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"Portrait of a Leader: Caroline Flatt Rupert"
(1867-1967)

by

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Much is known about national nursing leaders who stimulated the growth of the profession over a century ago, but little research has been conducted about leaders who significantly influenced nursing and health care at the local level.

The existence of the Caroline Flatt Rupert Endowed Chair for Nursing and the Caroline Rupert Outstanding Senior Nursing Award at Illinois Wesleyan University served as impetus to question the relationship of this woman to the University and to the nursing profession in general. In order to address the question, archival materials were used at Illinois Wesleyan's Sheean Library, A.E. Livingston Health Sciences Library in Bloomington, Bloomington Public Library, the McLean County Historical Society, and the Midwest Nursing History Resource Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Findings were later validated and enriched through oral interviews with relatives and colleagues.

What emerged from this review of over seven decades of documents was a profile of a nursing leader whose personal and professional life paralleled other nursing leaders of the period. Caroline Flatt was born in 1867 in Champaign, Illinois, the daughter of a respected farmer in the region.¹ In an interview which I conducted with Miss Flatt's granddaughter, she described the family as one that greatly valued hard work and utilization of one's potential.²

¹ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 29 March 1967.

² C. Tate, interview held in Mrs. Tate's home, Bloomington, IL, January 1992.

As nursing, however, was not an acceptable field for a young woman in the late 1800's, her family strongly discouraged her from entering the profession.³ A quote from Teresa Christy, a noted nurse historian, exemplified this image of nursing in that period. She stated the following about national nursing leader, Lavinia Dock: "..in her early years, her family constituted a much-respected church-going group, and it came as somewhat of a shock to the leaders of society in her community when Lavinia announced she would enter the Bellevue Training School for Nurses in New York. It is said that one of them exclaimed, 'But I always thought the Dock girls were ladies!'"⁴

Despite family opposition, at the age of twenty-five, Caroline Flatt enrolled at the Illinois Training School for Nurses in Chicago under the direction of Lavinia Lloyd Dock.⁵ Although the impact of Ms. Dock on Miss Flatt's career is unclear, it is interesting to note that Ms. Dock was described as an exceptionally able teacher and became one of the most influential nursing leaders in the history of American nursing. Additionally, she was known not only as a nursing leader, but also as a social reformer, feminist, and international leader.⁶

Miss Flatt graduated from the Illinois Training School in 1894, just a year after the World's Fair in Chicago, during which the first

³ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 2 October 1966.

⁴ Teresa E. Christy, "Portrait of a Leader: Lavinia Lloyd Dock," Nursing Outlook, (June 1969), pp. 72-73.

⁵ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 29 March 1967.

⁶ I.M. Stewart, The Education of Nurses, (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p.143.

national organization for professional nursing was formed.⁷ Although the extent of her participation in the World's Fair is unknown, one quote from an Illinois Training School alumnae document indicated that Miss Flatt was involved in the movement to organize nursing: "I was one of a group who started the Nursing School Superintendent Association."⁸ It was during this time that Miss Flatt was Superintendent of Mary Thompson Hospital in Chicago, a position she accepted immediately following graduation.⁹

In 1897 Miss Flatt returned to her hometown of Champaign, IL and engaged in a year of private duty nursing.¹⁰ During this time, the groundwork was being laid for Miss Flatt's next contribution to nursing. Deaconess Hospital, which was staffed by Methodist deaconesses, was established in Normal, IL. These untrained "deaconess-nurses" withdrew from the hospital after a short period of time, leaving a critical shortage of nursing staff.¹¹

From a type-written history by Maude Essig of Brokaw Hospital, formally the Deaconess Hospital, it was learned that Miss Flatt was consulted and agreed to accept the position of Superintendent of Nurses at Brokaw Hospital. At that time, there

⁷ Listing of the graduates of the class of 1894, A History of the Illinois Training School for Nurses, (1880-1929), p. 207.

⁸ The Report (IL), December 1955, p.3.

⁹ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 18 February 1961.

¹⁰ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 29 March 1967.

¹¹ Maude F. Essig, History of Brokaw Hospital (Normal, IL: Brokaw Hospital, 1939), p.4.

was no formal training program for nurses at this institution; however, upon accepting the position at Brokaw Hospital in 1902, Miss Flatt took immediate action to establish the Brokaw School for Nurses. This was a two year program, with the first class graduating in 1904, and the first training program in the region.

In 1905, Miss Flatt established Brokaw's first visiting nurse program, with the help of the Chicago Visiting Nurses Association. These services were free to the Bloomington-Normal community, but donations were accepted and expected when one could afford the services. The first year's report from the visiting nurse, as found in a written history of the Brokaw hospital, provided the following information:

Number of families visited	161
Number of calls	2415
Number of deaths	9
Number of births	14
Number of operations	3
Number sent to hospital	12
Cases referred by doctors	42
Cases referred by hospital	16
Cases referred by Bureau of Charities	32
Cases referred by families	60
Cases referred by schools	9
Doctor supplied to family	8
Amount collected	\$47.30

As one could imagine this became a financial burden for the hospital and the responsibility of the visiting nurse program was turned over to the City of Bloomington.¹²

In 1907 Miss Flatt resigned her position as Superintendent of Brokaw Hospital and Director of the Nurses School to marry L.S. Rupert, one of the building contractors of Brokaw Hospital and a member of the hospital board. Upon her resignation the Board of Directors gave Miss Flatt this final tribute:

"Whereas, Miss Flatt has successfully occupied her present position for five years having accepted it when Brokaw Hospital was financially embarrassed and with limited facilities for successful service and from this condition she has ably assisted in the enlargement and general improvement to its present high standing and efficiency, whereas it is with regret that we learn of her contemplated withdrawal from this work, be it, therefore, 'Resolved that the House Committee recommended to the Board of Directors that Miss Flatt be granted a four months leave of absence from and after July 1st next, and further, that while it is hoped that she may return to the service of the hospital there shall be no obligation on her part to do so.'"¹³

At this time when a woman married she was expected to discontinue working, because that was the respectable thing to do. For her to be asked to return to work as a married woman was most significant.

Mrs. Rupert did not return to her position as Superintendent of Brokaw Hospital, but she did stay active in nursing and accomplished as much for nursing and the health of the people in the region after her marriage as she did during her time as Superintendent. Some of these accomplishments, as cited in the Daily Pantagraph from the

years of 1902-1907, and early 1960s, included lobbying in Springfield for stricter nursing education standards-quite an accomplishment for a woman who did not yet have the right to vote. Mrs. Rupert also served on the board for the first civil service examining boards for hospital employees. In addition, she was a member of several local organizations. These included, the McLean County Historical Society, the Castalian Club, the YWCA, the Red Cross, and the Woman's Club. Mrs. Rupert was president of the latter from 1911-1914. The members of the Woman's Club were extremely active and influential during these years. As with many other woman's organizations across the nation, these woman were also hard at work in the suffrage movement.¹⁴

Through the influence of the leadership of Caroline Rupert, the members of the Woman's Club were also able to influence actions of the city government. Through their efforts city ordinances were enacted and enforced, such as, requirements for garbage to be contained in metal cans instead of allowing it to be thrown loosely into alleys and along the streets in front of houses, and requirements for grocers and bakers to wrap bread in wax paper, cover food bins, and keep perishables off the streets.¹⁵ These issues were critical to the public health of the people and were reflective of Caroline Rupert's nursing background.

Amidst her involvement in the community, Mrs. Rupert never lost interest in nursing; over the next 60 years she maintained her

¹⁴ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 18 February 1961.

¹⁵ *ibid*

determination to improve the profession. She watched closely as the Brokaw School for Nurses began to merge with Illinois Wesleyan University. A glimpse of Mrs. Rupert's interest in the merger of the two schools was revealed during a selected review of several decades of "The Report.": These documents were the formal alumnae newsletters of the Illinois Training School for Nurses and are located in the archives at the Midwest Nursing History Resource Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago. A quote from Mrs. Rupert in one of these newsletters reads: "The Brokaw Nurses School which I organized 50 years ago is being merged with the Wesleyan University. I trust the merger proves to be the right move."¹⁶ Yet another quote states: "I am living to see the Nurses School I organized develop into a Collegiate School via Illinois Wesleyan University."¹⁷ The extent of her belief in University education was indicated by the establishment of an Endowed Chair in 1961 prior to her death. At the time the chair was endowed, it was publicized as one of the first Endowed Chairs for Nursing in the country.¹⁸

Although Mrs. Rupert worked to improve standards of nursing, her work was not only for the nursing profession, but also for the welfare of the patients. This concern was expressed in newsletters to the Illinois Training School and validated by her granddaughter in an interview.¹⁹ An aspect of modern nursing that troubled her was that

¹⁶ The Report (IL), July 1956, p. 12.

¹⁷ The Report (IL), April 1961, p.2.

¹⁸ The Daily Pantagraph (IL), 18 February 1961.

¹⁹ C. Tate, interview held in Mrs. Tate's home, Bloomington, IL, January 1992.

nurses seemed more concerned about themselves and the profession than about the direct care of individual patients. A quote from her alumnae newsletter questioned, "There is so much time off from service. Is it progress or just a change? We older nurses still keep the patient in mind--while the younger ones apparently think of their time off."²⁰ Mrs. Rupert was satisfied with progress and would argue wholeheartedly in its behalf if benefiting the patient were the motivation behind the growth of the profession.

Many changes may have been difficult for her, however, she continued to be involved in activities of the profession into her later years. This was evidenced in a quote to her alumnae association. "Today is the Nurses Convention date in Peoria, and I had hoped to go, just because I cannot lose my interest in nurses' work of today."²¹ Mrs. Rupert was 83 years old when this letter was written. In addition, she taught a class in the history of nursing at Illinois Wesleyan University until the age of 94.²²

While it is true, national leaders such as Lavinia Dock made significant contributions to the growth of the profession and to social change, the accomplishments of local leaders such as Caroline Flatt Rupert must be acknowledged. She was not described as an activist or a social reformer, but her actions over several decades of her professional career and personal life clearly exemplified these characteristics. Central to her contributions were a 75 year

20 The Report (IL), January 1961.

21 The Report (IL), January 1950.

22 The Daily Pantagraph (IL), May 1966.

commitment to a profession and to improvement in one community. She left her legacy through the a final act of commitment at the end of her life. Today, the Caroline Rupert Endowed Chair for Nursing and the Caroline Rupert Senior Award for Excellence in Nursing at Illinois Wesleyan University are formal reminders of the impact of one person on a community and a profession.

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