History of Nursing in Nevada
Nurses Who Changed the Landscape of Nursing in Nevada

Circa 1850s: Florentina (Nellie) Nostrossa (from Peru) learned midwifery in Eureka, Nevada via informal training helping two local doctors.

1862: There was at least one midwife in Virginia City, although her name is unknown.

1875: St. Mary’s Hospital in Virginia City was established by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul down Six-Mile Canyon. Three religious Sisters arrived to set things up in 1864, Frederica, Xavier and Mary Elizabeth. In 1875, the hospital was described as “the best in the mining district.” The hospital was named St. Mary Louise Hospital, named after Mary Louise Bryant Mackay, who donated the land. The four story building accommodated 60 to 70 patients. The first patient was admitted in 1876. The Hospital, supported by fees from miners, did emergency surgery only. The Daughters soon established a school and an orphanage.

1880s: Eliza Cook was one of Nevada’s first frontier doctors. She was first tutored in nursing by Dr. H.W. Smith to provide nursing care for his wife, ill with puerperal fever. Cook read all of Dr. Smith’s medical books while working as his assistant and nurse. After 6 months (1882) she applied to and was accepted in medical school. She practiced in Sheridan, and later worked with a physician mentor in Genoa. “At this time, there were Reservation Hospitals for the Indians of Nevada with approximately 100 beds in all. There were 2 hospitals in Reno: Washoe County General Hospital and the Catholic St. Mary’s. Owyhee, headquarters of Duck Valley Indian Reservation also had a hospital and a school to serve about 400 Indians who cultivated farms along the river.” Walker Lake Reservation also had a hospital. In 1881 legislative
monies were appropriated to establish a hospital near Reno for “nervous and mental cases”.

**1893:** State Board of Health was established.

**1899:** Mary Oxborrow, a midwife educated in Salt Lake City, provided medical care and delivered babies in Lund NV until her death in 1935.

**1898:** The first Red Cross Society of Nevada formed in Carson City through the efforts of Mrs. H.A. Lemmon. Within a month, groups formed in Wadsworth, Reno, Virginia City, Austin, and Winnemucca, and then gathered in Reno to form the Nevada State Red Cross Association. They raised funds to gather and distribute clothing, food, bedding and medical supplies to enlisted men. They were active in volunteer efforts in the Spanish American War.

**Early 1900s:** Mining companies built hospitals in McGill, Ruth, and East Ely. Workers paid a monthly premium for emergency care. Nurses came from other states to work in hospitals that opened in the Reno area. The first 20th century hospital was a small 5 room facility for students on the University Nevada Reno campus. It was run by a practical nurse.

**1907:** Nevada State Journal newspaper ran a story that local nurses were organizing to form a “labor union.” The critical tone of the front page story accused nurses of being “more interested in money than patient welfare.” It reported that “the goals of the nurses were to secure a wage of no less than $45.00 a month, a move towards eight hour shifts and a limit to the amount of housework to be done by nurses.” Jessie Joslyn Nelson responded to the press immediately to clarify the purposes of the organization, stating “every state was forming a nurses’ organization and that medical associations were not accused of forming labor unions when they united.”

**1908:** Mary Virginia Perkins Lytle, born in Overton 1883, trained as a nurse mid-wife in Salt Lake City. She lost her first three daughters in childbirth and saw the need for trained persons to help with the delivery of babies. She was a midwife in Overton and delivered more than 200 babies in 30 years.
1908: In Reno, the Dominican Sisters converted a parochial school into a hospital, called *Sister’s Hospital*. Only two Nurses were hired.

1909: Elizabeth Cunningham was elected President of the newly formed Reno Nurses Association. Discussion centered around women practicing nursing “without certification of appropriate training.”
**1909:** George McKenzie, MD, who came to Nevada from Colorado, offered to provide lectures to nurses in an effort to help establish a nurse training school at Sister's Hospital in 1910. This created conflict among nurses about geographic variances in nurse preparation. “This is the first evidence provided by Nevada nurses of the still prevailing anti-intellectualism toward the frontier and nursing alike.”

**1910:** First class accepted at Sister's Hospital. Dr. McKenzie, who encouraged the sisters to open the training school to provide help for the hospital, ran the program for 15 years. He designed the curriculum, centered around lectures to students by physicians.
**1912:** Sister’s Hospital became St. Mary’s Hospital. The two-year program that they opened was the first nurse training program in Nevada and 18 nurses graduated 1912. A third year provided graduate nurses with a monthly salary of $50.00 and full employment.

**1914 - 1927:** Margaret Arnoldus Windous was a midwife in the White River Valley for several years, then later provided nursing care in White Pine General Hospital, in Ely around 1927.

**1915:** The first of four attempts to legislate nurse registration in Nevada. The first plan would have the Board of Health regulate nurse examinations and licensure. Also in 1915 the Nurse Alumni Association was formed. It was called the Sesrun (nurses spelled backwards) Club. Emma Springmeyer was president. The first meeting was at the home of Elizabeth Reddant and its activities were strictly social.

**1917:** Nettie Johnson was the first Nevada nurse deployed in World War I. There were reportedly 50 graduate nurses in the Reno area, although no state records about this have been located.

Although no state records have been located, “the Nursing Archives at Boston University indicate that the *Nevada Nurses* was organized on November 26, 1917. Application was made to the American Nurses Association on July 8, 1920 and acceptance was granted January 19, 1921. Elected officers were: Edith Peales, Chairman, Mary Evans, vice-chairman, Mary Robinson, Treasurer.” They raised funds for the war effort during World War I, and were specifically involved with fund raising to provide a home for nurses serving in France. (There are no known primary records of the Nevada Nurses Association between 1917 and 1931)

**1919:** Sadie Hurst, assemblywoman from Washoe County, introduced the nurse exam and licensure legislation, which passed but was vetoed by the Governor. “The greatest opposition to the bill came from nurses who had attended training schools but did not receive diplomas.”

**1921:** The nurse exam and licensure bill was again introduced by Assemblyman Heward. It was similar to the previous bills and was also defeated.

**1922:** The last class graduated from Sister’s Hospital. It was thought that the impetus for state registration came from supporters of the St. Mary’s Hospital Training School for Nurses. “The decision to close the school was prompted by the failure of the Nevada legislature to pass a Nurse Registration Act and, without the law, nurses could not obtain reciprocal registration with other states. Essentially, Nevada preparation would be
worthless so enrollment decreased. In addition, the national pressures to upgrade
nursing education made increasing demands on the staff. As a result, the nursing school
was sacrificed for better patient care.”

1922 to 1957: Nevada was once again devoid of any training school for nurses.

1923: Trained nurses organized and worked with support of the Nevada State Medical
Society to petition the Nevada State Legislature to establish a State Board of Nurse
Examiners.

1923: Assemblywoman Marguerite Gosse introduced the Nurse
Practice Act of Nevada. This successful legislation provided the
means to examine and register nurses in Nevada. The governor
was directed to appoint three registered graduates to the Board
of Nurse Examiners who would meet regularly, provide publicly
announced examinations and develop lists of accredited training
schools and nurses registered under the law. These women: Mary
Evans, Emma Springmeyer, and Alice Craven, Board members of
the Nevada Nursing organization, were instrumental in the
passage of the Bill. A committee
from the state nurses association
had presented a draft of the
proposed legislation to the Nevada State Medical Society
in 1922. After the passage of the nurse registration bill,
the registered nurse was compensated with higher wages
and the registration law reportedly increased the
efficiency and standing of the nursing profession in
Nevada. The $10.00 examination fee for registration
allowed nurses to put R.N. after their names. Registered
nurses earned more money and the registration law
reportedly increased the efficiency and standing of the
nursing profession in Nevada.

1923: Nevada legislature established the Board of Nurse
Examiners and Mary Evans, the first president, was
issued Nevada license #1. Between 1923 and 1931, there
were 196 licenses issued.

1931: The Nevada Nurses Association (NNA) incorporation. The articles of
Incorporation were filed in the Office of the Secretary of State on March 23, 1931, and
District One was formed. The purposes of the organization included: establish a code of
ethics, improve the standards of nursing, establish reciprocity between Nevada Nurses
and those of other countries and states, establish an office or meeting place, form
auxiliary organizations, obtain property for the benefit of the association, and remain a
non-profit organization. There were 42 members of the organization, or a 21%
membership. The first president was Edith Alden, and dues were $3.00/year.

1931: NNA was involved with employment issues at Washoe General Hospital.

1935: The Social Security Act passed.
1936: Christie Thompson Corbett announced that Nevada received $40,000 to improve health conditions in Nevada, especially in rural Nevada.

1937: NNA adopted eight-hour work day, despite objections by medical groups.

1940: NNA Membership count, 209 members out of a total of 291 registered nurses. Also in 1940, Helen Bakken arrived in Las Vegas and District Two was formed. The population in Las Vegas was approximately 8500 in 1940.
1941: NNA, at the request of the ANA and the Nursing Council on National Defense, established a state council on national defense, and in 1942, the US Cadet Nurse Corps was formed to help recruit nurses.

1942: Mary Kennedy Rhymer arrived in Las Vegas; she worked at the Clark County General Hospital as a staff nurse in the ER, OR, and maternity. By 1945, Rhymer became Director of nurses at Clark County General.

1945: Committee to study practical nursing in Nevada.

1945: Labertha Miller Johnson, NAACP activist, was the first Black Nurse hired at Clark County General Hospital.
1946: NNA District Three was formed in Clark County.

Mid-1940s: Maida Pringle, chair of the NNA membership committee, used her vacation time from work to travel the state to recruit members. Main issues of concern were to increase membership and funds.

1947: Mary Hocker arrived in Las Vegas, where she first worked at Clark County General Hospital. In 1954 she was employed by City Jail as matron; she was the first jail matron in the nation.
1949: Professional Nurse Practice Act was amended to reinforce mandatory registration and provide penalties for violations. Legislation was passed to regulate practice of practical nursing, and Louise Terrill was hired as Joint Executive Secretary for NNA and the Board of Nurse Examiners (now the Nevada State Board of Nursing).
1950: Evelyn McColl came to Las Vegas. She worked at Clark County Health Department around 1956 where Della Fitzgerald was her supervisor. McColl later became Director of Nurses at the Clark County Health Department.

1950s: NNA established a Committee on Careers, and members visited 28 out of the 38 high schools in the state to encourage nursing as a career.

1952: There was one practical nurse program in Las Vegas.

1953: Patricia Whalen of Boulder City awarded a scholarship to study professional nursing in Utah by NNA District #3 because Nevada had no RN program.

1954: NNA participated in the statewide survey initiated by the US Department of Health Education and Welfare that identified nursing needs and ways to meet those needs. It recommended establishment of a BSN program at University of Nevada Reno.

1955: District Three’s membership exceeded 100 for the first time.
1955: Jean Rambo in Las Vegas where she worked at Southern Nevada General Hospital.

1956: Genevieve Arensdorf arrived in Southern Nevada, where she worked as a school nurse, and later became director of nurses for the Clark County school district.

1957: The first Bachelor of Science in Nursing program in Nevada was established at UNR.

1958: Committee on School Nurse Certification formed with Ethelda Thelan as Chair.
1960: The Las Vegas population was 64,405 with 107 registered nurses. Districts Four, Five and Six were established. NNA state membership, fluctuated since the organization began, and never seemed to be more than its highest count of 27% in the early 1970s.

1963: An amendment to the Nurse Practice Act which directed the governor to solicit names for the Board of Nurse Examiners from the Nevada Nurses Association. In 1963, there were eight practical nursing programs in Nevada.

1964: Survey done to identify current and projected nursing needs in Nevada. This was initiated by the Nevada Public Health Association and recommended preparation of nurses at all educational levels. NNA also participated in this survey.

1964: Barbara Generaux was the first non-religious order member to direct nursing service St Rose de Lima.

1965: Associate Degree Program in Nursing was established at Nevada Southern University, renamed University Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) in 1969.

1966: Ethelda Thelan was elected President of NNA.
1966: First Capping in Associate Degree Program at Nevada Southern (UNLV)

1968: First refresher course established for inactive RNs.

1968: ANA Board created the position of Executive Director created and filled by Jean Rambo.

1969: Marguerite Clevenger elected NNA President

1969: Community College system was funded.

1970: Pat Peer candidate for nation’s “Most Be-Involved Nurse.”

1970s: NNA began studying criteria for continuing education for re-licensure & became involved with economic and general welfare issues.

1971: New articles of incorporation filed. Name changed from Nevada State Nurses Association to Nevada Nurses Association

1972: RN to BSN program at UNLV begun
1973: Dorothy Button, NNA lobbyist, successful with Nurse Practitioner Bell in Nevada; ANA conducted workshops in Nevada on Collective bargaining.

1974: Ethelda Thelan, NNA Executive Director

1976: NNA established an office in Reno and hired a full time executive director, Pat Gothberg Smith.

1979: NNA Education Committee was formed.

1982: 30 hours of continuing education became mandatory for re-licensure in nursing. NNA initially was the responsible group for accrediting these programs.

1984-1985: NNA negotiated for Washoe County School Nurses.

1990-2006: NNA continues legislative activities:
- Executive board position with the Nevada Health Care Reform Project
- Instrumental in passage of Nevada’s Patient Protection Act and subsequent formation of the Office of Consumer Health Affairs, with requirement that the Commissioner position must be filled by a registered nurse
- Collaborated with Senator Harry Reid for passage of national needle-stick injury legislation
- Introduced successful state presumptive compensability legislation for blood borne infection with health care workers
- Worked at state and national levels on issues related to safe nurse staffing

References: