

Historian's Corner: Nursing Shoes Through the Ages

Caregivers who were part of the Western monastic movement of the 4th Century, probably were barefoot or might have worn sandals when tending to the sick and injured. Women's religious groups, referred to as *orders*, became formalized from the 6th through the 17th Century, and dress codes unique to each were adopted by most. Specific nursing orders that are familiar today include the Roman Catholic Daughters of Charity of St Vincent De Paul (French order that wore the large, starched coronet), Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity of New York (Saint Vincent School of Nursing) and Anglican Community of Saint John the Devine (*Call the Midwife*, PBS series).

As these religious orders became engaged in public health initiatives, their laced shoes became more functional in providing safety from injury and contamination. Nurses in England and the United States wore black stockings and black lace-up boots throughout the Victorian era, some including a fashionable heel.



The Industrial Revolution brought mass production of many products that were easily modified by style and color, including stockings and shoes. Manufacturers began to identify and market to specific occupations just as nursing was emerging as a profession and hospitals with training schools were expanding. In 1888, an ad for Fastep Foot Powder showed nurses powdering their feet before donning their lace-up nursing shoes, with the headline proclaiming, "They know how to start the

day right.” The Red Cross shoe brand was started in 1896 by a company that had absolutely no affiliation with the International or American Red Cross.

While low heels were available as an Oxford shoe during the late 1800’s, many graduates and students preferred a slight French heel going into the 1920’s, supposedly more comfortable and flattering to the leg now visible with a skirt that rose somewhat above the floor.



The original Clinic Shoe, manufactured in Saint Louis in the 1930’s, finally abandoned the French heel in favor of the iconic, white oxford most of us remember wearing in nursing school.



Many graduates, especially those working in the Operating and Delivery Rooms wore clogs for sustained comfort and additional height if needed.



In conclusion, I will share with you a wonderful photograph of five African nurse educators from different religious orders taken at meeting held in Zambia in 2019, each wearing sandals with their lovely white, gold, gray or blue habits. Some things change, while other do not because they do not need to!



For me, a special memory is of my mother telling how she kept her black shoes shiny throughout nursing school by giving each a quick rub on the opposite leg's black stocking whenever the tutor nurse passed. What seemed ancient back then,

became reality for me when I worked in Great Britain and was required to wear the same black stockings and shoes I laughed about years before.

Do you have memories you would like to share? Please write!

Mary F. Belmont, Class of '71A