

# **PROFILE OF A LEADER: Labour Relations Pioneer: Alice Lillian Wright (1894 - 2000)**

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## **Abstract**

Alice Wright, who died in March 2000 at age 105 years, was one of Canadian nursing's pioneers in labor relations for nurses. The Registrar and Executive Director of the Registered Nurses Association of B.C. from 1943 to 1960, she was named an Honorary Member of the Canadian Nurses Association in 1962, just one of the honors for her pioneering labor relations work, her contributions to improvements in standards of nursing education, and her many professional contributions nationally and internationally.

When Alice Lillian Wright died a year ago [in March 2000], Canadian nursing lost one of its outstanding architects of labor relations for nurses. An excellent administrator, Wright had been Registrar and Executive Director of the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia from 1943 to 1960. During that portion of her career, she initiated trail-blazing efforts to establish collective bargaining for nurses in B.C. and in Canada. Wright later said the RNABC's focus on labor relations at that time led to "a turnabout in nurses' thinking" (Cooke, 1994, p. 9). B.C. and Quebec became the first provinces in Canada to use modern collective bargaining approaches (Jenson, 1992). Wright also served as a consultant to other provincial nurses' associations in the early years; later, Glenna Rowsell of the Canadian Nurses Association became the advisor nationally. Wright was also instrumental in improving nursing education in B.C. and elevated provincial standards for approval of schools of nursing, for improved registration examinations, and for peer review (Cooke, 1995; Paulson, 2000).

Wright took over at RNABC at a time of great restlessness among nurses, and she immediately began to try to change working conditions. She presented a Charter of Rights for Nurses at the 1946 Annual General Meeting and,

after approval from membership, she proceeded to act. She subtly assisted St. Paul's Hospital nurses when they formed the first bargaining unit in the province that same year (O'Brien, 1987). Until 1951, when Evelyn Hood was hired to take over the work of labor relations program initiated by Wright, she frequently assisted local staff associations in individual hospitals and other work sites to set up bargaining units and negotiate for improved salaries and working conditions with their boards (Paulson, 2000). By 1959, RNABC and the provincial hospital association began a move toward province-wide bargaining. Later, the RNABC bargaining arm became a separate entity – the British Columbia Nurses' Union. During her years as Executive Director, Wright also was active in introducing reforms in nursing education and closing the remaining small hospital schools of nursing that did not meet standards (Cooke, 1994; Paulson, 2000).

During her tenure with RNABC, Wright naturally was active with the Canadian Nurses Association, but as well was appointed to several national inter-professional committees and to committees of the International Council of Nurses. She served as an observer to the World Health Assemblies for ICN in 1956. She continued to work with the ICN following retirement, chairing its membership committee and traveling to South and Central America, Australia, Denmark, and Britain on this work. She was described as a "woman of vision" (Cooke, 1994) and received tributes from the RNABC in 1952 for her work in labor relations. She was also honored by being named an Honorary Member of the Canadian Nurses Association in 1962 for her many professional contributions nationally and internationally.

Alice Wright was born in Charlottetown, P.E.I., in 1894, but moved with her family to B.C. as a young child. She graduated from the Vancouver General Hospital in 1918 and began an early career in pediatric nursing and nursing education. After a year as pediatric head nurse in Vancouver, she moved to California, then New York, to work in pediatric nursing. She took post-graduate courses in pediatrics at the New York Nursery and Children's Hospital as well as a special course at the Kenny Institute, University of Minnesota. In the late 1930s, she began work on a Bachelor of Science degree at Teachers College, Columbia University, and graduated in 1941. She then returned to B.C. as Registrar and Executive Director of RNABC. Although she spent the remainder of her working life as an administrator, she never forgot her early devotion to pediatric nursing and was mentor and advisor to many young nurses in the field. During her time in New York, she began to collect antique baby bottles and other infant feeders. She searched second-hand stores and attended auctions. She wrote an inter-



Alice Lillian Wright in 1920

esting article for *Parent's Magazine* (1943) on these devices, which included at that time a rare 18<sup>th</sup> century pewter pap boat. She continued this hobby throughout her career and on her travels in retirement. The result was an outstanding collection of infant feeding devices, including one piece that dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. She donated her collection in 1966 to the recently opened Woodward Biomedical Library at the University of British Columbia; it has since been added to by other donors and now contains more than 40 precious items.

Following retirement, she remained interested in nursing and took part in many other activities and family affairs until increasing deafness forced seclusion in the last few years of her life. She had profound and lasting influence on the younger members of her family, serving as role model and encouraging the women, especially, to be strong independent citizens. She died March 15, 2000, at the age of 105 years.

## Authors

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## References and Resources

Biographical File: Alice Wright. B.C. History of Nursing Professional Practice Group. (File contains photocopies of documents and clippings supplied in 1995 by AW's great-niece, Helen Stoddart, as well as materials collected by Ethel Warbinek, Sheila Zerr, and Glennis Zilm.)

Cooke, M. (1994, Nov./Dec.). Profile: Alice Wright: A woman of vision. *Nursing BC*, p. 9-10.

Jenson, P. M. (1992). The changing role of nurses' unions. In A.J. Baumgart & J. Larsen (Eds.), *Canadian nursing faces the future* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 557-572). Scarborough, ON: Mosby Year Book.

O'Brien, V. (1987). An introspective look at the history of RNABC. *RNABC News*, 19 (1), 10-12.

Paulson, E. (2000, October 31). Personal communication. Interview with G. Zilm about Alice Wright; Paulson was president of RNABC from 1951 to 1953 and active on the executive and RNABC committees during Wright's tenure. During Paulson's presidency, she traveled with Wright to sites when nurses were forming collective bargaining units.

University of British Columbia; Woodward Library Special Collection. (1966). Infant feeding devices: Catalogue of items for display. Catalogue available Memorial Room, Woodward Library, Vancouver, B.C. Contains clipping from *Parent's Magazine* (1943).