A MISSION OF LOVE AND MERCY:

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN CANADA THROUGH THE PIONEERING SOCIAL SERVICES WORK OF THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH

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The arrival of successful European settlement in the early seventeenth century along the St Lawrence and the development that ensued toward today’s modern and increasingly urbanized Canada did not occur evenly. In western Canada, this is even more evident. With the delayed arrival until the early nineteenth century of any significant ‘white’ settlement in Canada’s West from the edges of the eastern prairie to the borders of the Pacific Coast,¹ the development toward ‘modern’ when settlement finally arrived, occurred much more rapidly. Unfortunately, the West’s late arrival to the overall Canadian scene has resulted in some negative consequences for western Canada both politically and socially; more specifically, the access to power and influence that many Westerners believe is lacking in Canada’s federal system for those residing in the West.² However, late settlement alone cannot be viewed, as the sole factor for some Westerners’ feeling of a perceived position of inferiority within the federal system, or for the unique development that the West has experienced. In fact, a number of additional reasons must be considered for the way in which western Canada’s development unfolded. Most importantly, two unchangeable factors have provided the basis for both the areas late development and much of the sentiment of alienation that continues to be felt by some Westerners today.

The first factor is simply Canada’s vast expanse, which created a significant obstacle for building a single cohesive nation, and the second impediment was the incredibly varied physical environment and climate that exists between Canada’s borders. Thus, both Canada’s sheer size and varied geography created and fostered regionalized development, at times bringing disunity. In a more general statement about the history of Canada, Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel support this assertion: “…the physical
environment has been a crucial factor in shaping life’s chances and choices. While geography alone does not determine human destiny, it places limits on the possibilities that individuals and groups enjoy.” Jean Barman, in her text on the history of British Columbia also mentions the importance of these factors. She writes: “Size, location, and geography give the explanation. British Columbia is big. It’s not just big, it’s very big.”

In furthering support of this view that both physical environment and sheer vastness have and continue to direct or limit development in various regions of Canada, Barman states: “British Columbia’s location has been perceived both as an advantage and as a liability.”

While the importance of these two factors, whether creating specific advantages or limitations, influenced western Canada’s development, other factors also guided those early pioneers who settled in the West, allowing them to put in place the necessary foundation for the later overall transformation of the West toward today’s modern industrialized society. Importantly, both the determination and personal sacrifice of the early settlers and those who would follow in the coming years were key factors for the modern development of Canada’s West. While historians in the past have well acknowledged the importance of individual efforts in both the West’s and Canada’s overall development, one group of individuals who played a vital role was mostly missing from many of the pre-second wave feminist historical accounts—that group was women. In one of the few (or perhaps only comprehensive survey style texts) written solely on Canadian women’s history, Alison Prentice et al. in the introduction outline the overwhelming absence of women and their important contributions to Canada’s history from most Canadian history texts until the mid-1980s. The authors explain that it was not until the beginning of the women’s movement in the 1960s, through the untiring efforts
of second-wave feminists within the academic realm, that the accepted understanding or ‘truths’ being professed by established historians of that day began to be questioned and subsequently challenged.6

While much progress has been made by interested historians and other academics exploring Canadian women’s history and women’s role in past and present Canadian society as is evidenced by the growing number of articles and books on the subject, misunderstanding and misinformation about both the realities and the importance of women’s past involvement in Canada’s development still remains. Debra Rink, writing in 2000 about the history of Catholic sisters in British Columbia states, “[o]nly recently has society begun seriously to address the role of women in history.”7 She further mentions that this has been particularly true of Catholic women religious who “have been given little recognition for their involvement in and contributions to society.”8 Although we have gone beyond the days of the 1970s, when feminist Gerda Lerner proclaimed that “[t]he first challenge of Women’s History to traditional history, is the assertion that women have a history”9, I would suggest that there is still a long road ahead before women’s contributions to society are truly valued in both academia and Canadian society more generally.

Sadly, I was reminded only the other day that even with the now near half a century of feminist historical research on Canadian women, women’s ‘story’ continues to remain misunderstood and misinterpreted. On a guided tour of a local museum, I listened to a representative of the museum explain to a group of children that women did not work after marriage or contribute outside the family until after the Second World War.10 Certainly, given that joining employment and marriage together for women was
considered socially unacceptable, married women were not encouraged to participate in paid employment before WWII. Examples of this are recorded from interviews conducted in Denyse Baillargeon’s article on marriage in the interwar years.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, in discussion of Canadian nursing during the same period, Kathryn McPherson in her text explains that married women “were enjoined to leave paid labour upon marriage.”\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, married women (as was the situation for single women) in all classes of Canadian society have always managed to work around the social taboos and outright restrictions placed on women to participate at various times in both paid and unpaid work in Canada both out of necessity and desire. Today, what is now of more importance to the recording of women’s past is not when and where Canadian women participated in paid or unpaid work whether married or single, rather how much that work and the many sacrifices made by Canada’s women directly and indirectly significantly contributed to the overall development of Canada. Also imperative in the recording of Canada’s past is to ensure that whatever work Canadian women did is seen as having importance or ‘real value’, and not merely regarded as superficial ornaments to decorate men’s endeavours.

It is through an initial examination of the archival records of the hospital mission to Comox, British Columbia by The Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Toronto, that I will demonstrate that the commitment, sacrifice, and ‘free’ labour of this small group of women was imperative to the communities’ immediate medical needs. Moreover, I will argue that the Sisters of Saint Joseph’s mission of labour, mercy, and love assisted in providing part of the necessary foundation required to move the Comox Valley district from a pioneer settlement to a modern vibrant community in a relatively short period of time. Their efforts were part of a larger women’s ‘story’ of sacrifice that
was repeated many times across western Canada during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as it was in other parts of Canada much earlier. This labour of love included a wide variety of women’s groups across western Canada who sacrificed their time and efforts. Through their unpaid work, volunteerism, as well as through various facets of individual women’s paid work, women in the West ensured their families and others were not only assisted in times of need, but also these same women began developing the necessary infrastructures they deemed important. All of this ‘women’s’ work can be found to have not only made individual lives easier in early communities in the West, but for a young struggling nation, this ‘work’ of women additionally assisted in laying the initial foundation for bringing about development of the West toward becoming part of a modern Canadian society that many now take for granted.

Part of this development process that took place includes our present social services system. Moreover, many Canadians have come to expect this system as an inherent right, yet understand little of the systems’ initial inception. “Canadians tend to view our modern health and welfare state as a national treasure, built in the post-second world war era on the inspiration of progressive liberal figures such as Leonard Marsh and William Beveridge. But this system of governance did not spring forth like the first snowdrops after a cold winter. Rather, the welfare state created in the 1950s and 1960s was laid on top of older poor law institutions and programs.” Megan Davies’ words are correct when she states that our modern system was not a product of the post war and was often built over top of older systems based on charity that distinguished between the deserving and undeserving poor. However, not all that was done toward building a
modern social services system should be seen as dismally as the picture Davies paints for British Columbia’s residential care for the aged in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There were those who strived to build something different, something respectful of those they served, but economic shortcomings often got in the way. It is important to remember that limited resources in settlements barely beyond the initial pioneering phase in many parts of Canada allowed for little choice in the care of the indigent and infirm. While I am not condoning the substandard aged-care that Davies substantiates existed in British Columbia during this period, I am suggesting that the delivery of aged-care as well as health care may need to be recognized within the limited economic resources available for care in many British Columbia communities at that time.

The Arrival of The Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Canada

The focus of this study, The Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Canada have a relatively brief history. If their efforts across Canada are compared to the nuns who arrived much earlier, as far back as New France, then this congregation of sisters’ accomplishments in such a short period must be viewed as being even more commendable. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Catholic sisters would gradually arrive to fill a variety of roles in the new colony. The women who would initially settle in New France and later Canada included the Hospitalière (1639), the Ursulines (1639), and the Congrégation de Notre-Dame (1671),¹⁴ to name only a few. Together these Catholic sisters would begin a long tradition of service in Canada that would over the coming centuries cross over a number of established religious boundaries, so that the poor and needy might be comforted. Through providing education, hospitals, and other social
service functions, these determined religious women would both “share in Christ’s redemptive mission”\textsuperscript{15} and through their commitment to charity, serve Canadian society. Although writing on the Catholic sisters’ experience generally in the United States, Bernadette McCauley identifies well this dual role of these resolute women. McCauley writes, “sisters’ involvement in hospital development was not an inevitable extension of their charitable mission; it was a deliberate choice made by sisters and their supporters who believed that their goals, which included both the alleviation of suffering and guidance on a path to salvation, would be well served in healthcare.”\textsuperscript{16}

When the Sisters of Saint Joseph came to Canada beginning in the nineteenth century, they would follow similar paths of other ‘sisters in Christ’ who had established numerous missions and Mother houses in Canada ahead of them. However, before their arrival, with the separation in 1791 to form Lower and Upper Canada, much had changed in the Catholic Church. The Catholic religion was now under the Bishop of Quebec and was no longer dependent on the earlier missionaries, and for the soon to arrive Sisters of St. Joseph in Upper Canada, more important was the increase of Scottish and Irish Catholics arriving. With the increase of Catholics to Upper Canada, Catholic activities beginning about 1801 were now becoming part of the English flavour in Upper Canada.\textsuperscript{17} It would be to this new ‘English’ Catholicism that The Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph would arrive in Toronto on October 7, 1851 to take up their mission at the Nelson Street orphanage. The religious sisters would replace the lay management of the orphanage under the tutelage of the Bishop of Toronto.\textsuperscript{18} However, unlike most of the earlier women religious who headed up orphanages, hospitals, and schools, these sisters would not arrive directly from Europe to Canada to set up a congregation. Their arrival in
Canada would be part of a joint pioneer mission from two Mother houses in the United States, one from Philadelphia and one from St. Louis. Each house would provide two sisters for the new mission in Canada. Although Canada’s mission would originate from the United States and not Europe, the founding Mother, Sister Delphine Fontbonne was well connected to the congregation at Lyons, France. Being the niece of Mother Saint John Fontbonne, Lyons founder, Sister Delphine knew well the original tenets made by the founding congregation in Le Puy, France. JoAnn McNamara in *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* summarizes well, the Orders’ original spirit recaptured when the Sisters of St. Joseph regrouped after the French Revolution in July of 1808. McNamara writes: “Typically charitable sisters shared the poverty of their clients as part of their charism. Fontbonne’s Saint Joseph houses were situated in the slums of Lyons. They revived the traditional ideals of labor and self-mortification as an enhancement of their mission.”

At the request of the Bishop of Toronto to “his friend the Right Reverend Francis Joseph Kenrick, Bishop of Philadelphia” Mother Delphine who originally “trained at Lyons in the original spirit of the Congregation” would be chosen for the Toronto mission. Three other sisters, all trained in the United States, would join her: Sister Martha Bunning, Sister Alphonsus Margerum, and Sister Bernard Dinan. While these four pioneering spirited women would devote “themselves with unremitting zeal to the spiritual and temporal welfare of the helpless young charges committed to their care,” the early years in Toronto would not be easy ones. “Toil was unceasing in the first years, beginning often as early as two in the morning and continuing until ten or eleven at night.” If the hard work on its own was not enough to tempt the sisters’ faith from time
to time, even more the continual poverty that accompanied the endless work must have challenged the sisters. It would not be surprising to discover that this daunting situation at times created individual faith crises for some sisters. However, as McCauley reminds us, “the ‘sisters’ religious faith was a tremendous source of strength amid adversity” and it was their faith that led and encouraged them to persevere.

It would be amidst this toil and privation, that the new ‘Canadian’ order would not only thrive, but also expand their work in this new mission location. “Less than a year after their arrival, the Sisters were asked to collaborate in the movement to improve the status of the Catholic schools in Toronto.” This is not surprising, as the Sisters of St. Joseph had gained much experience in the ‘teaching’ area as their earliest missions upon arriving in St Louis, Missouri were teaching missions. The continued demands on the already stretched resources of the Toronto sisters would not see the sisters remaining only in that city. Requests for the expansion of the Sisters of Saint Joseph’s missions outside of Toronto would come quickly. “In 1852, at the earnest request of Very Reverend E. Gordon, Vicar-General, Sister Martha with two companions founded a convent and orphanage in Hamilton.” Other early missions in the nineteenth century would soon follow for the Sisters of St. Joseph: St. Catharines - 1856 (School), Barrie - 1858 (School), Oshawa – 1858 (School), and Thorold – 1866 (School).

**Western Canada Teaching Missions**

In western Canada, the Sisters of St. Joseph would not establish education missions until the twentieth century. As the population across all of western Canada began to grow in the twentieth century seeing British Columbia’s population more than
doubling to almost 150,000 non-Aboriginals in a ten-year period preceding 1901,\textsuperscript{31} it is not surprising that the request for more religious women’s services would increase after the turn of the twentieth century. This is not to suggest that Catholic sisters did not come earlier to establish missions in prairie and coastal settlements, only that as populations increased in these settlements, the new communities were unable to provide for themselves the necessary social service infrastructures. Thus, the calls to establish new missions in the West grew with the establishment and growth of new settlements. In British Columbia, the newly founded Sisters of St. Ann would answer the first mission call to this province seeing the women religious leaving from Quebec in 1858, by way of the Panama Canal to Fort Victoria. This first mission in British Columbia would be a teaching mission.

There would be a number of other women religious congregations to head west and establish teaching missions before the Sisters of St. Joseph would undertake the task. The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph first established in Toronto, and later flourished in other parts of Ontario but would not go west until the twentieth century arrived. Prince Rupert, British Columbia “was the site of the first school founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph in the Canadian West.”\textsuperscript{32} With the Catholic population increasing in Prince Rupert, the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate believed it was time to call sisters to open a school. So convinced of the need, “Father Bunoz journeyed all the way to Toronto to beg for Sisters.”\textsuperscript{33} Their prayers were answered and the promise fulfilled when four Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Prince Rupert in 1916. Other education missions in the early twentieth century in both British Columbia and other prairie communities would follow: Ladysmith on Vancouver Island in 1917, Winnipeg in 1919 and 1923, Vancouver
in 1922, Sifton Manitoba in 1926, and Rosetown Saskatchewan in 1935. Without the efforts and sacrifices of these sisters and many other sister congregations, many communities simply could not have delivered the quality of education as inexpensively as provided by the Catholic women religious.

**Hospital Missions**

While schools or education missions continued to remain the central focus for much of the work the Sisters of St. Joseph would undertake in the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century in both Ontario and in the West (British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan), hospital work would also be embraced by these Canadian sisters. Hospitals would become a part of their missions and the work it has been said began through providence and not by intention. According to Sister Mary Agnes’ reading of the early Annals, it does not appear that the opening and the administration of hospitals was included as part of the original ‘Canadian’ plan for the Sisters of St. Joseph. However, hospitals and teaching of children may not be as far removed each from the other as it may initially appear for these sisters, especially when the first mission in Canada, being an orphanage, was already there to act as a bridge between the two. Further to note is that the Sisters of St. Joseph’s early roots in Le Puy were originally attached to charity and mercy, and not education specifically. Thus, it was from the Sisters of St. Joseph’s earliest beginnings in France where on October 15, 1648 they formed The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph that would see these non-cloistered women come together to “devote their energies to the solace of the poor and afflicted”.34 Their own past always encouraged the Canadian sisters to be willing to
nurse the poor when need arose. However, as is previously noted, it was not a planned decision, but rather a crisis of diphtheria and the city’s inability to staff the Isolation Hospital that brought the Sisters of St. Joseph more formally into hospital work in Toronto. Once involved, The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph quickly became respected in the community in every facet of needed social services work they undertook. It was indeed “the devotion and kindness with which they performed their duties that won admiration and respect from their patients and those who shared their labours.” After the crisis was met, Dr. Norman Allen, Medical Officer of Health, suggested and then persisted with his plea until the Sisters of St. Joseph agreed to open their first hospital in July of 1892. St Michael’s hospital expanded quickly, but it was not without “much opposition, and many obstacles” in the early years, writes Sister Mary Agnes. However, through perseverance and dedication, the sisters would see resistant forces retreat and their work could then be conducted peacefully and with the support of many admirers both Catholic and non-catholic.

**The Comox Hospital Mission**

In 1912, when the Sisters of St. Joseph in Toronto received a request (later recorders of the event describe it as more of a desperate plea) from J.D. McCormack, president of the Comox Logging and Railway Company, to establish a mission and a hospital to care for “the grim accidents among the woodsmen in the early days of the century”, “[f]or a year or more the Community hesitated”. Because of his wife’s education in Toronto with the Sisters of St. Joseph, McCormack wanted these sisters to establish a hospital in Comox. He had learned that these sisters “had shown themselves to
be excellent administrators, supervisors and nurses."42 This knowledge motivated McCormack to actively secure an approval from Bishop McDonald of Victoria (the diocese for the Comox district) to request this particular congregation of sisters.

However, there are a number of reasons that can be suggested for the delay in returning a response. First, the Sisters of St. Joseph were already fully immersed in many teaching missions in Ontario, as well as their involvement in a continually growing St Michael’s hospital in Toronto. Quite simply, their resources may have been overstretched. Clearly increased demands in Toronto existed for the Sisters of St. Joseph “[w]ith growth of the city, calls for hospital services continued to increase and a four-storey wing north of the original unit was opened in 1912”.43 Second, Comox, British Columbia was not only a remote and mostly undeveloped community, it was clear across the other side of a very large country. Most likely, the Sisters of St. Joseph would have known little of the area, and additionally, it would have separated the sisters sent on this mission a great distance from the Mother house adding complexities to successfully operating a mission hospital. The 1912 Annals record: “There came a cry out of the wilds of Vancouver Island to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto that a hospital was badly needed in a place called Comox, the place of the tall timbers, a place so far away it had never been contemplated.”44 Finally, and perhaps most importantly from the sisters’ perspective, any new mission would have needed time for the Sisters of St. Joseph to discern whether God was calling them to such a mission.

Realistically, when low population density and the areas remoteness are considered, the Sisters of St. Joseph were in retrospect prudent in their reservations for this mission. Even by 1912-13, British Columbia continued to have few inhabitants
(population under 400,000)\textsuperscript{45} for a province whose land mass is so extremely large (944,735 km\textsuperscript{2}). If a mission hospital was established, not only would low population make securing the necessary hospital equipment difficult, but more importantly the economic resources available and required to efficiently run a hospital would also be limited. Additionally, there was a further challenge for the Sisters of St. Joseph to consider before accepting this mission in the ‘wilds’ of British Columbia. In 1911, only 15\% of the province was Roman Catholic against more than 70\% of the population declaring affiliation to some denomination of the various Protestant churches.\textsuperscript{46} While from a proselytizing position this would present opportunities for the Catholic sisters, from an economic one it might be insurmountable.

When the Comox area had been described as being the ‘wilds’ of British Columbia, at the turn of the twentieth century, this was not an exaggeration. As the new century dawned, Comox was a young community still occupied in many respects with settling and simple pioneering. The first white settler, George Mitchell, farmer, is documented as arriving in the Comox area in the early 1850s. His pre-emption request, which allowed settlers “to preempt up to 160 acres of land at $1/acre in exchange for development of the apparently unoccupied land”\textsuperscript{47}, is not dated until June, 1862. However, a letter written by Mitchell to Victoria officials in 1865, over a survey conflict suggests that he was in the area when Joseph McKay undertook earlier investigations of the Comox area’s potential in 1852, as well as during Governor James Douglas’ visit to the area in 1853.\textsuperscript{48} An early surveyor, Eric Duncan, in his survey notes, further confirms Mitchell’s settlement in the 1850s. Even by the 1860s, with a colonial government seeing increased numbers of pre-emption requests being registered, the early years in the Comox
District are considered to have been rough ones. Women were few in number, and with both extremely limited resources and sporadic delivery of those goods to the area during this period; for those men who remained without the company of a woman, are believed to have spent little of their time on shelter construction and instead, focused their efforts toward getting beyond subsistence farming.49

According to the Land Recorder’s 1865 Statistical Report, improvements totaling over $11,000 had occurred in the area. Moreover, the area now had a population of 64, which boasted the inclusion of 7 women and 7 children.50 While a steady trend of settlement to the area would continue over the coming decades, it would not be farming that would become the leading industry. With a Hudson’s Bay Company looking for a new resource to exploit to replace a waning fur trade, Vancouver Island was looked to for the area’s known coal deposits.51 Added to this desired resource was the district’s easy access to substantial timber reserves.52 It would be the demand for these two resources that would become the main impetus for increased settlement in the district, and the necessity for the invitation to what are now Comox and Courtenay to the Sisters of St. Joseph by McCormack and his logging company.

Some of the early chroniclers of the Sisters of St. Joseph’s history suggest it was truly providence that finally guided the decision to send a mission westward, rather than weighing practicalities of such a mission. It was the timely arrival of the appointment to the Archdiocese of Toronto by Archbishop Neil McNeil, formally of the Vancouver Diocese, where his arrival and urging53 saw the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto answer the call of Bishop McDonald of Victoria. While providence might have been the motivator for the sisters to agree to the West Coast hospital mission, what can be
ascertained from the annals is that the sisters under Mother Irene, Superior General, not only made their decision to accept independently, but also that the Sisters of St. Joseph were indisputably shrewd negotiators with both McCormack and the Bishop of Victoria. The annals of June 1912 record their acceptance letter: “We accept the Comox mission, but a house must be ready for the sisters, and they must have all spiritual administrations, that is we suppose a priest is resident there. We are not now prepared to build a hospital there on account of our new buildings here, but later on when the sisters get to Vancouver funds will come, as past experience has taught us in the case of new missions.”

While agreement in principle for the mission now existed, clearly hesitation remained for the Sisters of St. Joseph in sending out a mission from Toronto. Before setting out on the Comox mission, another entry from the annals in November 1912 indicates that it was apparent that the sisters were still negotiating for acceptable terms. The annals record: “Wrote to Reverend H. Mertins, Comox. Sending plans for Convent hospital in the light of future realities it would be intriguing to view these plans.” Yet, still no sisters went west. Satisfactory preparations from the sisters’ perspective for answering the call were not in place. It was not until April 1, 1913, that the sisters must have finally received acceptance of the conditions of their original acceptance letter, recorded in the annals of June 1912. The entry in the annals of April 1, 1913 records: “Bishop McDonald has informed the community that he will deed over to us 5 acres of land in Comox worth at least $500 per acre.” Almost immediately, the Sisters of St. Joseph announced that a mission would be heading for Comox.

Four sisters were chosen for the Comox mission to establish a hospital for the logging company and the Comox District. Sister Majella, a 46-year-old music teacher
would head up the group and become the first superior of the mission for St. Joseph’s hospital in Comox. Three others would join her: Sister Claudia, a nurse; Sister Praxedes, a cook and housekeeper; and Sister Edmund, a practical nurse. While some in the Comox community and perhaps the bishop in Victoria might have wondered and even questioned the Congregation’s choice of a music teacher for heading up a hospital mission, particularly when before leaving Vancouver she interviewed the Heintzman Company to arrange a piano for Comox, there would soon be no doubts as to both her determination and capabilities.

*Sisters Majella, Claudia, Praxedes, and Edmund in front of the 10 bed St. Joseph’s Hospital, 1913*
The sisters “[l]eft Toronto for the West on June 29th 1913 at 10:30.” From reading the synopsis of the annals, their trip west was uneventful, that is until they got on the steamer, The Charmer, in Vancouver to head for Comox. On July 5, 1913 when the sisters departed Vancouver, the weather for the trip is recorded as “amid torrents of rain”. Perhaps ironically, this helped to prepare these women for the difficulties they would first face on their arrival to Comox. At a stop at Union Bay, which is down the coast from Comox, by accident they met the pastor, Father Mertins, who was on his way to his annual retreat. Because he had not received the letter announcing their arrival from Toronto, none of the housing arrangements were ready for the sisters. Further, because of his absence, “there wouldn’t be Mass on Sunday nor all the next week.” The priest offered the sisters the rectory until their own accommodation was ready, and on his return from retreat, he graciously stayed in a tent. One can only imagine after coming such a distance, the incredible anxiety the sisters must have felt as the steamer finally pulled into the wharf at the Landing in Comox. Indeed, once alone the “annalist confesses that some resorted to having a good cry.” However, not Sister Majella, for her optimism shone through. While “[a]ccording to a comment of a longtime resident, she turned once to look at the little boat fittingly named the charmer still lying at anchor at the Comox wharf”, this would be her last sign of apprehension for her work now lay only forward. Even with the sisters, arriving to a situation with nothing prepared as promised and additionally seeing their first few nights put up in cramped conditions with one of the parishioner families, Sister Majella would not be vanquished. She remained strong and determined. The synopsis of the annals records that two sisters “wended their way through the long wet grass to the priest’s house”, which from viewing a picture
included as part of Sr. Anne Purcell’s 1999 presentation at the Catholic Hospital Association of B.C. (CHABC) annual meeting, this was not tall grass but giant ferns known as bracken up to their necks. For women used to city life, this new home must have been rather daunting. Yet, Sister Majella is said to have stood out that first morning on the veranda at the rectory in Comox and declared to Sister Claudia: “Do you know, I think we are going to love it here. Just look at those mountains, the scenery is wonderful and the roses.”

*Sister Majella Doran, Superior, 1913-1917 (known to most as Mother Majella)*

*Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto Archives*

*From St. Joseph’s Hospital Archival Collection, Comox BC*
These religious women continued to show their determination, resilience, and particularly independence over the coming months with their efforts to establish a hospital suitable to successfully fulfilling their own dreams, or more appropriately stated ‘God’s plan for them’. Their continued autonomy to direct this mission is visibly evidenced when the sisters for their hospital deemed the deeded 5-acre property on the landward side unfavorable, immediately sold it and purchased property across the road. The new property was a beautiful location that overlooked Comox Harbour, which they believed, would make a far better site for their patients and guests needing respite. They then set to work where they are said to have mostly dispensed with their regular pray and worship schedule and instead scrubbed continuously to prepare an appropriate environment to receive patients. On August 10, 1913, the renovated house on the new property received the first patient, a victim of an accident in front of the priest’s house. Patients continued to be admitted, with the first camp patient received on June 6, 1914.
Shortly after the initial hospital was established, the sisters would prudently see the need to purchase the adjoining property to allow for later expansion of the hospital.

*St. Joseph’s Hospital, 1915 (25 beds)*

In March of 1914, a very important group would be formed that would ultimately lighten the load for the sisters. This new group of volunteer lay women, the Ladies Auxiliary, would spearhead much of the necessary fundraising over the coming years, which in turn freed up the sisters to focus their own efforts toward daily administration of the hospital, and care of an increasing patient load. With war declared in August of 1914, the logging camps would be closed, but little would change for the continued and
growing number of requests for hospital care. In fact, the war would see the arrival of 1200 soldiers for training, the 102 Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Warden. With their arrival in November 1915, for St. Joseph’s hospital in Comox, arrived an added demand for care of sick soldiers. Once again, the sisters demonstrated their ability to make beneficial arrangements for their hospital. In exchange for care of the sick soldiers when required, Warden would send a detachment of 25 men daily to assist the sisters in land clearing, farming, and any other necessary help that was requested by Mother Majella. This arrangement would last until June of 1916, when 102 Battalion would head overseas. The many letters to the sisters from soldiers over the remaining years of the war, following the soldiers’ departure from Comox, provides another example of the importance of not only the care for the sick that the sisters provided to the community, but more importantly the incredible understanding and love that these religious women gave to all those they touched. Charles F Roope (killed in action, July 1, 1916) writes on April 3, 1916, “…How can I thank you enough for your wonderful goodness to me in having those masses said for me.” G. Rothnie (killed in action) writes on August 28, 1916, “I must thank you dear Mother for the many kindnesses you and your staff extended to myself and brother officers and men during our stay in Comox.” Lieutenant-Colonel J.W. Warden adds to their sentiments when he writes to the sisters on April 28, 1917 recalling the lovely times he had with the sisters on the old verandah, and hoped he would do it again.
By 1917, even with so many men involved overseas with the war, a growing community would continue to see an increasing need for expanded hospital care, which necessitated the building of an addition to the existing hospital, making the hospital able to accept even more patients when the new wing opened in 1922. With continued expansion came even more demands on the sisters. Assistance from others had to be both accepted, sought, and integrated into the hospital plan. The Ladies Auxiliary would continue in their role as the hospital’s primary fundraisers. They would move from small showers and concert fundraisers as they often did at various times beginning in 1914, to much larger functions such as the June Garden Fete which the annals record as being well established as an annual community event by 1927 to raise monies for the ever increasing hospital funding demands. On the nursing side of the hospital with increased availability of trained secular nurses from St. Michael’s Hospital nursing school, in
January 1917, St. Joseph’s Hospital would see the arrival of the first non-sister nurse, a Miss Labsensky, to assist with the rising care demands.

Additional, after the soldiers’ departure in 1916, replacements had to be found for the work that the soldiers had been doing at the hospital. From 1916 until shortly after the end of WWII, this was mainly done in three ways. First, the sisters took on a hired man by the name of Augustine Patrick Powers (Gus) to do the day-to-day maintenance. Second, larger tasks, renovations, and new construction were hired out. Finally, various donations were gratefully accepted when offered, and pursued. A 1926 event recorded in the annals shows how together paying out and donations coming in could bring new conveniences to the hospital, often advancing the quality of care for hospital patients.
“Dec. 28th. FRIGIDAIRE installed by Bruce Robinson Electric Co., Vancouver, B.C., (Work conducted by Mr. H.D. Johnson)[.] This very valuable donation was made by Mr. R.J. Filberg [a generous patron to the hospital] at a cost of $625.00…To-day we used the first ice for a very sick patient – such a blessing to have it!”80

St. Joseph’s Hospital, Comox B.C. - First Ambulance (est. purchase 1923)

There are many examples throughout the pre-WWII Annals describing how the sisters drew upon and more importantly, cultivated from both the Catholic and non-catholic community in the district to not only keep the hospital doors open, but also to meet the ever increasing demands for health care of the community. The District’s financial support became increasingly important and by 1928, an increase to two paid
non-sister nurses and mention in the various records of several other occasional and permanent staff. However, the Sisters of St. Joseph’s success in Comox was not the situation in many communities in British Columbia. In 1927, the Lieutenant Governor, the Honorable Randolph Bruce was extremely impressed by the sisters’ efforts on his visit to the hospital and the area. Over the coming years, the annals record many other government officials who were similarly impressed with the work of the sisters. After Bruce’s visit, he is recorded at being ‘amazed’ at the quality of a ‘hospital in the timbers’, which included expert skills demonstrated in all facets of hospital administration and patient care by these women religious. Their superior skills, and additionally the ‘free’ labour the sisters provided, were undoubtedly significant factors in the hospital’s initial and continued success.

However, even with the exceptional foundation that the Sisters of St. Joseph had put in place, their continued efforts would still be required for the hospital to remain successful. After Bruce’s visit in 1927, the local newspaper interviewed James Carthew, a long time hospital director. The article (copied in the annals) explains that the hospital still needed community support to meet the hospital’s obligations, particularly with the addition of a $15,000.00 liability. In review of a later Comox annals entry (November 27, 1928) documenting a payment to Credit Foncier, the $15,000 liability was likely a mortgage that may have been secured to assist in building the 1922 wing of St. Joseph’s Hospital. Hospitals in the interwar period, particularly when the depression hit, could not depend on patient payment to assist in day-to-day operations, any more than hospitals could depend on regular government assistance, although Carthew does state, “the government had been very good.” However, this statement might have been more about
Carthew attempting to make a public political maneuver in hopes of securing any available future government assistance that came the hospital’s way, than any real recognition of past assistance the hospital received. Rink supports that securing provincial funding to a hospital was advantageous to the sisters. She writes as “provincial funding became available, particularly in the area of health care, the sisters took advantage of government assistance.”

However, government officials were not the only ones to see that the Sisters of St. Joseph’s hospital work was of a superior quality and imperative to economically delivering health care in these new British Columbia communities. Demonstrated through the many accounts of admiration and assistance recorded throughout those first few decades of the annals, the various histories, and the newspaper articles, is that both the reputation proceeding the sisters and the professionalism they continually showed helped to bring this overwhelmingly Protestant community mostly in support of the continuation of a Catholic hospital headed up by nuns. As summarized in the 1951 history of the sisters, the early years were well documented in the annals by the sisters, as a time when incredible generosity for the hospital was received from the Comox peoples, regardless of the givers’ religion or ethnicity.

While continued support by the Comox District, including financial generosity, was predominantly the sisters’ experience for the 79 years they served the Comox/Courtenay community, from time to time not all of the area’s residents have willingly welcomed these religious women and the Roman Catholic Church they represented, as the community’s health care providers. From conversations with a number of elderly long time residents of the district, it is clear that discord concerning the
hospital weighed on the community from time to time over the years. While the issues that brought tension to the hospital between interested parties varied, what often appears to have been at the foundation of enmities was the increasing Roman Catholic Church control in a predominantly Protestant community through the services of the hospital. Although this friction appears to be well understood by many long-term residents, from examination of the early years, the annalists said relatively little and when they did mention any conflict, it was extremely vague or cloaked. The only account by an annalist of any controversy existing between the Comox District community and the sisters over the hospital (from the annals [synopsis] June 29, 1913-August 15 1917 and [complete] September 1926 – August 1932) was in May of 1914 after Mother General Irene and Sr. Angelica visited from Toronto. While the controversy is said to have lasted several months, the annalist does nothing more than make passing mention that a controversy existed.

This is not surprising considering The Sisters of St. Joseph, over their years in Comox, continued to actively embrace their early roots of Salesian spirituality, where suavity and graciousness characteristics are embraced. The many fond accounts recounted by community members both Catholic and non-catholic in the ‘Farewell’ booklet, June 21, 1992, illustrates that all the Sisters of St. Joseph who served the Comox District over the years not only touched, but also enriched many lives. Isabelle Stubbs, O.B.C (1996) was a well respected local folk historian, newspaper columnist, and author who in her local newspaper column on the sisters’ departure in 1992, not only corroborates the booklet’s sentiment on the sisters’ time in Comox, but adds something further on the success of their mission. Stubbs writes: “Over the years many warm
friendships have been formed between the sisters and the community." Besides the many bonds that formed, the ‘Farewell’ booklet additionally supports the premise that the sisters remained faithful to the spirit of those founding centuries-old charitable vows during their time spent in Comox, even when discontent surfaced in the community. However, while I would suggest that they did remain faithful, it was not always an easy path to follow. The years surveyed between 1913 and 1932 of the annals, have numerous entries throughout discussing the importance of the sisters’ participation at retreats, at very least annually for each sister, right from the 1913 founding of the Comox mission. Additionally, there is mention of retreats of other sisters in the larger St. Joseph’s congregation as well as male religious who were a part of the Comox sisters’ larger religious network also emphasizing this importance of retreats in maintaining a spiritual connection while performing their humanly duties. Because the sisters’ mission hospital work consumed so much of their daily lives, it is obvious that retreats were necessary for these sisters to recharge and reconnect to their spiritual commitment. This demanding hospital work schedule as well as the sheer isolation with the mission hospital being so far away from the Mother house in Toronto, made retreats essential for the sisters’ spiritual well being. In addition to retreats, the letters, cards, and packages received from Toronto also aided in keeping the Sisters of St. Joseph’s faithful to their commitments in-between times of retreats.

Because the number of sisters appointed at one time to this mission remained small over the years and the fact that the mission was such a long distance away from the Toronto Mother house, isolation would have continued to be an issue for the sisters right
to their departure. In fact, the number of sisters remaining at the Comox hospital mission when the order was recalled to Toronto in 1992 was only three, one less than had arrived back in 1913. Yet, even with the isolation a number of sisters’ later comments on their time in Comox reflect back to Sr. Majella’s initial thought that the sisters would like it in Comox, and ‘like it they did’. Sr. Margaret Ann who had been in Comox between 1952-1957, when asked of her time in Comox commented: “It means everything to me. It was my happiest mission. It was wonderful.” Decades later, Sr. Patricia Macaulay who was in Comox in 1992, when the hospital closed, mirrors both of the earlier sisters’ comments when she writes: “Probably the most significant life-experience for me has been the 13 years I spent in Comox, B.C.”

*Farewell to the Sisters of St. Joseph, June 21, 1992 (Sister Marie, Sister Pat, and Sister Bernice)*

![Image of farewell ceremony]

*Courtesy of Christ the King Catholic Church Archive, Courtenay BC and St. Joseph’s Hospital Archive, Comox BC*
It is extremely important to remember, whether a St. Joseph’s sister over the years nursed, cooked, cleaned, administrated, provided pastoral care, or even built the furnishings during their time at the Comox hospital mission, her purpose first and foremost for this work was the salvation of souls and the building of the Church of Christ. The Annals make mention of a number of occasions when sisters had opportunities to ‘save souls’, including mention of one male patient at the Comox hospital in 1917 who was “always irritable and blasphemous”, yet in his final days “showed signs of repentance and had a most beautiful death.” It was through this service of those in need that “sisters remained equally committed to their own religious life.” Further, it was also through “[t]he need and desire for sisters to teach and care for the sick [that] ensured them a welcome everywhere” as it did by most in Comox. Thus, this service to others allowed the Sisters of St. Joseph to carry out what they deemed the most important function of their calling to this mission; the salvation of others.

McNamara supports this conclusion. She states: “Despite all this activity, a nun’s profession remained what it had always been, religious vocation.”

While Catholic scholars have well explored the connection between nuns’ labour and religious vocation or spirituality, far less has been considered around the economic importance of this work by women religious to the larger community they serve. Through the sisters’ labours of love and mercy, women religious provided both necessary and often expensive social services that in turn freed up limited funds of the various governments and thus, enabled governments to put efforts elsewhere. This use of charitable work by women religious and additionally, the volunteer services of secular...
women was the situation all over western Canada. Although commenting on the United States situation and not fully explored, McNamara is correct when she states, “using nuns for social services was cheap, so hard to argue against it.” Further, from a feminist perspective, the dominant male hierarchy accepted this ‘charity’ work, because it was not only cheap, but because it also fit well into maintaining the ideology of separate spheres that had emerged from the Victorian era and was now firmly entrenched as Canada entered the twentieth century. Marianne Ferguson, considering this ideology, comments specifically on the situation for Catholic women religious who, similar to married women to their husbands, fell under male dominance through the Church, yet ironically could embrace a unique freedom that many other women had failed to secure. Ferguson states: “Even though Roman Catholic nuns, or sisters, as they are called, have to submit their communities’ constitutions to male church authorities, they have enjoyed many of the freedoms and opportunities for which feminists have longed. They have become economically independent, received advanced education opportunities, and held the executive positions in their own institutions.”

For women, such as Sisters of St. Joseph in Comox who followed their religious vocation, the circumstances that saw them providing various social services also presented a variety of opportunities both on a personal level and a spiritual one. Through their ‘service’, they laid the foundation for many social service infrastructures western Canadians still utilize today; and further, a variety of services that Canadians so often take for granted or mistakenly believe were solely provided by Canada’s various levels of government. This misguided view of government’s sole initiation and provision of social services, may additionally be the result of the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes that
remain, helping to explain why so many of Canada’s women who sacrificed so much have received so little recognition for the extremely valuable services they provided. If nothing more is acknowledged than the establishment of social service infrastructures, the work of women religious, and women’s groups more generally has undeniable added to and advanced more quickly the development and subsequent modernization that followed to the Comox community, British Columbia, and western Canada. Through exploring the early years of The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in western Canada’s historical record, and more specifically the Comox hospital mission, evidence clearly demonstrates that women’s work not only contributed to the development of western Canada, but also was necessary to allow the area to rapidly move from a pioneer society to a modern one.
Endnotes:

2 Roger Gibbins, Conflict and Unity: An Introduction to Canadian Political Life (Toronto: Methuen, 1985), 103-111.
5 Barman, 4.
8 Rink, 272.
14 Prentice et al., 35-36.
17 Sister Mary Agnes, CSJ, The Congregation of The Sisters of St. Joseph (Toronto: St. Joseph’s Convent through the University of Toronto Press, 1951), 70.
18 Sr. Mary Agnes, 79.
19 Rink, 132.
20 Sr. Mary Agnes, 29.
21 McNamara, 617.
22 Sr. Mary Agnes, 79-80.
23 Sr. Mary Agnes, 79.
24 Sr. Mary Agnes, 87-88.
25 Sr. Mary Agnes, 87.
26 McCauley, 20.
27 Sr. Mary Agnes, 88.
28 Sr. Mary Agnes, 55.
29 Sr. Mary Agnes, 83.
30 Sr. Mary Agnes, 114-118.
31 Barman, 430 (Table 7).
32 Sr. Mary Agnes, 155.
33 Sr. Mary Agnes, 156.
34 Sr. Mary Agnes, 15.
35 Sr. Mary Agnes, 169.
36 Sr. Mary Agnes, 169-170.
37 Sr. Mary Agnes, 172.
38 Rink, 163.

Sr. Mary Agnes, 180.


Sr. Catherine and Sr. Patricia, 1.

Sr. Mary Agnes, 170.


Barman, 429 (Table 5).

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Isenor et al., 88.

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Barman, 57.

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Sr. Mary Agnes, 180.

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Charles F. Roope, Letter to Mother Majella, 3 April, 1916.

G. Rothnie, Letter to Mother (Majella), 28.8.16.


Isenor et al., 152-153.

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CSJ Annals, June 1927.

Rink, 129.

Sr. Mary Agnes, 183.

Synopsis, 4
Sr. Mary Agnes, 21.


CSJ Annals, September 1926.


*Synopsis*, 3.

*Synopsis*, 6.

*Synopsis*, 6.


McNamara, 624.

McNamara, 620.

Prentice et al. 155-188. (Excellent discussion of women’s separate sphere in this chapter.)

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