

## Nurses to the Rescue!

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*This article explores the role of nurses in the United States during the outbreaks of the Spanish Influenza between 1918 and 1920. It describes the rise of nursing from an untrained service to a trained profession during a time of national hardship. It argues that the epidemic provided women with a chance to successfully insert themselves into the male-dominated medical field by providing valuable services to a nation paralyzed by the Spanish Influenza and World War I. The article follows the pandemic, its debilitating nature, and its deadly toll while analyzing the growing importance of nursing, not only for the medical field and the patients, but also for the women who became nurses during this time. It concludes that the Spanish Flu enabled women to blaze a trail to higher education and careers, regardless of gender, class, and race.*

When the Spanish Flu first arrived in the United States in the spring of 1918, neither the public, physicians, nor public health officials worried about it. After all, America had weathered many such outbreaks before, with the last major one in the winter of 1915/1916. Advancements in therapy surely meant this epidemic would play out without causing major damage. By the time the pandemic was over, however, America lost over half a million people. Children, the elderly, and a surprisingly large number of young, previously healthy adults had succumbed to this deadly disease. In its wake, the Spanish Flu left bewilderment about its fatality rate and possible long-term health issues, but also instilled the resolve to improve public healthcare and medical research to avoid a recurrence of such a fatal deadly. The Spanish Flu proved to be a trailblazer for women in general and nurses in particular, as through its course they managed to find their own niche in the overall male world of medicine by launching nursing into a respected profession for women.

What had made the Spanish Flu more devastating than previous influenza outbreaks were its swift onset and severe symptoms, its secondary conditions, its range of fatalities, and its long-term effects on survivors. Named after the one country in war-torn Europe that had not censored its press and therefore had public records of the disastrous outbreak, the Spanish Flu's place of origin was initially unknown.<sup>1</sup> Virologists now theorize that it originated in China from a mutated influenza strand and traveled the world through trade and shipping routes. The first wave of the disease in the United States was recorded in the spring of 1918 in Kansas and in military camps throughout the country, but health officials largely ignored this outbreak as it killed few people. In September 1918, the virus reemerged, this time in Boston, Massachusetts, where it likely arrived with soldiers mobilized from the entire country to join the war efforts in Europe. Almost 200,000 died in the month of October, and the victory celebrations at the end of World War I in early November contributed to the large-scale spread of the disease in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy K. Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Molly Billings, "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918," in *Human Virology at Stanford* (June 1997), accessed on 7 February 2016, <https://virus.stanford.edu/uda/>.

The primary symptoms and secondary conditions caused by this particular epidemic were much more severe than in previous years. Unusually high fevers, often coupled with pulmonary edema, struck patients incredibly quickly. As Nancy Bristow notes in *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, “for most the attack came without warning.” Additionally, most people who had contracted the disease suffered from complications such as sinusitis, laryngitis, psychoses, and more. Many patients ended up with pneumonia, which often became the cause of death.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the pattern of infection changed. During previous influenza outbreaks, mostly children and elderly succumbed to the disease, but during the 1918-20 epidemic an alarming number of young adults contracted the illness and died from it, with people between the ages of twenty and forty suffering the highest mortality rate.<sup>4</sup> Those who survived the Spanish Flu were not in the clear, either. Full convalescence was slow at best, and quite a few patients suffered from long-term issues like cardiac irregularities, pulmonary tuberculosis, and vascular disorders, as well as nervous and paralytic problems.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, at least twenty-eight percent of the American population contracted the Spanish Flu, and an estimated 675,000 American succumbed to the disease between 1918 and 1920.<sup>6</sup> As the flu tore throughout the United States, men and women likely perceived the epidemic differently and reacted to it in diverging ways. In her book *American Pandemic*, Bristow goes to some length discussing the gendered roles of men and women, claiming men were “detached responders” and women were “emotional responders.” She analyzes private letters from men and women that contain accounts of the disease, and concludes, quite logically, that women submitted to their gender roles by openly stating their feelings and emotions regarding the influenza outbreak, often admitting their great fear of it. However, most women also did their best to prepare for the case the epidemic crossed into their households. Men, on the other hand, while equally worried about the disease, attempted to sound positive and optimistic, even if just for the benefit of their loved ones. Many men who caught the disease expressed frustration over being bed-ridden, asserting at the same time that it really was nothing and that they would be well soon enough.<sup>7</sup>

Some examples of the attitude about the Spanish Flu can be found in contemporary newspaper articles. Following such reports as they trailed the flu, one often has to read between the lines and consider what is *not* mentioned as much as what *is* mentioned, especially when dealing with times in which gender and race were viewed differently. Nonetheless, these articles provide a fascinating insight into the social structure of America at any given time, and the reader gets a feel for the overall mood of the era. Many people seem to have retained an upbeat and positive attitude in line with the general positivity displayed by public health officials (who were often male) and their agencies. The officials' goal was to avoid a major panic on top of the already

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<sup>3</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 44-5, 127, 196.

<sup>4</sup> Billings, “The Influenza Pandemic of 1918.”

<sup>5</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 180.

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, “The Pandemic,” in *The Great Pandemic: The United States in 1918-1919*, (accessed February 2, 2016), [http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/the\\_pandemic](http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/the_pandemic).

<sup>7</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 57-59.

existing issues of war and deadly influenza epidemic. This particular goal was arguably reached, even the official attitude may have been *too* positive, therefore creating an indifference toward the outbreak that was rather dangerous.<sup>8</sup>

Gender-based reactions played out even more in the responses to the epidemic, particularly in the area of volunteering. Volunteering -- often defined as a “distinctly female activity” by many Americans -- became a way for women to insert themselves into the public sphere by the end of the nineteenth century. During the early twentieth century, volunteering had taken on a new form when, thanks to the Progressive Movement, women set out to create a public space for their activities by “keeping house” on a larger scale, attempting to improve society one “stain” at a time.<sup>9</sup> Of course, volunteering itself was based on gender-roles, as women were seen as natural nurturers and willing assistants to men.<sup>10</sup> Therefore it was not surprising that women often reacted to the epidemic by immediately lending a helping hand. Newspapers, attempting to remain upbeat and positive while still alerting the public to the dangers and problems attached to the Spanish Flu, often reported on goodwill deeds and charitable events organized and performed by women. An article in the October 23, 1918, *New York American*, for example, describes relief efforts undertaken by the National League for Women Service and the Mayors Committee of Women on National Defense in New York. It highlights immediate efforts such as soup kitchens, but also explores the organizational skills necessary to fill all the needs that arose with the outbreak of the epidemic. It goes on to provide contact information for potential volunteers in order to ensure that all the relief efforts could be staffed properly.<sup>11</sup>

Men are rarely mentioned in such accounts, but this lack of male charitable work might be explained with circumstances other than just gender-role behavior. First, at the time of the outbreak the United States was in a state of war, which means that able-bodied men likely were preoccupied with war work, either directly at the front or at home as part of the mobilization effort. As it were, Marshalltown, Iowa’s *Evening Times-Republican* proudly reported on June 1, 1918, that twenty-nine percent of all male students at Indianola’s Simpson College voluntarily enlisted in the army. While not volunteers in a strict sense of providing a service without pay, their willingness to join the military rather than wait for the draft should not go unrecognized. Of course the article then goes on to mention that as of the declaration of war in April 1918, students had been “given drill work in accordance with the new army regulations” and that the female students had been given Red Cross instruction, thus reinforcing the roles of each gender.<sup>12</sup> Second, men still had to

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<sup>8</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 100, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Moser Jones, “The American Red Cross and Local Response to the 1918 Influenza Pandemic: A Four-City Case Study,” *Public Health Reports* 125 (Suppl 3) (2010), 92-104, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2862338/>.

<sup>10</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> “2,000 Victims Fed by Woman,” *New York American*, October 23, 1918, 11, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.1270flu.0006.721>. Also: “Women of Three Churches Take Turns in Caring for Epidemic Orphans’ Clothing,” *Worcester Daily Telegram*, October 18, 1918, 9, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.1220flu.0012.221>.

<sup>12</sup> “Simpson Students Loyal,” *Evening Times-Republican*, June 01, 1918, 3, accessed December 13, 2014, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85049554/1918-06-01/ed-1/seq-3/>.

financially provide for their families, which means they had to seek and hold employment, which in turn made it hard to spare the time to volunteer. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of Red Cross volunteers for example was made up of women. In her case study “The American Red Cross and Local Response to the 1918 Influenza Pandemic,” Marian Moser Jones speaks of an “army of eight million female volunteers” who produced medical supplies and clothing, provided social services, disbursed food, and chauffeured military and medical staff.<sup>13</sup>

Like other forms of volunteering, nursing was gendered, as Patricia D’Antonio’s explains in her book *American Nursing: A History of Knowledge, Authority, and the Meaning of Work*. Nevertheless, the world war and the Spanish Flu changed the status from domestic sick-nursing as an untrained occupation to nursing as a respected and trained profession. Based on her own experience as a trained nurse, as well as on the analysis of statistics, letters, diaries, journal entrances, and news reports spanning over a century of nursing, D’Antonio concludes that nurses over time found a way to gather knowledge and authority while at the same time forging a sense of identity.<sup>14</sup> *American Nursing* helps to understand the history of nursing from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

At the time of the epidemic, nursing was still a relatively young vocation, composed of trained, full-time assistants to doctors practicing in hospitals. Until the end of the nineteenth century, private homes, regardless of status, ethnicity, or race of patients, were considered the best place to care for the sick, the dying, and those who gave birth. Patients were assisted by sick nurses who had plenty of experience and a general understanding of the human body, but possessed no formal training. As hospitals emerged in the late eighteen-hundreds, the need arose for trained nurses who could provide professional assistance for physicians.<sup>15</sup>

Physicians in the early twentieth century were predominantly male by design. During early colonial times, women took responsibility for the health needs of their families, nurturing ill family members as sick-nurses and assisting in birth as midwives.<sup>16</sup> In the late eighteenth century, however, a shift occurred that placed formally-educated physicians in a higher class, who then deliberately excluded women from their ranks. By 1918, physicians had gained prestige and high status due to the establishment of exclusive professional organizations such as the American Medical Association.<sup>17</sup> Medical licensing, comprehensive restrictions, and medical education reform heightened the gender barriers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, physicians had managed to drive most women out of the professional medical field. Only a few women attempted

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<sup>13</sup> Jones, “The American Red Cross.” See also “World War I and the American Red Cross,” The American National Red Cross (2016), accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.redcross.org/about-us/history/red-cross-american-history/WWI>.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia D’Antonio, *American Nursing: A History of Knowledge, Authority, and the Meaning of Work*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), Kindle version.

<sup>15</sup> D’Antonio, *American Nursing*, loc. 221, 240, 354.

<sup>16</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1990), 12-3.

<sup>17</sup> American Medical Women’s Association, “AMWA’s History of Success,” in *About AMWA*, accessed February 7, 2016, <https://www.amwa-doc.org/about-amwa/history/>.

to become medical doctors, and in 1920 a mere five percent of all physicians practicing medicine in the United States were female. While men had carved out a niche as physicians, women carved out a niche as nurses. Domesticity, compassion, and selflessness were attributes ascribed to females across class boundaries. This meant that American society thought that women were predisposed to care for patients (not heal them, as that was the physician's task). Physicians may have been celebrated for their skills, but nurses increasingly earned respect for being "angels" and providing motherly care.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, nursing, much like anything else in early twentieth-century America, was subject to racial division and segregation. Although qualified through training, many black nurses found their career options limited by geography and duty. In some areas in the North they worked alongside white women and performed all duties for which they had trained. In a majority of the country, though, they were highly segregated and reduced to fulfilling menial tasks for which no formal training was needed.<sup>19</sup> However, because of the severe shortage of nurses due to the double burden of war and epidemic, officials had no other recourse but to consider nurses they previously rejected in the public health field. For the first time, the United States called upon black trained nurses and other minorities to help with the war efforts. In the *Nashville Globe's* July 26, 1918 edition, the front page announces that "UNCLE SAM CALLS FOR NEGRO TRAINED NURSES." Finally, black nurses were given the chance to don the Red Cross uniform, but they were not going to be stationed just anywhere. Their place was on army bases that housed black troops rather than overseas with the main body of the military. To explain why they were suddenly trusted with the care of "the boys," the racial stereotype of the caring and nurturing "Southern Mammy" was applied.<sup>20</sup>

The elation of being able to secure a job outside of one's community, coupled with the opportunity to gain work experience and recognition were enough to lure a number of minority nurses to the camps. One such minority nurse, a Native American woman whose name is not known, wrote to a friend about her experience as a nurse in army camps, describing her work load and the working conditions, but also mentioning that the Red Cross was "certainly 'hard-up' for nurses," as they called out time and again for volunteers. In fact, according to the author, the Red Cross was so desperate that "even me" (emphasis added by the author of the letter) could volunteer successfully.<sup>21</sup>

Whether white, black, or Native American, nurses were in high demand during the epidemic, and the Red Cross had quickly jumped into action by organizing resources and,

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<sup>18</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 123, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Negro Women in War Work," in *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War*, Emmett J. Scott, (1919), Ch. 12, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/comment/scott/SCh27.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> "Uncle Sam Calls for Negro Trained Nurses," *Nashville Globe*, July 26, 1918, 1, accessed December 13, 2014, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86064259/1918-07-26/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from nurse to her friend at the Haskell Indian Nations University, Kansas, October 17, 1918, Bureau of Indian Affairs, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/influenza-epidemic/records/volunteer-nurse-letter.pdf>.

according to Bristow, by “establishing and provisioning emergency hospitals to driving ambulances, from delivering fresh meals to nursing the sick in their homes, from creating and circulating educational pamphlets to surveying and serving community social needs in the aftermath.”<sup>22</sup> Accountable to the U.S. Congress, the Red Cross initially concentrated on providing the army with trained nurses at the beginning of America’s entrance into World War I, but with the influenza outbreak the service quickly returned to its original task of disaster relief (while still sending nurses the army’s way).<sup>23</sup> Working closely with public health officials, local authorities, and newspapers, the Red Cross called on all trained nurses across the United States to volunteer their services, stressing the need for graduate nurses to fill their ranks. Klamath Falls, Oregon’s *Evening Herald*, for example, informed its readers as early as June 4, 1918, that the Red Cross was in search of twenty thousand nurses, both for military and public health service. Appealing to the nurses’ need for recognition and praise, the article states that the Red Cross was “seeking now America’s bravest womanhood.” It further advised nurses who were not eligible for military service (whether for health, marital status, or race/ethnic restrictions) to report anyway, as they could still be useful by taking care of supplies and resources, and by visiting the sick.<sup>24</sup>

As the epidemic intensified in 1918 and 1919, the staffing shortage only worsened. On October 8, 1918, Kentucky’s *The Bourbon News* printed an “Appeal to Nurses,” in which the Red Cross asked graduate and undergraduate nurses as well as nursing aids to report to their local office “for service in the present epidemic of influenza.” In desperate need for staff, the Red Cross advertised that volunteer service “is desired,” but that nurses, according to their education status, would be reimbursed their expenses and would receive a weekly payment. In this article, the Red Cross also implores nurses not to work without assignment from the agency, maintaining that only if it keeps track of its nurses can it assess all resources and send them where they are needed most.<sup>25</sup> Another article from October 15, 1918, in *The Washington Times* highlighted the nurse shortage when it reported that an emergency hospital, opened on the day of the publication in the former quartermaster general building, had hired twenty nurses so far, but was in need of at least eighty more in order to provide adequate service to the up to five-hundred patients expected in its care.<sup>26</sup>

Articles and advertisements seeking nurses were published in newspapers and bulletins across the country. As it was painfully clear that there were not enough nurses to fill all the needs, young women were increasingly encouraged to apply to nursing schools, whether at a military facility or in a civilian hospital.<sup>27</sup> By this point it was also clear that trained nurses more and more

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<sup>22</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Lavinia L. Dock, *History of American Red Cross Nursing*, (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 13.

<sup>24</sup> “20,000 Nurses Are Now Being Sought,” *The Evening Herald*, June 04, 1918, 3, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99063812/1918-06-04/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Appeal to Nurses,” *The Bourbon News*, October 08, 1918, 4, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86069873/1918-10-08/ed-1/seq-4/>.

<sup>26</sup> “New Hospital to be Opened Today,” *The Washington Times*, October 15, 1918, Final Edition, 2, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1918-10-15/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>27</sup> “20,000 Nurses Are Now Being Sought” already advises young women to seek nursing training in June of 1918, but the need for nurses only grew with the massive outbreak of the Spanish Flu. Also: “Wanted: 50,000 Nurses: The

had a say in their fate. While, according to D'Antonio, many nursing school graduates only worked briefly as nurses and usually dropped out of the work force by the time they got married, some nurses began to look at nursing as a life-long career, albeit not in sick-nursing where they would provide their services in various private homes, but rather in the public health sector as school nurses or teachers.<sup>28</sup> During the years 1918 to 1920, nurses could decide whether they wanted to go into private sick-nursing, work at hospitals, or do public health work. Of course, this also meant that many simply ignored the call to serve. As the Red Cross informed officials and the public via newspapers about the number of trained nurses who have not registered for service, the wording suggests that qualified nurses not registering were not doing their best for their country and their society. Officials asked even "married and retired nurses" to reconsider and offer their skills instead of letting their experience go to waste. Of course, as the Red Cross called on married and retired nurses at this point, the organization still ignored the minorities in its pleas.<sup>29</sup> Still, over 18,000 nurses followed the recruiting call of the American Red Cross, and honorably served their country in the war as well as in the battle against the Spanish Flu.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the outbreak and in its aftermath, these nurses found strength and validation in their work, often feeling that they actually made a change in the well-being of patients and that they managed to save people. Many nurses described their work during the epidemic as "treasured experience" and successful endeavor. One nurse exclaimed, "Terrible as was the influenza epidemic, with its frightful toll, there was a certain tremendous exhilaration to be felt as well as many lessons to be learned from such a terrific test."<sup>31</sup> Another summed up her experience by stating, "Through the confusion and terror spread by the epidemic the visiting nurses, who had but little time to nurse, rushed on, instructing and leaving behind them a world of comfort, or reassurance, of encouragement, forming inseparable ties of trust, unity, and confidence between the patients and themselves."<sup>32</sup> While certainly saddened about the loss of life, nurses were rather content with their role during the Spanish Flu outbreaks of 1918 and 1919. Unlike doctors, who were expected to treat and cure the disease (failing at this invariably as there was no cure), nurses did not set out to cure their patients, but instead looked at providing care and easing the suffering to the best of their abilities.<sup>33</sup>

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Call," *The Washington Herald*, September 8, 1918, 5, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1918-09-08/ed-1/seq-17.pdf>. Furthermore: "Nurses Wanted," *The Morgan City Daily Review*, October 10, 1918, 1, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064293/1918-10-10/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> D'Antonio, *American Nursing*, loc. 1296.

<sup>29</sup> "20,000 Nurses Are Now Being Sought," informs the public that as of June 4, 1918, there were at least 60,000 registered (eligible) nurses "who have not yet volunteered for military service."

<sup>30</sup> Jones, "The American Red Cross."

<sup>31</sup> "Annual Report of the Superintendent," from *Report of the Board of Managers of the Visiting Nurse Society of Philadelphia, January 1-December 31, 1918*, quoted in Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 132.

<sup>32</sup> Miss Steinberg, "Personal experiences during the epidemic," student nurse epidemic accounts, Simmons College, quoted by Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, p. 131-133.

Despite the exhaustion caused by overworking due to a severe lack of nurses, the women in nursing often found a value and nobility in their service. They also developed a certain courage during their fight against contagious diseases, a courage that enabled them to sign up for duty even when faced with the possibility of contracting the illness themselves.<sup>34</sup> Nursing provided a unique opportunity to prove strength and independence, and in a combination of epidemic and war, woman even found themselves serving in the military alongside men. As nurses and doctors shared many of the same risks to their personal health, as well as the problem of understaffing and exhaustion, they were still eager to serve their country's needs.<sup>35</sup>

In the aftermath of the epidemic, nurses pointed out their invaluable services while at the same time demanding standardized training across the board. As an increasing number of colleges and universities recognized the need to add nursing to the degrees they offered, hospitals, previously the only facilities providing nursing training, began taking a backseat in the making of new nurses. The University of Michigan, for example, heavily advertised its Nurses Training School in *The Owsosso Times* of January 30, 1920. Already offering a three-year degree to aspiring nurses at no cost while they receive "full maintenance" at this point, the university also started a postgraduate program in public health nursing and a new five-year course in which women could earn a Bachelor's Degree *and* a nursing diploma. University officials pointed out that their training school provided more education than could possibly be dispensed at training hospitals alone, highlighting the increased desire to turn nursing into an academically-accepted profession instead of treating it as a craft or trade.<sup>36</sup>

As the Spanish Flu epidemic came to a close, nurses had inserted themselves into the public sphere by volunteering their services to the public for the greater good of society. Officials sought out and wooed nurses for their specific skills. As gender-assigned as the skills attributed to women at the beginning of the twentieth century may have been, the desperate times of war and epidemic enabled women to seek a higher education and to take their fate into their own hands as professional nurses. Highly regarded and honored for their role in the fight against the Spanish Flu (and of course in the war), nurses carved out an identity for themselves that filled them with pride and a sense of accomplishment. The epidemic certainly was tragic for the people of the United States, but it *did* help nurses to find their own niche in the male-dominated field of medicine. Good *can* come from bad, even in unexpected or not clearly visible forms; women became empowered while battling the influenza epidemic as volunteers and as trained nurses.

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<sup>34</sup> D'Antonio, *American Nursing*, loc. 1010.

<sup>35</sup> Bristow, *American Pandemic*, 134-135.

<sup>36</sup> "The Nurses Training School," *The Owsosso Times*, January 30, 1920, 1, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn97070614/1920-01-30/ed-1/seq-1/>.