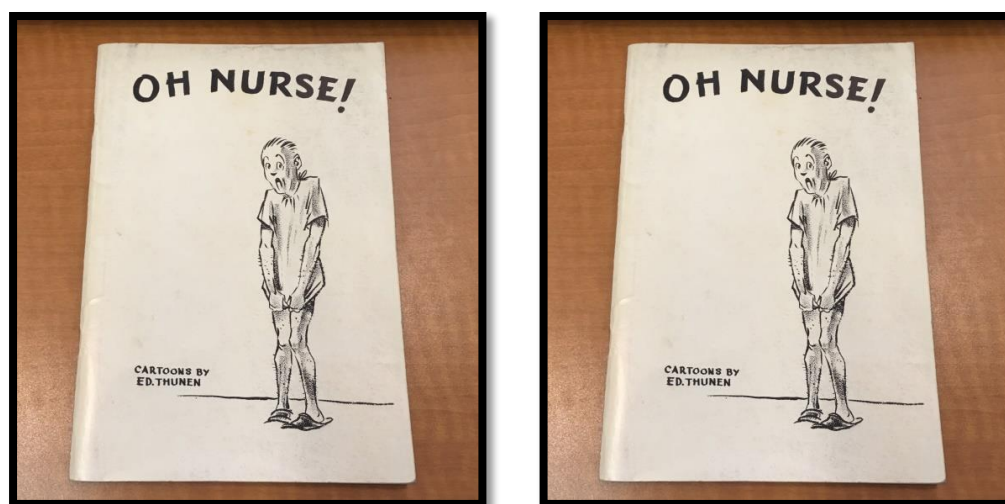
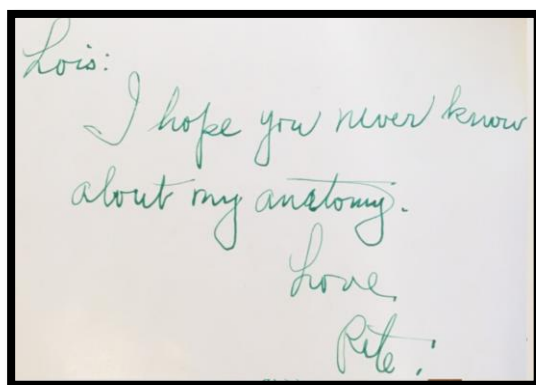


## A Look into Nursing History through Illustration

The Dolan Collection gives us access to artifacts ranging in age that can teach so much about the history of nursing. Among the precious artifacts, is the book *Oh Nurse* by Ed. Thunen and Don Skinner. This work was published in 1952 by Harr Wagner Publishing Company in San Francisco, California. Upon first looking at the book, you can see that it has been through many hands by the stained cover. Surprisingly, there are no tears or missing pages, making it obvious that the book has been taken care of by those who have read it. As depicted below, the authors chose a humorous illustration of a patient who can barely keep himself concealed in the hospital gown for both the front and back cover.



The authors of the book are not the only ones with a sense of humor who added to the book. Inside the cover, is a personal inscription to the recipient of the gift. The message reads, “Lois: I hope you never know about my anatomy. Love, Pete.” Though these are the only hand written words in the book, they do not go unnoticed or unappreciated by the viewer.

A handwritten note in green ink on a white background. The text reads: "Lois: I hope you never know about my anatomy. Love, Pete."

The book itself consists of a series of cartoons depicting scenes of what it was like in American hospitals during this time period. Some images have texts that accompany them, while others do not. The cartoons are not sequential and telling one single story but, rather capture different patients and different scenarios. The glimpses into diverse scenes in the hospital offered by the authors give the reader the opportunity to experience a piece of history in American nursing.

Over the eras, inconsistent images of nurses have affected public opinion of American nursing as a profession. In turn, how nurses were treated by patients, doctors, other healthcare professionals and the public was influenced. How nurses viewed their own career, as well as their colleagues, has also been affected by the ever-changing perception of nursing. A quote from Victor Robinson in 1946 summarizes what nursing looked like in America, from the 1940s to the 1950s, during the early years of women's social emancipation.

Woman is an instinctive nurse, taught by Mother Nature. The nurse has always been a necessity, thus lacked social status. In primitive times she was a slave, and in civilized era a domestic. Overlooked in the plans of legislators, and forgotten in the curricula of pedagogues, she was left without protection and remained without education. She was not an artisan who could obtain the help of a hereditary guild; there was no Hanseatic League for nurses. Drawn from the nameless and numberless army of poverty, the nurse worked as a menial and obeyed as a servant. Denied the dignity of a trade, a devoid of professional ethics, she could not rise above the degradation of her environment. It never occurred to the Aristotles of the past that it would be safer for the public welfare if nurses were educated instead of lawyers. The untrained nurse is as old as the human race; the trained nurse is a recent discovery (Judd & Sitzman, 2014).

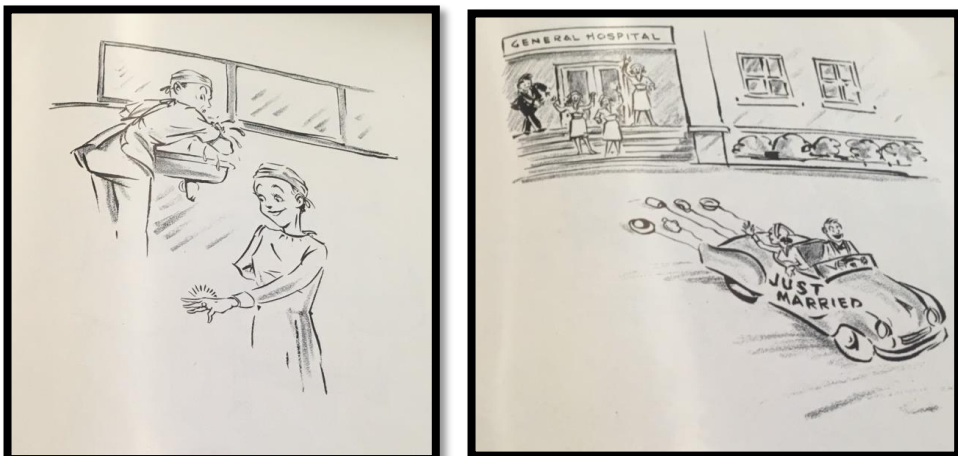
Ed. Thunen and Don Skinner did a phenomenal job of portraying the public image of nursing during this time. Though the authors included other themes sprinkled throughout the book, such as alternative medicine beliefs of immigrants and advances in technology and medicine, an overwhelming amount of cartoons portray nurses. As stated in the quotation above, nurses went from being slaves to domestic figures. It was a very trying time for nurses both

physically and mentally. Nurses in the book can be seen helping with toileting, feeding and caring for the environment. Nurses can also be seen giving medication and attending to patients recovering from injury, surgery, illness and caring for newborns. The authors portrayed the overcrowding of hospitals in two images side by side. One image is of a hospital room with multiple beds and the other of a nursery with many babies. The images both contain text saying, “In the full of the moon, it’s always like this!”



Another image humorously features a very petite nurse applying to the hospital saying, “I hear you’re short of nurses.” On top of overcrowding, lack of staffing and tiring work, nurses had other issues to deal with. A lack of respect is portrayed very clearly by cartoons of a nurse having food spat on her, having patients scold nurses, having a patient hide on a nurse and a nurse being chased down the hall by a patient. The cartoons in the book mirror what can be described as an ignorant public stereotype that exists even today; “the nurse as valuable and heroic, put-upon, underpaid, overworked, passive and down-trodden, doing a menial and largely unpleasant job and who requires empathy but not expertise or education” (Morris-Thompson, Shepherd, Plata & Marks-Maran, 2011).

In addition, sexism was alive and well during this period. All of the doctors in the book are male, and all of the nurses are female, rendering to the lack of opportunity for women in pursuing higher education. Even though women were working more than in the years prior to World War I, it seems the end goal was still to find a husband, not to progress in their career. This can be seen by cartoons of women flirting with patients, wearing inflatable bras for sex appeal and gazing at an engagement ring saying, “this is a beautiful ring of yours, Doctor!” There is also an image in the book of a car pulling away from the hospital with text reading, “just married.” This signifies the separation between domestic life and a career which was still apparent for women during that era.



This was also a time when men often viewed nurses, not as respected professional but, as sexual objects. Various images in the book portray the objectification nurses faced ranging from verbal harassment to inappropriate physical contact. These images are featured on page 7. According to Kiger (1993), Rossiter and Yam (1998) and Bacon et al. (2000), the traditional stereotypical images of nursing, such as the “naughty nurse”, nursing as solely women’s work and nurses having a low societal status are still relevant today (Morris-Thompson et al., 2011).

In conclusion, *Oh Nurse* is a historical treasure. It speaks directly to the time in which it was written and allows us to see a glimpse into the lives of nurses during this era. History helps us to understand the changes that have occurred in the United States that have caused society to become what it is today and what still needs to change. By understanding what has shaped the past, we can act in such a way that can create a better future for generations to come. We can also appreciate nursing as we know it presently, for it has evolved leaps and bounds from what Ed. Thunen and Don Skinner so poignantly depicted. Pioneers of nursing, such as Florence Nightingale, have paved nursing into the fulfilling and privileged career it is but, not without resistance. Nursing as a profession, has prevailed through numerous struggles and progressed into what we know it as today: a career of professionalism, respect, accountability, excellence, integrity, service and so much more. So, even though the public perception of nursing still has room to grow beyond the stereotypical images that have existed for centuries, it has taken giant strides towards reality. As said by the famous Howard Zinn, “human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives” (“History Quotes”, 2017).

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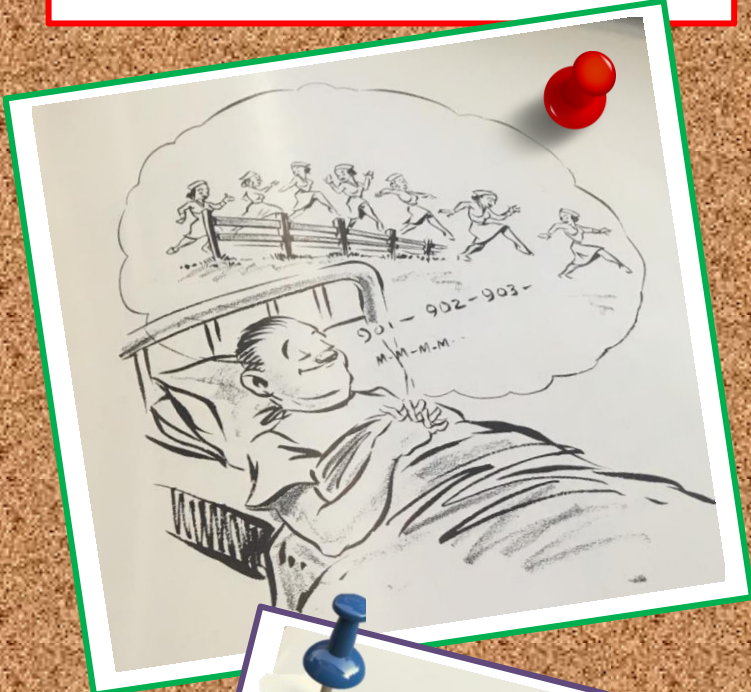
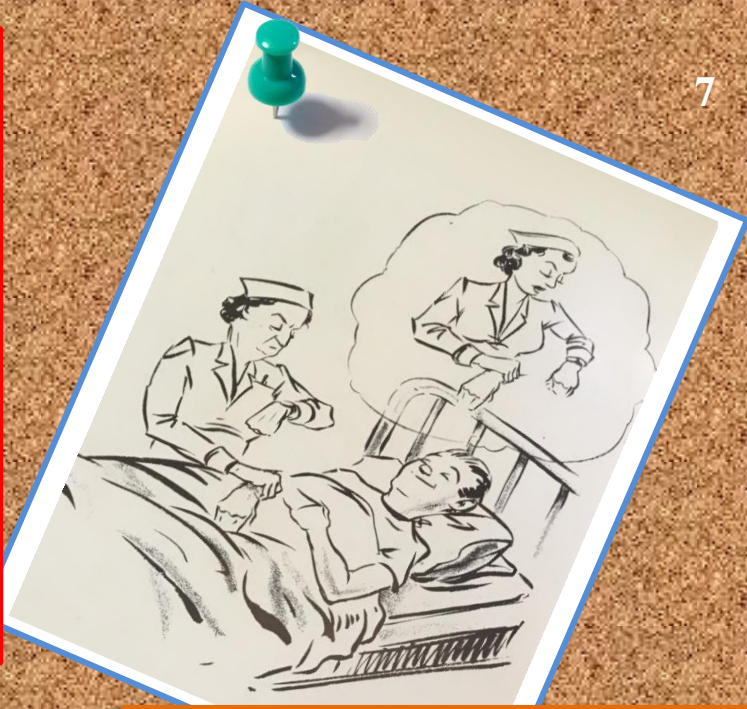
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“Now it’s my turn to rub your back!”



“Wish to finish it, Miss Edwards?”



“Ain’t nylon wonderful?”

