

GOWER REMEMBERS

Mabel Atwill, VAD

(1883-1975)



A letter was received from Miss Mabel Atwill, who has been a V.A.D. in France for the last couple of years, in which she says she is enjoying splendid health despite the strenuous life she has been spending in France, and wishes to be remembered to her many friends.

(The Evening Telegram, December 28, 1918)

Mabel Atwill was born in St. John's, on July 14, 1883, the second of four children of Harriet Whiteway and William F. Atwill. An older brother, Frederick, younger sister, Rose, and younger brother, William, rounded out the family. Her parents were married at the Gower Street Methodist Church (the one that burned in the 1892 fire) on March 29, 1881, so it was likely that Mabel was a member of the Gower Street Congregation from birth. Her father died when she was still a child, in January 1890, at age 33. Her mother was then forced to work outside the home to support her family. She was fortunate in securing a position as a milliner at Ayre & Sons Limited on Water Street.

Obviously a strong believer in the value of education, all four of Harriet's children attended the Methodist College on Long's Hill, where Mabel, in addition to her regular studies in grammar, arithmetic and the classics, received training in art, particularly drawing. Her classmates included Elsie Holloway, daughter of Robert E. Holloway, principal of the college at the time, and Mabel Chaplin, whose brothers John and Harold Chaplin both lost their lives during World War I.

After completing her studies there, probably at the end of the 1898-1899 school year, she undertook a course in shorthand, most likely by mail, receiving a diploma in the J. M. Sloan method early in March of 1900. This may have been in preparation for her entry into the workforce.

Very little is known of Atwill's early career. She was employed as a clerk at Trapnell's Jewellery store in 1904 and as a saleslady at Ayre & Sons in 1908; by 1913 she was working for Job H Roberts¹ in his tea and commercial merchant business on McBride's Hill as a bookkeeper. She was still working there when she decided to enroll in the Newfoundland Branch of the Red Cross in February 1915, with the intention of joining the Voluntary Aid Detachment, an organization founded in 1909 by the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem to train and co-ordinate volunteers who were to provide nursing services in various hospitals in England, and after 1914 on the European continent. However, various matters kept Atwill from going overseas until the summer of 1916.

Atwill left St. John's aboard the SS *Stephano* on July 22, 1916 for New York City, arriving at Ellis Island on July 27. With her were Bertha Forsey, Patience Greenland, Maureen Saunders and Elsie Herder, Newfoundland nurses or volunteers also about to embark upon war service in Europe. After a short stopover in New York City they boarded the SS *St. Paul*, which took them across the Atlantic to England, arriving in Liverpool on August 7. Later that month later, Atwill was assigned to duty at the 4th Northern General Hospital in Lincoln.

¹ Job H. Roberts (1874-1951) was the father of Dr. Harry Roberts (1908-2004) and grandfather of Hon. Edward Roberts, both members of the Gower Street United Church congregation.

As a VAD, Atwill's primary job was assisting trained nurses in the care of patients, usually soldiers, sailors and airmen from the various British and Empire fighting forces who had been injured in the war effort, some of whom would have been Newfoundlanders. While her duties filled most of her days, there was some time to relax and travel to nearby villages. A postcard she sent one of her Newfoundland VAD colleagues, Frances Cluett (1883-1969) of Belleoram, dated April 3, 1917, read: "Visited Torquay yesterday. Enjoying holiday. Have you heard when you are going? Your friend, Mabel Atwill." Her question to Cluett was referring to her re-assignment to a casualty hospital in France, which happened within a few weeks of that postcard.

Atwill herself was re-assigned to duty in France later that year, on July 12, 1917. She spent next twenty months there at the hospital in St. Omer, and possibly at hospitals in Calais, Boulogne and Rouen. Her service at these hospitals coincided with a period of heavy German bombing and shelling, which resulted in the destruction of some of these hospitals and death or injury for some of the VADs, nurses and other medical personnel, as well as the soldiers who were already there because of injuries.

She did receive some respite from the arduous tasks and dangerous conditions that were her lot in the casualty hospitals. During the late winter of 1918 she was on furlough in Edinburgh, Scotland, and sometime previous to that had

encountered John G. (Jack) Higgins (1891-1963) of St. John's who had enlisted in the St. Francis Xavier Hospital Unit as an ambulance diver after having been rejected by the Newfoundland Regiment on medical grounds. A report on their meeting that appeared in the St. John's newspaper *The Daily News* on April 1, 1918 stated: "Some time ago Miss Atwill met Mr. Jack Higgins, who is connected with one of the Canadian Corps. Mr. Higgins, it will be remembered, is one of our Rhodes Scholars, and needless to say, was glad to meet someone from his home town with whom he could have a good chat."

Later that same year, *The Daily News* of December 28, 1918, informed readers that they had received a letter from Atwill in which she recounted her "pleasure in having luncheon with Princess Mary,² who was then in France and was visiting the hospital to which she was attached." It further reported that "All the nurses are glad the war is over, but they still have a lot of work to do, and it will be some time before they will be released."

Release for Atwill did not occur until March 21, 1919, at which time she had served as a VAD for more than 2.5 years. After a couple of months of rest and recuperation, on May 20, 1919, she, together with VAD colleagues Patience Greenland and Marion Saunders, who had travelled to Europe with her in the Summer of 1916, as well as Edith

² Princess Mary (1897-1965) was the only daughter of King George V and Queen Mary of England, and later served as Honorary Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment.

Milley and Isabelle Taylor, boarded the SS *Sachem* at Liverpool bound for Newfoundland. They disembarked in St. John's on May 27.

It is highly likely that Atwill re-entered the workforce after settling back into civilian life in St. John's. She lived with her mother and her sister Rose at 7 Leslie Street until 1923 when all three of them moved to the United States, eventually settling in Farmington, West Hartford, Connecticut. This move was likely influenced by Mabel's brother Fred, who had relocated to the Hartford area in 1902. There she was employed as a bookkeeper with first Jack the Tire Expert and later with the Bond Hotel, retiring in 1950. She was a long-time member of First-St. Paul United Methodist Church in Hartford.

Atwill made at least one visit home to Newfoundland after her move to the United States. The Corner Brook newspaper *The Western Star* for September 14, 1951 reported that she and her sister were guests at the Glynmill Inn in Corner Brook the previous week.

Mabel Atwill died on Christmas Day, December 25, 1975, at age 92, and was laid to rest at Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford. Her sister Rose died six months later on June 26, 1976, at age 91. She, too, was interred in Cedar Hill Cemetery. Neither Mabel nor Rose married, although they were survived by two nieces, Emily Atwill Conklin of

Hartford and Dorothy Atwill Clerk of St. Louis, Missouri, and a nephew, Ralph Atwill of St. John's, Newfoundland.

One of more than 150 Newfoundland VADs and nurses who took part in World War I, Mabel Atwill gave willingly of her time and talents, often finding herself in great personal danger, to care for injured soldiers, sometimes within viewing distance of the actual fields of battle. She and her colleagues had the eternal gratitude of the men they cared for and deserve to be remembered for their selfless service at a time of great need.

On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately the next four years. On roughly every third Sunday from now through to 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, like this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.

We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of this congregation. If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca 726-6169/864-8303