

The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #96

March 2017

MATRON SADIE MACISAAC: A WOMAN OF SERVICE

BY MARLEEN MACDONALD HUBLEY

Sadie (Sarah Catherine) MacIsaac was born November 25, 1882 in Doctor's Brook to John D. and Mary (MacDonald, "Duncan Mor"). Sadie's MacIsaac family can be traced back to her g-grandparents, John and Mary MacIsaac who came with their large family from Rudha na foachaig, Moidart, Scotland about 1790. John D. and Mary were married February 5, 1876 in Antigonish and had 9 children; two of whom died as infants. On November 16, 1897, the family sold their Doctor's Brook farm and moved to Court Street in Antigonish and then to Pleasant Street, five years later. To support his family, John D. worked as a carpenter.

The impetus for the move is unknown but a comment years later in a letter from the Scottish Highlands, Sadie writes, "*They (highlanders) are all intelligent and educated better than our country people at home, except of course the few who go to college or convent.*" The move to Antigonish, provided the children with the opportunity for an education well beyond the rudimentary education available at the time in the country. The opportunity for an education was not lost on the children as they all went on to achieve success in their chosen fields.



After graduating from Mount St. Bernard, Sadie left home on May 6, 1906 to attend St. Joseph's Hospital in Glace Bay to train as a nurse. She remained there after graduation until a further training opportunity arose at Mercy Hospital in Chicago. Her younger brother, Daniel Joseph also attended Mercy Hospital to train as a doctor and remained there to live and work until his death on January 1st 1932. Sadie saw her time there as a stepping-stone, and upon graduation in 1915, on the recommendation of Sister M. Leonardo, she applied to Mount Sion Hospital in San Francisco, California as a supervisor. On October 23, 1915, Dr. Milton Mandel of Mercy Hospital wrote "*She is tactful, conscientious, and exceedingly capable, a good executive and has developed to a high degree the faculty of obtaining maximum efficiency from those working under her supervision.*" However, her time as supervisor at Mount Sion would not be long, as the outbreak of the war would soon call her to another training mission.

In February 1916, Sadie received a letter from Lt. Col. Roderick C. MacLeod, outlining the establishment of St. FX Hospital #9 and his wish to have her become the Unit nursing supervisor. They were willing to pay all the expenses incurred in her return to Antigonish to join the war effort. Sadie returned home and reported for duty, leaving Halifax June 19, 1916 on the *SS Missinabie*, with # 9 hospital unit made up of 12 doctors (officers) 26 nurses, and 118 other personnel. They arrived 10 days later and were dispersed for further training before assuming operations at Bramshott Military Hospital on November 23, 1916.

During this time, Sadie fought for the refund of the expenses she incurred during her return from San Francisco. The unexpected death of Lt. Col. MacLeod on January 4, 1917, meant she had to prove her case as it was not the usual procedure to reimburse those costs. It was more than a year before the account was settled. During her life, Sadie was very careful with her financial matters; investing in a life insurance policy and was keen to be sure she had a secure retirement. During the war, she made a substantial assignment to her parents to be put in the bank to be available for her when she returned home. In a terse letter to her mother in early 1918, she rebuked her parents for not depositing the amount assigned and immediately had the assignment cut in half.



During that first winter in Bramshott, there was a major influenza outbreak amongst the soldiers which kept the staff extremely busy. Many of the original # 9 staff were dispersed to other hospital units as required and it was feared that the Unit would be disbanded before they would be sent to Europe.

From May 20th to May 30th, 1917, Sadie and three friends from Cape Breton went to the Scottish Highlands on leave. They travelled to all the major historic tourist locations and Sadie wrote to her family them the highlights of the scenery and their

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experiences of the people “*who look like the Scotch people at home . . . from the Gulf or the Grant*”. She wrote to her mother that she was sorry she didn’t know much about her family history and where they came from in Scotland. Although she described the rugged beauty she wondered how people made a living because “*there is nothing but rock & a few stunted trees – the few fields that are cultivated are so full of stones you can hardly see the earth.*” While travelling, they tried out their Gaelic but soon discovered “*only the old people and the people way back in the hills speak Gaelic, but they all loved to hear us with our brand.*” Sadie was glad of an evening out to dinner as the guest of a local priest, after they all arrived back at Bramshott, completely broke.



On November 22, 1917, the #9 Unit received its orders to proceed to St. Omer, France, arriving there on December

11th. They proceeded with the set-up of the hospital and accepted their first admissions at the beginning of January and casualties by March. However, due to the closeness of the German troops, the hospital was evacuated and Matron Sadie and her nursing staff were relocated to Etaples. Meanwhile, the hospital unit was being established in a nearby town to accept venereal disease patients. This was quickly halted when they came under attack by German troops. During the attack, Matron MacIsaac and Matron Hubley were on leave in England. They spent their time touring, relaxing, and shopping. Sadie described Babacombe as a *“delightful spot . . . the red, red earth of the cliff and the green grass, and the trees above, and the white sands and shimmering seas below left an impression on my mind which I shall not easily forget.”* Returning to Etaples on May 28th, Sadie was assigned to # 3 Hospital in France while awaiting news of her unit. She was delighted with this assignment because it was the largest and most up-to-date of the Canadian hospitals. On August 15th Sadie was re-assigned to # 2 Hospital on temporary duty. She returned to a period of very heavy casualties and hospital over-crowding which lasted well into October when a flu epidemic put extra strain on the staff. On September 20th, she heard that the # 9 Unit was being remobilized back to Etaples, but that never happened. Everyone was overjoyed when the Armistice was signed on November 11th as people *“gave vent to their feelings by embracing each other in the streets. Town beflagged, sirens, guns etc. going all day & all night. Marvelous.”*

On January 24th, 1919 Matron MacIsaac and two other Matrons left for a tour of duty to the various hospitals under Canadian command. While contrasting the conditions in Germany where, *“it might have been peace time at the Ritz to judge by the menu”* compared to France, Sadie wrote, *“The pictures of that devastated area will never fade from my memory. The old battlefield with their trenches and miles of barbed wire tell an awful tale of suffering for those poor fellows who lived and died there. It is very pathetic to see the French people coming back, trying to locate what was once their home. It is a picture one never forgets though one feels very bitter when they see the havoc the boche has wrought.”*

From February 14th to 27th, Sadie and another Matron took leave to Italy where they took in all the tourist sights. On returning to Etaples, they were told they would be returning to England on March 8th, 1919. Once in England, Sadie was told she would not be returning to Canada with the others as she was being re-assigned. After a few weeks in London, Sadie was decorated by the King at Buckingham Palace, and afterwards, received by Queen Alexandra at Marlborough House. The following day, she received orders to proceed to Buxton to take over Granville Con. Spec. Hospital which was being turned into a Veterans Hospital. After several weeks of strenuous work, the building known as The Peak was transformed into a very desirable hospital and patients were loud in praise of work done. With her work in Buxton complete, Sadie arrived in Halifax July 9th, demobilized and proceeded home the next day. In her words, she found Antigonish *“very quiet and dull . . . rather oppressing during our absence.”*

After only a brief stay at home with family, Sadie was hired to replace Matron McLatchey, with whom she served in Europe, at Camp Hill Hospital in Halifax. Sadie served as hospital Matron from 1919 until her retirement in 1945. She guided Camp Hill through major changes, renovations, and constructions. The management style of Camp Hill under the Matrons, was described as operating with the efficiency of a military sergeant-major. In her usual manner, Matron Sadie MacIsaac got the work done.

Sadie MacIsaac died at Camp Hill Hospital on January 3rd, 1969. In a Casket tribute to Sadie, the paper echoed the post-war words of Matron-in-Chief Macdonald praising the great work of the nursing service. The paper went on to say, *“In these conditions which tried men’s souls, Matron MacIsaac’s skill, courage and compassion were challenged to the utmost and did not fail.”* A solemn reminder of the words of Dr. Milton Mandel in his recommendation in 1915.

THE WEARING OF THE GREEN FOR OUR IRISH CEILIDH!



HERITAGE ASSOCIATION OF ANTIGONISH

NEW MEMBERS

Judy Callaghan Halifax

WILLIAMS POINT MEMORIAL PARK

Bernie, Brian, Joy, Sheila Gilfoy and families

GUEST LECTURE PROGRAM

APRIL 23RD 3PM

- Guest Speaker: Chris Robbins
- Topic: Little Known Stories of the Cape d'Or Scots

MAY 8TH 7PM

- Guest Speaker: Marleen Hubley
- Topic: TBA

AROUND THE DISTRICT

APRIL 22ND 10:45AM

- Culloden Memorial – Lismore

HEATHERTON PARISH CELEBRATES 150TH ANNIVERSARY. CAN YOU ASSIST?

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