

Signe Skott Cooper, RN, MEd, FAAN: January 29, 1921–July 16, 2013

Signe Skott Cooper, 92 years of age, passed away July 16, 2013 in Madison, Wisconsin. I first met Signe as an undergraduate student in 1969, but I did not have an appreciation for who she was until much later in my life. Nor did I have much appreciation for the nursing history that she tried to teach us. When I returned to Wisconsin in the late 1970s with a sincere interest in history, I became acquainted with Signe and the knowledge she was willing to share. Over the next 35 years, we conferred on projects, presented papers at conferences, wrote a book, and discussed the changes in the profession and its organizations. We often met in airports on our way to or from the American Association for the History of Nursing (AAHN) conferences. We discussed books she was reading or history questions we pondered. Would our nursing ancestors approve of the changes made to American Nurses Association (ANA) or the selling of the *American Journal of Nursing*?

Earlier in her career, she was known for her work in continuing education (CE) for nurses. For 35 years (1948 until 1983), Signe was on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin (UW)–Madison School of Nursing and Extension Division. In Wisconsin, the Extension is the outreach arm of the University, important to the rural inhabitants of the state. In 1955, Signe started her career in CE for nurses, traveling the state to deliver courses. In 1965, the first “distance education” courses were offered via Educational Telephone Network (ETN). This statewide system quickly expanded from enrolling 600 nurses at 24 “listening posts” to having nurses at 170 listening posts, covering every county in the state. I recall attending a history of nursing course delivered via ETN in the 1970s. Signe’s leadership in CE for nurses was instrumental in the formation of the ANA Council of Continuing Education and in the creation of the *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*. She was the associate editor for more than 25 years. Dorothy Hutchinson, her colleague/friend in the Wisconsin Extension Division, was the editor. Signe wrote four books related to her work in CE. One of her responsibilities was to conduct



Signe Skott Cooper. Reprinted with the permission of Laurie K. Glass.

refresher courses for inactive nurses. Two of her books addressed this audience: *Contemporary Nursing Practice: A Guide for the Returning Nurse* was published in 1970 followed by *Continuing Education in Nursing* in 1973 (it was revised and updated in 1983 with a new title, *The Practice of Continuing Education in Nursing*). There also were two edited books: *Self-Directed Learning in Nursing* and *Perspectives in Continuing Education*, both appearing in 1980.

When serving as the president of the Wisconsin Nurses Association (WNA) in the late 1950s, Signe's interest in nursing history was peaked when browsing through old records. Recognizing that early nursing leaders had exceptional careers and made some unusual contributions, she set out to investigate these leaders in the Wisconsin State Historical Society. *Wisconsin Nursing Pioneers*, a monograph that includes biographies of 17 nurses, appeared in 1968. Thereafter, she studied nursing history, taught it, and wrote about it and collected historical items. The UW–Madison School of Nursing has a collection of more than 100 nursing caps, uniforms, artifacts, books, and other items that Signe used in displays, classes, and consultations. In Wisconsin, she was known as “the nurse historian” and was sought out by everyone from high school students to nurse administrators and physicians for her expertise.

Throughout her career, Signe was an avid researcher and writer. She authored five books and more than 100 peer-reviewed articles/book chapters. Between 1991 and 2003, she also contributed 138 biographical sketches of Wisconsin nurses to *Nursingmatters*, Wisconsin's statewide monthly newspaper. There was a photograph for each article, and evidence of the extensive research she did for these sketches was found among her papers. Those biographies have been alphabetized and annotated, for easy access,

and along with the photographs that accompanied them are available in the WNA offices.

There was a “publication” that Signe did not even know she had. AAHN member Wendy Burgess (now deceased) studied public health nursing in Chicago, including the infant milk tents. Wherever she went, she browsed through books having to do with cows and milk production. In *Wholly Cow* (Emily M. Gwathmey and Niki Berg, authors), Wendy stumbled on a letter to the author from a “Signe Cooper.” It described life on the Iowa farm with about 25 cows, including naming the cows, milking them, and herding them into the barn. When Wendy asked Signe about it, she had a good laugh. She remembered writing it but did not know it was published in the book.

Signe was an early member of the AAHN and served as the second editor of the *AAHN Bulletin*. From 1987 to 1992, 22 issues were published. Signe not only solicited the articles but also wrote quite a few of them and established a system of regional reporters. Under her leadership, the *Bulletin* went from 8 pages to 12 pages and from appearing three times a year to four times a year. In 2003, President Kathy Hanson presented Signe with the AAHN President’s Award.

Signe was a fellow of the American Academy of Nursing (1977), named one of its Living Legends (2003), and inducted into the ANA Hall of Fame (2000). She also received the National League of Nursing’s Linda Richards Award and the ANA Honorary Recognition Award for her dedication to, and innovative efforts in, CE for nurses.

In 1943, Signe received her Certificate of Graduate Nurse from the UW and in 1948, her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. She attended Teachers College, Columbia University and earned a Master of Education (MEd) degree from the University of Minnesota (1955). As a member of the Army Nurse Corps during World War II, she served in the China-Burma-India Theater for 2 years. Signe’s wartime experience is shared in a 1990 doctoral dissertation, *United States Army Nurses in the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II, 1942–45* by Linda N. Bianchi, and a Wisconsin Historical Society publication, *Women Remember the War, 1941–1945*.

In Signe’s memoir, *The Life of a Living Legend: A 20th Century Nursing Odyssey*, the retirement chapter begins with a quote, “It’s better to wear out than to rust out,” and that she lived this was evident in her 30-year retirement. She volunteered at the UW Arboretum where she started a weekly walking group. She loved nature walks and attending outdoor concerts. In addition to her work at the arboretum and her historical research and writing, she took piano lessons, delivered Meal on Wheels, managed the School of Nursing’s historical collection, and was a docent in charge

of accessioning items at her local historical society. She had an extensive nursing and health care stamp collection and liked to do needlepoint. Traveling around the United States with friends was a frequent activity. For 11 years, Signe visited her mother every day playing Scrabble or Dominos, proclaiming that she never won. Signe's mother lived to be 105 years old. She often talked about her family's "longevity genes."

Signe was a very generous person. For several years, she shared her home with graduate students, enjoying the conversations with them about their studies. Among her papers, we discovered that Signe had personally sponsored several Wisconsin military nurses for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial in Arlington, Virginia. She also recruited her friends and colleagues to sponsor long-forgotten nurses whom she had uncovered. Always a willing participant, many students and researchers interviewed Signe for their projects. Being very generous with her time and knowledge, I doubt she ever turned down a request for help or an interview. At the age of 90 years, she was still granting requests for interviews. I know she met with a high school student and a college student during that year to share her World War II experiences. She was always gracious and willing to share her photos and tell her stories.

There is a new \$52 million building under construction for the UW–Madison School of Nursing. Signe donated money to create The Hildegard Skott and Signe Skott Cooper Historical Suite that will be located near the



Signe Skott Cooper with Dean Katharyn May at the groundbreaking ceremony for Signe Skott Cooper Hall in April 2012. Reprinted with the permission of Laurie K. Glass.

administrative area. When Signe continued to raise funds for the building, it was decided the building would bear her name, Signe Skott Cooper Hall. This could be the first school of nursing building named for a nurse historian. Signe hoped to live long enough to see it open, but that was not to be. The building will be dedicated in August 2014. Signe passed away in July 2013.

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