

The Rockefeller legacy

From 1924 to 1955, the Rockefeller Foundation
in New York City offered nurses around the world
a fellowship to study at U of T

By Dean Sioban Nelson, RN, PhD, FCAHS

Today, world travellers number in the millions. We keep connected with family, friends and colleagues in faraway countries through Skype and Facebook. Even without leaving Toronto, the rest of the world has an intense immediacy. As one of the world's great cosmopolitan cities, Toronto can sometimes feel closer to Portugal, India or Ethiopia than to the rest of Canada or our neighbours south of the border—especially during the World Cup!

It wasn't always this way. Toronto in the 1920s was not the cosmopolitan centre it is today. It was a rather conservative city where South Americans or South Asians (particularly in their customary dress) stood out. The rest of the world seemed a long way from Toronto, and communication with people in other countries was slow and expensive. Nonetheless, it was in this unlikely city that, over the next three decades, hundreds of nurses from around the world came to undertake a six- or 12-month nursing course (or perhaps a special short program of study) funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in New York City.

Travelling the long journey alone from Bolivia, Hungary or Japan, they came to the University of Toronto nursing program to build skills and knowledge (and perhaps English language proficiency), and to further their education in the service of their country. Along the way they found themselves to be part of an international network of women whose mission was to transform health care. The story of how Toronto came to be at the centre of a radical, ambitious movement to create public health care, develop nursing education and strengthen health care systems is a fascinating tale.

An inspired vision

In 1913, Standard Oil magnate John D. Rockefeller Sr. and his principal business and philanthropic adviser, Frederick T. Gates, established the Rockefeller Foundation. This pre-eminent philanthropic institution funded everything from the development of a variety of high-yield maize (significant today in biofuels), to the Kinsey Report and Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

The Rockefellers also funded the most extensive nursing capacity-building project ever undertaken, spending more than \$8 million on 48 schools in 28 countries. In addition, the Foundation's International Health Division, established in 1929, hand-picked between 500 and 800 nurses from about 70 countries to send to the U.S. and Canada to train in public health, and nursing education and leadership.

The majority of these nurses came to the University of Toronto for some or all of their fellowship. While we'll never know exactly how many Rockefeller nursing fellows came to our school, an educated guess would be about 400.

On returning home, these nurses assumed positions of significant authority. They were charged with starting a nursing school or public health program, or establishing programs for intergovernmental agencies, such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and World Health Organization (WHO).

To the Rockefellers, what our nursing school offered was an exemplar of a cutting-edge program. It attracted the best students, gave them a strong foundation in the sciences and was completely independent of a hospital-based program—a feature that made it stand out around the world. It also provided extensive public health education and a suite of programs in nursing education and administration. To the Foundation, Toronto was the future of nursing education.

Our school's founding director, **Kathleen Russell**, was a key figure in the Rockefeller vision for the brave new world of nursing. Russell was a remarkable intellectual leader and educational innovator, and the Foundation had boundless faith in her ability to mentor students and nurture future leaders. Miss Russell was sent the "special cases," including students who ran into difficulties adjusting to a nursing program in the U.S. and highly talented individuals marked for special training to become key leaders for important Rockefeller Foundation projects. Under Russell's careful eye, the distraught students would soon settle in, and the high flyers would be provided with a tailored program of study under Russell's tutelage.





Kathleen Russell (left), our school's founder, meets with Miss Mary Beard (centre) and Mrs. Plumptre from the Rockefeller Foundation in New York City.

Over the first three decades of the school's existence, nurses from around the world came to Toronto in great numbers. They learned about Canadian life, developed a sense of themselves as leaders and created networks that would sustain them over the years to come. Some came as the result of a selection process that included both an examination and an interview. In certain countries, selection was highly competitive. In the 1920s in Japan, for example, 800 nurses applied for only three fellowships.

Two outstanding classmates

The Rockefeller Foundation awarded their fellowships by exercising a sharp eye for potential leaders. For instance, **Ruth Nita Barrow**, a talented nurse in Barbados, received a public health fellowship to come here in 1943. A dynamic and charismatic individual, Barrow was at the centre of a vibrant Caribbean student community at U of T. She was also a gifted student and her year's valedictorian.

Barrow's valedictorian speech so impressed the Foundation officer in the audience that the representative offered Barrow a second scholarship on the spot, this time in nursing education. After Barrow completed her second year at U of T, the Foundation sent her to Jamaica to help develop and then oversee public health nursing, and to establish public health nursing education in the country. Eventually, Barrow took on a new challenge at the newly founded University College of the West Indies, introducing nursing to the first university in the region.

From 1946 to '48, Barrow served as president of the Jamaican Nurses Association and in 1956 became the first nursing officer of Jamaica. Her remarkable career included terms as a WHO nursing adviser, and as a Council member and then director of the World Council of Churches. Dame Barrow was the permanent

representative of Barbados at the United Nations, stepping down in 1990 to become the governor general of Barbados.

One of Barrow's probable classmates was another exceptional young nurse sent north to study public health and education, **Mary Elizabeth Lancaster Carnegie**, an African-American. On returning to the States, Carnegie accepted the position of dean of the Division of Nursing Education at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College in Tallahassee, a historically black college. Carnegie undertook the Herculean task of revolutionizing the college's nursing school and paving the way for improved nursing education in the U.S. She also helped black nurses in Florida gain the right to vote in the Florida State Nurses Association. Later, her doctoral thesis "Disadvantaged Students in RN Programs" would reflect her Florida experience.

Carnegie was apt to quote Russell when trying to improve nursing education. In a letter to the Rockefeller Foundation nursing director in 1946, Carnegie wrote, "I am often reminded of the two basic principles of administration of nursing schools that I learned at the University of Toronto; namely, financial independence and educational control."

Carnegie's career highlights a remarkable number of firsts. For example, she was the first black editor of *Nursing Research* and first black president of the American Academy of Nurses. Carnegie also established the first baccalaureate nursing program in Virginia, at Hampton University.

Wanted: Top faculty members

The Rockefeller Foundation supported the development of nursing schools around the world, and these new schools required faculty. A great many of the fellows were part of capacity building for schools, and this is why **Vera Nieh** came to U of T.

In Beijing, the Rockefeller Foundation had established Peking Union Medical College (PUMC) in 1920 to demonstrate the modernizing power of Western science and education. The nursing school took only the best high-school graduates, and degree preparation was preferred. But despite the high calibre of the Chinese nurses, the directorship remained in the hands of Western nurses until Nieh completed her fellowship at U of T in 1930. She returned to China to take over the school at its most challenging point in history—during Japan’s invasion of China and the relocation of PUMC to the province of Sichuan in southwest China.

In the 1940s, another fellow, Brazilian **Maria Rosa Pinheiro**, went on to become a major figure in Brazilian nursing as the dean of the School of Nursing at the Universidade de São Paulo, Campus São Paulo. A few years later her colleague, **Glete de Alcântara**, who undertook her whole nursing studies at our school, became the dean of the School of Nursing of São Paulo, Campus Ribeirão Preto.

De Alcântara, who came here in 1940 and whose 1944 graduation picture hangs in our first-floor corridor, was so inspired by her education at the hands of Russell that she implemented what became known as “the Toronto model” at the Universidade de São Paulo. She went on to become a major professional and educational leader in Brazil, eventually serving two terms as president of the Brazilian Nurses Association.

Wanted: Practice leaders

Rockefeller fellow **Eugenia Costes** was destined for professional leadership, rather than education. When she returned to Romania in 1928, she rapidly became the country’s leading nurse and is now remembered as the founder of the Romanian Nurses Association. Costes’s experiences in Toronto proudly feature in the history of the development of Romanian nursing, as nurses work to rebuild their professional structures after Romania’s democracy was restored in the 1990s.

Daisy Bridges studied nursing education in Toronto in 1936. She returned to England to assume the post of tutor to students of the international program at Bedford College in London. With the outbreak of the First World War, Bridges served with distinction in France, Egypt and India with Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMS) and was awarded the Royal Red Cross.

In 1948, she assumed the position of general secretary of the International Council of Nurses (ICN). It was largely due to Bridges’s efforts that ICN developed a close working relationship with WHO. Over the next 13 years, Dame Bridges worked to heal the ruptures caused by the Second World War, rebuilding an international professional community devoted to advancing nursing and health care around the world.

The legacy continues

The Rockefeller fellows left U of T and returned home primed with the latest knowledge, and latest approaches to health care and practice to put into action in their home country. A good many returned home to marry and raise a family. At the time, women often had to choose

A day in the life of Glete

On a Rockefeller scholarship, Glete de Alcântara of Brazil came to U of T in 1940 to study public health nursing. She lived at 7 Queen’s Park Cres., a mansion that provided the School of Nursing with both classrooms and a residence. Kathleen Russell, the school’s director, and Jean Wilson, a school administrator, each had a room on the second floor. The students lived on the floors above them. In her second and third year, de Alcântara likely followed a daily routine similar to the one below.

6:15 a.m. The alarm rings, and de Alcântara starts dressing in layer after layer of clothes. It’s January, and yesterday the temperature was -35° . Shocking for someone from Brazil!

6:50 a.m. De Alcântara goes downstairs to join other students in the leisure room for prayers.

7:00 a.m. They walk to the dining room for breakfast.

7:30 a.m. The students report to a head nurse at Toronto General Hospital who informs them of the tasks they are to perform that day.

3:00 p.m. De Alcântara returns to her room to write a letter home. On her way upstairs, she peeks into the staff sitting-room. Russell is pouring tea from a silver tea service and passing delicate china cups and saucers to the staff gathered for the daily ritual.

5:00 p.m. The students change into a black dress and white bonnet for dinner.

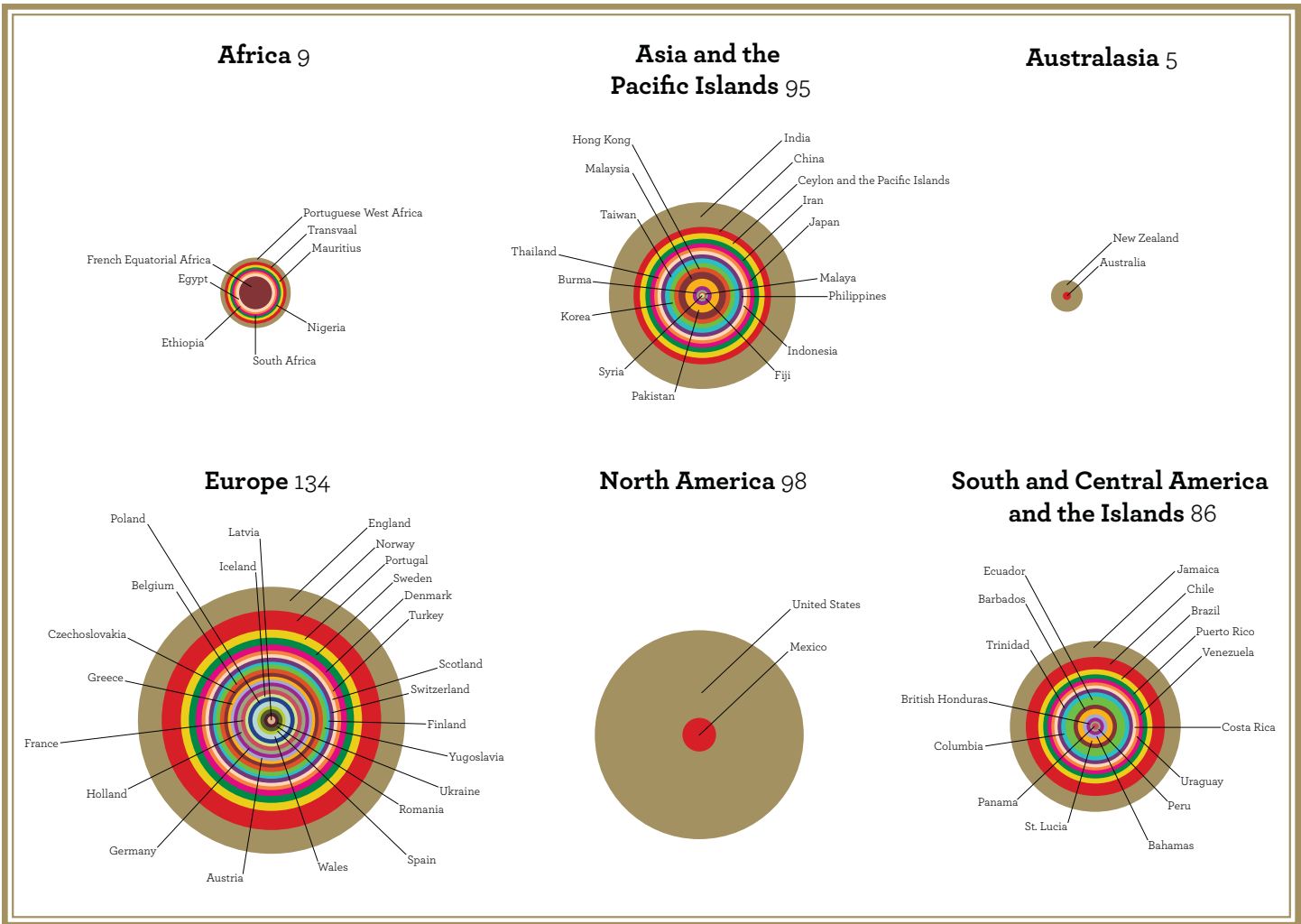
5:30 p.m. The first bell rings. The students assemble at the front of the dining room and hold their hands behind their back.

5:32 p.m. The second bell rings. Russell enters the hall and says grace.

5:35 p.m. Everyone sits down at a table that has been laid with a linen tablecloth and linen napkins. Tonight, the waitresses announce that they’ll be serving curried chicken and naan. A Rockefeller student from India has helped the cook prepare a menu that reflects her native cuisine.

6:00 p.m. Russell stands up, and then the staff and students rise. Russell and the staff go down the hall to the leisure room where a fire is burning in the fireplace and waitresses stand ready to serve coffee in demitasses. After the teachers have left the dining room, the students head to a basement room they affectionately call “The Bassinette” and enjoy snacks.

No nursing student would dare leave the dining room before Russell and the teachers. Seniority was so engraved in the school that when the elevator doors opened at the hospital, for example, the third-year students would enter first, followed by the second-year students and then, finally, the lowly first-year students.



The numeral after the region's name indicates the approximate number of fellows from the region who came to our school. The larger the concentric circle, the greater the number of fellows.

between being a nurse, and being a wife and mother. Like their peers in Canada, these women no doubt greatly enriched their local communities with their knowledge, skills and leadership.

Other fellows felt touched by a sense of destiny and deeply felt the duty to serve their country. These women's achievements (like those described earlier) are closely bound to the history of nursing and the development of health care in their countries. But their stories and their achievements are also part of the Faculty's rich history and our contribution to the development of nursing.

Shaping the future of nursing by developing leaders was a cornerstone of the Rockefeller Foundation's 30-year strategy to promote health in and bring stability to countries around the world. By sharing this vision, Kathleen Russell and the University of Toronto placed sleepy old Toronto at the centre of a vibrant international network to build health care and a better future for all around the world. That

was the impetus for the founding of the nursing school and it remains our mission today. ††

Happy 90th anniversary to all

The history of nursing at the University of Toronto is a story of individuals. In this special commemorative issue of *Pulse*, we help draw your attention to these remarkable nurses by bolding their names.

Pulse and our Notable 90 list can't begin to capture the creativity, talent and intellect that built our school. No one ever achieved anything great alone. Every nurse who ever studied or taught at our Faculty has left a mark.

This anniversary belongs to you.