, illness, and limited access to health care (what we would now call the social determinants of health) took a toll on people and families.



Dr. Grenfell found many orphans among the native Eskimo and took these orphans under his wing and into the care and shel-

ter of the Grenfell mission. Some photos show the presence of elderly Eskimo women who helped to provide care to these orphans and a connection to their culture.

In closing, I wondered if the Grenfell Mission was carrying on today. I share with this quote from their website: "... today, the Labrador-Grenfell Regional Health Authority delivers medical services to the area formerly under the International Grenfell Association (IGA) care. The association still remains active as a private foundation and regularly awards grants to non-profit organizations for improving the health, education, and social welfare of people in coastal Labrador and northern Newfoundland" <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/society/grenfell-mission.php>

Thank you for your time and attention and learning about The Grenfell Mission through the photographs captured by American nurse volunteer, Sophia Valentine Kiel, RN."

I hope you've enjoyed learning about Sophia V. Kiel and her service at the Grenfell Mission along with some of her chalk-written descriptive notes on the album pages. ■

*Until the next issue,
Trudy*