



### The Professionals

**Film Summary:** A short profile on Ethel Johns, an important figure in the history of nursing in British Columbia.

**Curriculum Application:**  
Social Studies 10, Social  
Studies 11 Explorations  
and Social Justice 12

**The Essential Question:** How did the rights of women workers impact on the occupation of nursing over the twentieth century?

### Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignette provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. Small group activity examines the history of nursing over the twentieth century by examining illustrations of nurse uniforms. (one hour)
3. Extension Activity - Small group activity involves short reading on the BC Nurses' Union strike of 1989, followed by discussion questions. (one hour)
4. Further Research - A list of research topics and resources for students to consider.

### Learning Standards

1. To compare and contrast the *continuities and change* experienced by women in nursing in BC/Canada over the twentieth century and appreciate women's contributions in health care (*significance*).
2. Assess how prevailing conditions and the actions of individuals or groups influence events, decisions, or developments by examining the role of the nursing profession in the changing role of women in society. (*cause and consequence*)
3. Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions, gather, interpret, and analyze ideas: and communicate findings and decisions.

### Materials and Resources Provided

- [The Professionals- Working People-A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- **Lesson Activity 1-4** – Details of the 4 lesson activities are provided.
- **Appendix 1** - Group activity on nurses uniforms throughout the decades.
- **Appendix 2**- Information Worksheet- History of Nursing in BC/Canada
- **Appendix 3**- Reading on the BC Nurses' Union Strike of 1989.

### Additional Suggested Materials

- [These Were the Reasons : Chapter 7: Fighting for Equity: The '30s, The War years and A Shoreworkers' story.](#)
- The History of Nursing in BC - <http://bcnursinghistory.ca>
- The BC Nurses' Union - <https://www.bcnu.org>
- Canadian Indigenous Nurses Association - <http://www.indigenousnurses.ca>
- There are several books about nursing in BC and Canada, including a biography of Ethel Johns by Margaret M. Street, entitled *Watch-fires on the mountains: The life and writings of Ethel Johns*, (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1973.)

### Vignette Questions

1. How was nursing regarded in the early 1900s?
2. How did Ethel Johns challenge this attitude about nurses in 1919?
3. Why did doctors resent the university education of nurses?
4. What type of work would nurses' aides do and how would this change nurses' work?
5. How did nurses' work improve by the 1940s?

### Lesson Activities

1. Lesson Activity 1 - Students watch the vignette, "The Professionals" and answer the vignette questions above.
2. Lesson Activity 2: Small group activity using the provided illustrations of nursing uniforms. See Lesson Activity 2 for full details of the lesson.
3. Lesson Activity 3: BC Nurse's Union Strike of 1989; small group activity with guiding questions and discussion.
4. Activity 4 - Topics for Further Research: see Appendix 1 for additional details.

Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Janet Nicol

### Lesson Activity 1-4:

### The Professionals

**Activity #1- Students watch the vignette, “The Professionals” and answer the following questions:**

1. How was nursing regarded in the early 1900s?
2. How did Ethel Johns challenge this attitude about nurses in 1919?
3. Why did doctors resent the university education of nurses?
4. What type of work would nurses’ aides do and how would this change nurses’ work?
5. How did nurses’ work improve by the 1940s?

### Activity #2 - Small group activity

1. Divide students into five groups and distribute an illustration (*Appendix 1*) of a nursing uniform (one worksheet per group), each representing a different decade in the twentieth century. Also give each student a fact sheet.
2. Direct each group of students to share the illustration, read the fact sheet and discuss the questions on the illustration worksheet and fact sheet. (*Appendix 2*)
3. Ask students to report on their group discussion to the class, starting with the group assigned to the early 1900s and moving in time sequence to the 1960s.
4. Conclude by asking students to write a paragraph (or discuss) the ways the nursing profession and women’s roles have changed over the 20th century.

### **Activity #3 - BC Nurses' Union Strike of 1989**

Distribute the reading about the BC Nurses' Union 1989 strike. (*Appendix 3*) In small groups, students discuss the five questions at the end of the article and report to the class.

### **Activity #4 - Topics for Further Research**

1. Mrs. Rose Casper (nee Terry) was the first First Nations graduate (1955) of nursing in BC. The Rose Casper Healing Centre in Shalalth, BC is named after her. Research more about this pioneer.
2. Research the history of aboriginal healers prior to and/or after European settlement.
3. Research the biography of Ethel Johns or another pioneer nurse in early BC.
4. Research the history of "gender" segregation in nursing. How has this changed over time?
5. What was life like for Canadian war-time nurses in either the First or Second World War?
6. Describe the changes in nursing education from in-hospital training to university programs. How does this evolution reflect the status of the profession and women?
7. Choose another area of health care where changes have occurred over the decades. Examples: attitudes toward patients, certified midwives, female doctors, nursing assistants, non-traditional/alternative forms of medical care.

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### Appendix 2: Information Worksheet - History of Nursing in BC/Canada

#### Nursing in Canada - The Early 1900s

The nurse's uniform has its origins in the military and the church. By the early 1900s, nurses still reflected the Victorian ideal of attractive, yet modest, femininity. What do you think the nurses' "aprons, caps and bibs" symbolized?

#### Nursing in Canada during and after the First World War

As nurse training and practice became standardized and more demanding, the need for discipline was reflected in the uniform. More than 3,000 nursing sisters served overseas with the Canadian Army Medical Corps, and 49 were killed. How did "nursing sisters" in army hospitals impact on the image of nurses?

#### Nursing in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s

Fashionable women cut their hair and wore shorter skirts but in nursing, the strict rules around "conservative" uniforms continued. In 1939, BC politician Dorothy Steeves said nurses were "treated worse than domestic servants." Why do you think the traditional nursing uniforms remained?

#### Nursing in Canada in the 1940s

Over 4,400 Canadian nurses served in the Second World War and of those, 15 lost their lives. After the war, sleeves and hems of nursing uniforms were shortened. How do you think nursing service in the Second World War impacted on their uniform and their work after the war?

#### Nursing in Canada in the 1960s

The uniform had its most dramatic change in the 1960s and 1970s as pantsuit uniforms came in to use and the bib and aprons were eliminated. How do you think the rise of feminism impacted on the nursing uniform and profession?

#### More Questions for each group

1. How does the nurse's uniform reflect the time period assigned to your group?
2. How do you think nurses were regarded by doctors and patients at that time?
3. What type of tasks do you think nurses performed?
4. What do you think was nurses' level of education?
5. What do you think were the challenges and rewards of nursing?

## The Professionals

### Appendix 3: BC Nurses' Strike - 1989: Reading and Questions

More than 17,000 nurses working in British Columbia gained the right to strike in 1981, after establishing the BC Nurses' Union (BCNU). They went on strike for the very first time eight years later, when contract negotiations with the government broke down.

"We are trapped in a vicious cycle," Pat Savage, President of the BCNU told the *Vancouver Sun*. "Substandard conditions make it hard to recruit badly needed nurses to this province and we go from bad to worse because there are too few of us."

BC nurses ranked sixth in wages among Canada's provinces. Besides significant pay hikes, nurses wanted improvements to their benefits and working conditions. Savage told the media: "BC nurses have been undervalued for years, and we believe our time has come."

On May 17th, 94 percent of nurses voted to strike. In the following days, they started job action, refusing to perform non-nursing duties, such as housekeeping and cleaning.

On June 4, the BCNU held rallies throughout the province. Debra McPherson, a nurse at Vancouver General Hospital, told the crowd: "This is a sign that we have awakened a sleeping giant." Bernadette Stringer, also a VGH nurse, said: "It's a rally to keep up momentum and express our distress at negotiations—how slow it is."

Next, nurses refused to do overtime work. Finally, they took strike action, walking off the job and setting up picket lines outside the hospitals. Some nurses remained working to provide essential services, required by law.

The 18-day strike had an impact. The employer and union reached a tentative agreement, with a 29.5 percent pay hike. But many rank and file union members had hoped the union would do better. More than 700 angry nurses packed a hotel meeting room in Vancouver, demanding answers from their President. Later, about 150 nurses held a rally outside the BCNU office. They wanted their representatives to resume negotiations for a better contract immediately.

Stringer was among the protesters. "We are tired of seeing a bargaining committee that does not take seriously what the members say," she told the media.

The BCNU leadership ignored their protests however, touring the province and urging members to ratify the contract. Others organized a vote "no" campaign, with McPherson and Stringer travelling the province and giving members another point of view.

When the vote to approve the contract was held on July 12, BC nurses voted 65 percent against the agreement. In the end, the dispute went to binding arbitration with a mediator deciding the nurses would get a 20.9 per cent wage increase.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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Despite the disappointing outcome for many, the conflict did lead to positive changes. Paid staff had been running the union, not elected officials from the rank and file, Bernadette Stringer observed, and the strike changed that. The union was more democratic as a result.

Debra McPherson, who went on to become the BCNU President, said pressure had been building: “By 1989, there was a lot of spent up anger and frustration over conditions in nursing. Having a say in compensation for our work, safety, staffing levels and control over our practice wasn’t working out through union-management committee work.”

She also said, “...we now recognize the fact that that during job action it’s the members who drive the engine, and the leaders have to stay in touch with them and keep them informed.”

### Questions

1. Why do you think it took so many decades for nurses to gain the right to form a trade union?
2. At the time of the 1989 dispute, BC nurses were overworked because of the nursing shortage. They argued better pay would attract more nurses to the province. How did these conditions affect the dispute and what were the lessons learned by the union?
3. Looking over five generations of nursing in Canada, how do you think unions changed the profession?
4. To what extent has the evolution of women’s rights and workers’ rights impacted on the nursing profession?

**Key words: shop steward, contract negotiations, strike, binding arbitration, tentative agreement, ratification vote, rank and file**



### 1. Nursing in the early 1900's

How does the nursing uniform (cap, hem length, colour, style) tell a “story” about women’s rights and nurse work and role?



*An advertisement from 1907 features a uniform characteristic of the style worn by nurses in that decade, plus necessary equipment to carry out their duties. Courtesy of Canadian Nurse, a publication of the Canadian Nurses Association.*



# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

## Appendix 1: Images of Nursing from 1900-1960    The Professionals

### 2. Nursing in Canada during and after the First World War

How does the nursing uniform (cap, hem length, colour, style) tell a “story” about women’s rights and nurses’ work and role?



*Nurses voting in 1917 at a Canadian hospital in France. They were the first women to vote in a federal election—an election called on the single issue of conscription. Any Canadian involved in military service could vote, and over 90 percent voted for conscription.*

*Courtesy of Library & Archives Canada, PA-002279.*



*No. 6 Canadian General Hospital nurses, Paris, World War I. Canadian nursing sisters were nicknamed “bluebirds” because of their blue uniforms, white aprons, and white veils. Courtesy of Library & Archives Canada, PA-005071.*




*Poster issued by the provincial board of health about the influenza epidemic, Alberta, 1918. Courtesy of Glenbow Museum Archives. NA-4548-5*

### 3. Nursing in Canada in the 1920's

How does the nursing uniform (cap, hem length, colour, style) tell a “story” about women’s rights and nurse work and role?

**GRADUATION CLASSES 1925**  
Nurses' uniforms more dignified, accurately cut, and of such perfect tailoring and material could not be designed for your graduating apparel. We invite comparison, and have implicit confidence in the nurses' ability to discern unequalled values in our garments.  
These illustrations depict uniforms most suitable for graduating nurses or for Hospital or Private Duty.

BY INSISTING ON HAVING **CNURSES UNIFORMS C** SATISFACTION IS ASSURED



These Three Styles in Corley Poplin,  
\$6.50 each, or  
3 for \$18.00

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Graduate uniforms, 1925. Courtesy of Canadian Nurse, a publication of the Canadian Nurses Association.



The Canadian Nurses' Association War Memorial, unveiled in 1926 in the Centre Block Hall of Fame on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. The sculpture depicts the beginnings of nursing care by nuns in the 1600s, and the nursing sisters and care of soldiers in World War I. The images are connected by the female figure of Humanity, whose outstretched arms bridge the three centuries. The inscription reads: "Led by the spirit of humanity across the seas woman by her tender ministrations to those in need has given to the world the example of an heroic service embracing three centuries of Canadian history." Courtesy of Canadian Nurse, a publication of the Canadian Nurses Association.



# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

## Appendix 1: Images of Nursing from 1900-1960 The Professionals

### 4. Nursing in the early 1940's

How does the nursing uniform (cap, hem length, colour, style) tell a “story” about women’s rights and nurse work and role?

## An Outstanding Career for Girls



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ENROLL NOW

APPLICATIONS FOR FALL TERM  
at ROYAL COLUMBIAN HOSPITAL  
NOW BEING ACCEPTED  
FULL INFORMATION MAY BE OBTAINED FROM MISS E. CLARK, SUPERINTENDENT  
OF NURSES. (TERM COMMENCES SEPTEMBER 1)

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Train  
for  
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FINEST  
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AND  
EXPERT  
SUPERVISION  
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GRADUATING CLASS OF 1947 ROYAL COLUMBIAN HOSPITAL

### • REQUIREMENTS

- Age, 18 years 6 months or over
- Education, Junior Matriculation
- A genuine interest in the care of the sick.

### • STANDARD for GRADUATES

- 8-hour working day
- \$140 monthly minimum salary
- Wide variety of service . . . medical, surgical, paediatric, obstetric, administrative, teaching, and others.

### • OPPORTUNITIES

- Air Stewardess
- Ship Stewardess
- Hospital
- V.O.N. or Red Cross
- Doctor's or Dentist's office
- Public Health Service

The Royal Columbian Hospital School of Nursing is fully accredited by the Registered Nurses' Association of B.C., and offers all the advantages listed above. The expansion program now in progress will create greater opportunities for students and graduates alike. Standards of nursing have always been high at the Royal Columbian Hospital and every effort is being made to maintain and elevate this standard.

**TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO ENTER A FINE PROFESSION — ENROLL NOW!**

HEARTILY ENDORSED BY THE FOLLOWING DOCTORS, MEMBERS OF THE NEW WESTMINSTER MEDICAL ASSOCIATION:

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A recruitment ad placed in the Columbian newspaper August 9, 1947. The hospital and School of Nursing advertised for additional graduates and students to staff the 1950 wing then under construction. Courtesy of New Westminister Public Library.

Labour History Project: A partnership of the Labour Heritage Centre and the BCTF

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### 5. Nursing in the early 1960's

How does the nursing uniform (cap, hem length, colour, style) tell a “story” about women’s rights and nurse work and role?



Round the Clock Shifts will certainly appeal to you when they fit as this one does! Snowy white . . . crisp cotton . . . cool design that glides over your figure and flatters you beautifully with clever darts that become pockets at the hipline. One from our collection of smart new uniforms in sizes 8 to 18, each 13.00

Uniform Shop at . . . **EATON'S**

*Eaton's ad, placed in the '67 annual for a graduate nursing uniform, so different from previous decades.*