

# Buffalo Tales

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## THE UNITED STATES CADET NURSE CORPS: TWO RAVENNA SISTERS WHO ANSWERED THE CALL

BY VALERIE VIERK

During World War II, the United States found itself with a nurse shortage as war raged in Europe and Asia. To remedy this problem, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law a bill that created the United States Cadet Nurse Corps on July 1, 1943. The Corps was administered by the United States Public Health Service (USPHS). The goal for the first year was to recruit 65,000 student nurses, which was about 10% of the female high school graduates in 1943. The young women had to be between the ages of 17-35, in good health, a graduate of an accredited high school, and have received good grades. Attractive advertisements were placed in magazines to entice young women to join. It worked. The enrollments that year surpassed the quota. Two young women from Ravenna, Nebraska, Elizabeth and Virginia Pesek, daughters of John and Myrl (Mahoney) Pesek of Ravenna, answered the call.



Virginia (left) and Elizabeth (right) in 1945

Elizabeth was born December 23, 1921, the first child of the couple. A brother, Jack, was born in 1923 and Virginia arrived on June 3, 1926. After a gap of six years, four more siblings joined the family. As the oldest child, Elizabeth helped her mother with the cooking and child care in the busy household. Virginia also helped with the younger children and worked in the fields during summers. Elizabeth graduated from Ravenna High School in 1940. She worked at several jobs, including teaching school in Buffalo County, and then in September 1942 she entered the Cadet Nurse Corps at Columbus Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. One of her high school classmates was in training at Columbus and encouraged Elizabeth to enroll. (Even though the Cadet Corps was not made law until July 1943, young women were accepted beginning in early 1942.

Columbus Hospital was founded by Mother Cabrini in 1903 and was affiliated with the University of Loyola. However, the Cadets were not required to be of the Catholic faith. Elizabeth very quickly experienced the kindness and support of the nuns, especially Mother Clement, Directress of the Columbus School of Nursing. The young women also formed strong bonds with their fellow-Cadets, many which would last the rest of their lives.

The traditional 36 months training was shortened to 30 months or less. Cur-

riculum was examined and obsolete and repetitive courses were eliminated. The program was divided in three phases: pre-Cadet, Junior Cadet, and Senior Cadet. The young women received free room and board, books, tuition, and clothing. Additionally, a stipend for incidentals was provided starting at \$15 per month, increasing to \$40 and finally \$60 if the senior Cadet chose to

work in a military hospital during the final phase of her training.

Fashion designers were consulted to design attractive uniforms for the cadets, and in August 1943 a fashion show was held at the Waldorf-Astoria. A jury of New York fashion editors made the final decision. The cadets were required to wear their dress uniforms for special events, but were allowed to wear civilian clothes when on a date. However, if they wanted to wear their uniforms in off-duty hours they could, and many did as they liked the uniforms. The cadets were provided a regulations booklet on how to wear their uniforms and how to behave while in uniform.

The summer uniforms, jacket and skirt, were made of gray and white striped cotton. The single-breasted jacket sported red epaulets and four buttons bearing the official USPHS

symbol. The sleeve patch, worn on the left sleeve, displayed the eight-pointed Maltese cross, the earliest symbol of nursing. Headgear consisted of a gray felt hat with a large brim and red band. (The winter "Montgomery beret" could also be worn with the summer uniform.) The "device" of the USPHS was worn on the hats and this was slightly different than the official symbol (fouled anchor and winged caduceus) that was on the buttons and the lapel pins. Additionally, a raincoat and summer purse were provided. The winter uniforms were of the same cut as the summer, but were made of gray wool. The winter topcoat (reefer coat) was of gray velour with four buttons also bearing the official device of the USPHS. The coat also had red epaulets like the winter jacket.

The nurses started their day about 7:00 AM with the ringing of a large gong. After breakfast (the food was far from good) they attended classes until about 10:00, at which time they had a break. There were more classes in the afternoon, then they worked on the floors until about 7:00 PM. They then had some free time but 9:00 PM dorm hours were strictly enforced during the week. Early in her training at Columbus Hospital, the nuns noticed Elizabeth's natural leadership and her willingness to assume duties far beyond what was expected of her. Her early life experiences in Ravenna had prepared her for this. She stood nearly 6', and with her beauty and confident manner, she gained the respect of the doctors, nurses, and her patients.

The course work was difficult with the accelerated program, but the young women still managed to have some fun. Chicago was an exciting place, especially for young women like the Pesek sisters from small town Nebraska. With the war raging, many service men were stationed or passing through Chicago. The nurses could attend dances, sun bathe in nearby Lincoln Park in the summer, swim in Lake Michigan, or best of all, go on dates. This was a treat because the guys would take them to dinner—a good meal for a change!

In May 1944, Virginia graduated from high school, and after working a summer job, she boarded the train at Ravenna, and twelve hours later was with her sister in Chicago. It was comforting for Virginia to have her older sister there, and Elizabeth in turn was delighted that her little sister had joined her. While they did not room together, they saw each other almost every day.

In mid-March 1945, Elizabeth and her entire senior class of twelve Senior Cadets volunteered to work at military hospitals for their final phase in their training. Six of the Cadets, including Elizabeth, were assigned to the huge military hospital named Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan. She was very excited to begin her training at the military hospital. She wrote her mother on a jumbo postcard that displayed a sketch of the impressive hospital with American flags flying from the spires. "Isn't this beautiful . . . We're strictly GI here. Food and everything is just marvelous. . ."

The hospital specialized in fitting artificial limbs for veterans who had suffered amputations. While at the hospital, Elizabeth cared for young veterans who were flown directly from the battlefields of Europe. She later commented that many of them still had the mud of battle on them. Elizabeth and her classmates returned to Chicago for their graduation on June 13, 1945.

Elizabeth's mother, Myrl, attended the ceremony. After graduation, Elizabeth and her classmates returned to Percy Jones to complete their training.

Virginia was still in Chicago when the war ended on August 15, 1945. She wrote her aunt and uncle in Goff, Kansas, of the wild jubilation of thousands of people in the streets. Virginia and her friends went out into the melee and helped celebrate. No records exist of Elizabeth's experience on this wonderful day, but if she was on duty, the wards were undoubtedly a place of great



Elizabeth (left) and Virginia (right) in 1945

jubilation too.

In September, Elizabeth returned to Chicago, and passed her state board examination in October. She was now a registered nurse and what a thrill it was after the hard work! She worked in Columbus Hospital for a few months, and then moved to Springfield, Illinois.

In early February 1946, Virginia began her two-month training at the Contagious Disease Hospital in Chicago. Here she cared for infants and young children who were suffering from various diseases, including pertussis, or "whooping cough." She was dismayed to see the little victims of this terrible disease coughing until they would sometimes cause ruptures. Vaccinations for pertussis would not be available for 3-4 years. (A year prior, Elizabeth had started her training at "Contagious" but after a few days she had to be temporarily removed because she was highly susceptible to the diseases. She went back in December 1944.)

In January 1947, Virginia was assigned to Mercyville Psychiatric Hospital in Aurora, Illinois, to further her training. The student nurses were closely supervised so no harm came to

them, but Virginia witnessed some frightening incidents with the patients.

In early 1947 Elizabeth moved to San Mateo, California, and worked at the hospital there. She also worked as a model part-time but she decided this was not a very practical means of support and she would be wise to continue her nursing career! Unfortunately, in late 1947 she was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis.

On June 18, 1947, Virginia graduated from the Columbus School of Nursing. Her mother and aunt attended. Elizabeth was not able to attend but she sent warm wishes by letter. Virginia's training was formally completed in September 1947. In November she received word that she had passed her state boards, and began working in a small hospital in LeMars, Iowa. On May 29, 1948, she married Herbert Nolda of Ravenna. Her sister, Elizabeth, served as her matron of honor. The newly weds lived at Ravenna and Herbert continued his job as a railroad brakeman.

In January 1949, Elizabeth moved to Miami, Florida, to see if a change of climate would help her feel better. She found employment caring for Frederick Snite, Jr., the son of a wealthy financier from Chicago. Frederick had contracted polio in China in 1936, was then confined to a respirator "iron lung," and in the ensuing years had become an advocate and inspiration for other polio victims. Elizabeth knew the story of Frederick from many newspaper accounts and news reels. Elizabeth and Frederick had many good talks and she was impressed with his kindness and concern for others, as well as his cheerful spirit. He leaned heavily on his Catholic faith, and this was not lost on Elizabeth.

The Snites had three homes—the summer home in Minocqua, Wisconsin, the "family" home at River Forest, near Chicago, and the winter home in Miami Beach. Elizabeth traveled with the family and greatly enjoyed the summer home. While there actress Elizabeth Taylor, and her new husband, Nicky Hilton, came to visit Frederick. Elizabeth was surprised by how petite the actress was as the camera had always made her look much taller. She talked to the couple for a while and stated later that Taylor appeared somewhat shy.

Frederick often attended card tournaments in hotels. One time in a hotel room in Wisconsin, just as dawn was breaking, the power suddenly went off, rendering Frederick's iron lung inoperable. This was his nurses' worst fear and they had been trained in how to crank the machine if this occurred. Elizabeth telephoned for help, but the operator did not answer the hotel telephone so Elizabeth left hers off the hook and dashed back to the respirator. She tried to operate the crank, but it was jammed! "Pray!" she yelled to Frederick, but then knew he already was. He could only survive about two minutes without the respirator. Elizabeth took off her shoe and started pounding on the crank, which finally released. Down on her knees she cranked the respirator for twenty minutes before Leonard Hawkins, the technician, burst into the room. "Poor Miss Pesek," Frederick lamented when the crisis had passed.

In late summer 1951 Elizabeth's health had deteriorated to the point that she had to terminate her employment with the Snite family. She came back to Nebraska, and soon was admitted to St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island. After several weeks of treatment her doctor arranged to have her and her mother flown to Rochester, Minnesota, where Elizabeth was admitted to St. Mary's hospital near the Mayo Clinic. In December Virginia left her two small children in the care of others, and went to Rochester to provide support to her mother. Elizabeth underwent surgery in which several feet of her diseased lower bowel were removed. Her surgeon, Charles Mayo, was the son of one of the famous Mayo brothers. Elizabeth required over twenty units of blood and hovered between life and death for days. During this time Elizabeth was so sick she wished she could die. Shortly after, she was visited by a spiritual Presence who told her she wouldn't die, that He had other plans for her. She rallied then, (emotionally), determined to fulfill whatever mission lay in store for her.

Finally, in February 1952, Elizabeth and her mother came home to her parents' house in Ravenna to recuperate. Elizabeth converted to the Catholic faith, and this would be a constant source of strength to her as her health would always be poor.

By 1954 she had finally recuperated enough that she could work. She gained employment as assistant director of nursing at Kearney's Good Samaritan Hospital. That same year, Frederick Snite, Jr., died and Elizabeth attended the funeral. In 1956, Snite was the subject of the book, *The Man in the Iron Lung* written by Leonard C. Hawkins with Milton Lomask. Elizabeth was quoted several times in the book.

In 1953, Virginia began her 20-year service to the Red Cross when the bloodmobile came to Ravenna each June. She did this in gratitude for the many units of blood her sister had received during her illness. Although Virginia was constantly being asked to be a private nurse, she and her husband thought it best she remain at home with the children. While not nursing in a professional capacity, Virginia often ministered to many people and animals in her loving manner. In the early 1950s she joined the Ravenna Methodist church and was also active in the women's group for 50 years.

In March 1957, Elizabeth's witness, "I Nursed Fred Snite," appeared in *Friar* magazine. Also in 1957, Elizabeth secured employment at Grand Island's Veteran's Hospital. Here she cared for veterans from World War I, II, Korea, and Vietnam. In 1967 another witness, "Could It Happen to You?" appeared in *Friar* magazine. This dealt with her surgery in 1951 and told of the Presence who had spoken to her.

Elizabeth remained at the Grand Island Veterans Hospital until 1974 when she retired due to poor health. In 1977 she moved to Ravenna to care for her elderly father, John Pesek. He died in March 1978 and she remained in Ravenna.

Now the sisters were living a few blocks apart. In the 1980s they renewed their interest in quilts; they also enjoyed other mutual interests such as collecting decorative glassware

and dolls. At Christmastime they enjoyed sending and receiving correspondence from many of their friends from nurses training.

Elizabeth's poor health continued and she was admitted to the hospital many times for various ailments. In 1988, for example, she nearly died in the Grand Island Hospital. Through the fast action of her doctor, Elizabeth's life was saved, but more surgery was required, and after that, as her doctor predicted, her quality of life became even lower. Still, her faith kept her going, and she rarely complained.

In 1998 Virginia's health suddenly failed. She was rushed from Grand Island's St. Francis to Bryan Memorial Hospital in Lincoln. Tests revealed that she had several arteries that were almost totally clogged, which was causing dangerously high blood pressure. She underwent surgery and a long recovery period. Her youngest daughter, Cathy, came home and stayed with her for six months during this recovery period.

In summer 2004 Elizabeth entered Ravenna's Good Samaritan Center. In fall 2005 Virginia's health again failed and after a hospitalization, she entered the same facility as Elizabeth. In early 2006 Virginia was able to return home for three months, then another attack made it necessary for her to return to the facility. In April 2006 she began kidney dialysis three times a week. In early 2006 Elizabeth and Virginia both served notice that they were tired of the long struggle, and wished to go on to their heavenly home.

On July 18, 2006, Virginia was waiting for her driver to arrive to take her to the dialysis center when the telephone rang. It was her younger sister, Mary Lee, stating that Elizabeth had died while eating breakfast! Although greatly distraught, Virginia knew it was imperative that she not miss her dialysis session, so she went as scheduled.

After the session as she and her driver were leaving Kearney, Virginia suddenly gasped and fell unconscious. She was rushed to the emergency room, and regained consciousness about midnight. Although initially confused where she was, she became lucid and talked to her nurses. She slept fitfully through the night.

and was awake and lucid again at 6:30 a.m. Her nurses noted on the monitor that her heart began beating irregularly, and forty minutes later Valerie received the call that her mother had died peacefully with two nurses holding her hand. She had previously left instructions that she did not want to be resuscitated.

Elizabeth's funeral was held July 20 in Ravenna's Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church with Father Marty Egging officiating. She was buried in Ravenna's Highland Park cemetery beside her parents. The next day Virginia's funeral was held at Ravenna's United Methodist Church with Rev. Valera Heydenberk officiating. Virginia was buried at same cemetery as Elizabeth, about 100 yards apart.

Now in early 2008, Elizabeth's grave marker bears her nursing graduation photo while Virginia's bears her and her husband's wedding photo. One of the sympathy cards written to Virginia's family, a neighbor wrote, "How nice that the sisters could enter heaven together." Well, almost. As often before, Elizabeth had gone ahead to light the way.

The author wishes to thank her aunts and uncles—Mary Lee Pesek, Catherine Van Herreweghe, Kevin and Steve Pesek—for remembrances they shared about their sisters.

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

2008 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

\*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.\*\*

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**UPCOMING EVENTS for BCHS:**

Sat. February 21: Cake Fundraiser is POSTPONED

Sun. April 19 from 1-3 pm: BCHS Annual Meeting

**UPCOMING EVENTS for KAPS:**

Mon. March 9 at 5:30 at th Frank House: Nebraska State Historical Society presentation of Certified Local Government (CLG)

**UPCOMING OTHER EVENTS:**

Mon. Feb. 23rd at 7pm: Kearney Noon Rotary's Travelogue: "Lewis and Clark"

We hope you enjoy these short stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready, so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to [bchs.us@hotmail.com](mailto:bchs.us@hotmail.com) or sending them to our post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523 Kearney NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

## Director's Report

Hello, BCHS members and guests!

We have had a busy summer season and we are looking forward to a busy fall and winter. An inventory of artifacts is being conducted on each of building. A one-page description of each artifact will include a photograph of the item and the donor's name. Several UNK students have been working on this project and are making great progress. A binder, containing these descriptions will be housed in each building. Other UNK students have been working on preparing a disaster preparedness document with a checklist. We hope nothing ever happens to the museum grounds, but we also need to be realistic and ready!

The building plans are still in the works. The architect and the building committee are working tirelessly to achieve and meet the needs of the county's citizens. Other committees are working on goals to prepare the Society for a capital campaign. A new business plan has been started and will be presented to the board for discussion in the fall. The other major work is to look for funding for a new Educational Coordinator position. We have several schools and adults that come in for group tours and numerous requests for more educational programming. One of our goals is to meet the needs and fulfill our requirement of educating as many people as possible about the rich history of Buffalo County!

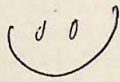
Please stop by and see us sometime! Thanks!! Jennifer



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