



## **A Nurse's Journey: Sage Memorial Hospital School Of Nursing**

By: **P.A. Pollitt**, C.A. Streeter, and C. Walsh

### **Abstract**

For Native American nurses, many of their stories have been lost to the past. Scholars have generally paid scant attention to the lives and deeds of rural minority women, and few articles have been written about the early education of Native American nurses and their contributions to health care. The people of the Catawba Indian Nation use storytelling to keep their culture and the memory of their heroes alive. Consider this one such story, one such hero. The Sage Memorial Hospital School of Nursing, known simply as “Sage Memorial,” operated from 1930–1953. It was the only nursing school ever opened for the sole purpose of educating Native American women as nurses.<sup>1</sup> One of these nurses was Viola Elizabeth Garcia, a graduate of the Class of 1943.<sup>2</sup> Viola’s life illuminates the struggles for education common among the women who attended Sage Memorial. Her contributions and experiences as a World War II nurse demonstrate the hardships encountered and outstanding contributions made by many of her fellow alumna.

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# A Nurse's Journey

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For Native American nurses, many of their stories have been lost to the past. Scholars have generally paid scant attention to the lives and deeds of rural minority women, and few articles have been written about the early education of Native American nurses and their contributions to health care. The people of the Catawba Indian Nation use storytelling to keep their culture and the memory of their heroes alive. Consider this one such story, one such hero.

The Sage Memorial Hospital School of Nursing, known simply as “Sage Memorial,” operated from 1930–1953. It was the only nursing school ever opened for the sole purpose of educating Native American women as nurses.<sup>1</sup> One of these nurses was Viola Elizabeth Garcia, a graduate of the Class of 1943.<sup>2</sup> Viola’s life illuminates the struggles for education common among the women who attended Sage Memorial. Her contributions and experiences as a World War II nurse demonstrate the hardships encountered and outstanding contributions made by many of her fellow alumna.

## *Ganado*

By law and custom, most nursing schools were segregated by race before the passing of the Civil Rights laws of the 1960s. From the 1880s through the 1960s, most schools of nursing were comprised of either all white or all African American student bodies, leaving few opportunities for Native Americans, Asian Americans, or Hispanic Americans to obtain a nursing education.

The Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church was unique in its efforts to address this inequality. In 1901, the National Presbyterian Church opened the Ganado Mission on Navajo Nation land, in the northeast quadrant of [Arizona](#), near the New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah borders, in the community of Ganado.

After a church and school were successfully operating at the Mission, the home missionaries turned their attention to health care.<sup>3</sup> In 1929, Dr. Clarence Salsbury and his wife, Nurse Cora Salsbury, took over the mission work at Ganado. One of their first priorities was expanding the antiquated 12-bed hospital into a modern facility of 150 beds, an operating suite, a delivery suite, and a laboratory. This new hospital was named Sage Memorial Hospital after one of its largest benefactors and was accredited by the American College of Surgeons.

In order to staff the hospital with nurses, as well as to provide skilled employment opportunities for Native American women, the Salsburys opened Sage Memorial Hospital School of Nursing in 1930.<sup>4</sup>

The school opened while naysayers proclaimed no Native American woman would ever be up to the academic task of completing a Nightingale-based nursing education program. They also claimed these women, given their culture, would not be willing to interact with the sick or dying. Sage Memorial graduates proved these assumptions wrong.

Dr. Salsbury felt training Native American nurses was crucial. “They would be able to understand the patients as no white personnel ever could,” he said.<sup>1</sup> Sage Memorial started small, with an entering class of two Navajo women: Adele Slivers and Ruth Henderson. They both graduated three years later and passed the Arizona State Board of Nursing Examinations. Their graduation exercises in 1933 were a festive event with scripture readings, vocal duets, a piano solo, and a pinning ceremony. Dignitaries including the Arizona governor, an Arizona State Board of Nursing member, and one of the chief Navajo medicine men praised the graduates and the school during the proceedings.<sup>3</sup>

As word and reputation of the school expanded among minority communities, the student body increased in number and diversity. By 1943, students from 28 tribes, including the Navajo, Kiowa, and Catawba; students who identified as Eskimo, Hawaiian, Spanish American, Cuban, and Mexican; and one Japanese student from a relocation camp were either enrolled or graduates of Sage Memorial.<sup>6</sup> By all accounts, this unique experiment in multicultural education was a success.

In the 1930s and 1940s, such training and cultural exchange among Native Americans and other minority women was not found anywhere else in the United States. The nurses developed a camaraderie and commitment to their work that consistently earned them the highest marks on state licensing exams. The students lived in interracial cooperation while learning the nursing arts and sciences. The school’s stellar reputation drew the attention of white applicants—who were denied consideration because they had access to many other schools of nursing.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Viola Elizabeth Garcia*

Viola Elizabeth Garcia was born on April 12, 1919, in Sanford, [Colorado](#), a poor, rural Mormon community home to approximately half the members of the Catawba Nation. Viola’s family was financially impoverished, but rich in family and culture. The older brothers, George and Labon, left school after completing the fourth and fifth grade to help their ailing father support the large family. Viola’s father was ill for much of her young life and died when Viola was only 11 years old, leaving behind 10 children for his wife to support.

Viola completed the ninth grade in Sanford, but due to the Great Depression, the public high school was closed. For the next three years, Viola tried desperately to complete her high school education by repeatedly applying for admission to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Haskell Boarding School in Lawrence, [Kansas](#). Finally, she was admitted at 18 years old and completed her high school diploma in 1940 at the age of 21. Viola’s classes focused on cooking skills, sewing, home

care, and arts. As graduation neared, she was offered full-time employment as a cook's assistant on the Apache reservation in New Mexico, but Viola was determined to continue her education.<sup>2</sup>

With the guidance of the staff at Haskell Boarding School, Viola applied to several nursing programs but was only admitted to Sage Memorial. One such rejection stated that she was too old at 21 years of age to begin the nursing program. There was also a concern, as World War II loomed and U.S.-Japan relations became strained, that her Native American features would appear Japanese and frighten patients.<sup>6</sup>

The head mistress of Haskell wrote in a reference letter about Viola, "Whatever Viola decides to do, she does." Several months after Viola enrolled at Sage Memorial, Dr. Salsbury personally wrote the Haskell headmistress asking if she had any other students like Viola, and if so, to please send them to his school.<sup>6</sup>

### *Studying at Sage Memorial*

Applicants to Sage Memorial had to be unmarried high school graduates between 18–30 years of age. Their applications had to be accompanied by a health certificate, as well as four character references, with one being their pastor. Tuition was \$100 for the first year with additional fees of \$1 for laboratory courses, \$0.50 for library use, and \$3.50 for health fees. The hospital provided room, board, and laundry services. In addition to their course work, students tended the hospital floors eight hours a day, six days a week. However, students had time to relax outside of their rigorous classroom and clinical schedules, enjoying picnics, parties, movies, and glee club, as well as mandatory gym class and chapel.<sup>4</sup>

Although Viola was accepted to Sage Memorial, she was not sure that she could afford the tuition, fees, and living expenses. As the months progressed, Dr. Salsbury procured the funds to pay for all her education expenses except for personal items she needed to bring with her.<sup>6</sup> According to the 1940 catalog, all students had to supply for themselves the following: a bag for soiled clothing, rubbers or galoshes, toiletries, two fountain pens (one for red ink and one for blue), a watch with a second hand, an alarm clock, two standard-size loose-leaf notebooks, a napkin ring, and coat hangers.<sup>4</sup> Viola's eldest brother, George, gave her an entire month's wages so she could buy the required watch with the second hand sweep. With her determination and supplies in tow, Viola began her three-year long education at Sage Memorial.<sup>6</sup>

Over the next three years, Viola and her fellow students not only studied the nursing curriculum but also spent many clinical hours on the hospital floors. They made and rolled their own patient bandages and folded disposable patient trash bags and slippers out of newspapers. Third-year students were expected to help teach the lower-level nursing students. Viola not only learned the nursing skills that she would use throughout her life, but she developed a deep devotion and admiration for the Navajo people. She even taught herself to speak Dine, the Navajo language.<sup>6</sup>

### *A nurse in practice*

Though Viola grew up in the rural, remote, and poor town of Sanford, she was surprised to learn that her new community at Ganado was even more so. Patients were brought to the hospital on

horseback and buckboard wagons, and sometimes by rattling old vehicles over rutted and narrow dirt roads. Many roads were so rough and rocky that they were impassable in wet and winter weather. The nursing students were expected to go on home visits with the nursing staff to the homes of the Navajo people, traditional dwellings known as hogans.<sup>7</sup> They made these visits in buckboard wagons. Viola would write back to her mentor at Haskell Board School that these hogans were “loving and cozy homes.”<sup>6</sup>

Viola viewed success as the ability to provide for herself, and she felt her education was essential to achieving that level of self-reliance. Viola studied hard and was the 1943 class valedictorian. She was awarded a set of surgical instruments for her academic success.

In 1943 Viola took her Arizona nursing boards and returned home to Colorado to await the results. She had been worried because she did not have an additional \$75 to retake the nursing board examination if she failed. One day a letter arrived addressed to Viola Garcia, R.N., and she knew she had passed. In fact, Viola received the highest test score in the entire state of Arizona. Viola’s academic and nursing success, however, was common among the students who graduated from Sage Memorial.

#### *World War II*

Not long after graduating from nursing school, Viola found herself working in Denver, Colorado, when President Roosevelt delivered an ominous speech. While the war efforts in Europe were drawing to a close, battles were still raging in the Pacific, and there might be a need to draft nurses into the military. Viola was told that if she volunteered for military service, she could select her location of duties. In January 1944, she enlisted in the United States Army Nurse Corps, requesting no surgical duties or overseas assignments. Within weeks of her enlistment, she was assigned to Camp Carson (now, Fort Carson, Colorado Springs, Colorado) in the surgical suite where she assisted with amputations from the war-wounded returning from the bitter winter campaign in Europe under General Patton. There were endless mounds of amputated ears, fingers, toes, hands, feet, arms, and legs that filled the air with putrid smells. Viola approached her supervisor and informed her of what she had requested: “No surgery and no overseas duties.” She was promptly informed, “Honey, you are in the Army now.”<sup>6</sup>

**Step Back in Time** The curriculum at Sage Memorial Hospital was based on the National League for Nursing Education criteria, accredited by the Arizona Board of Nursing Examiners. But what was nursing school in Viola Garcia’s day really like? Around 1940, courses required for graduation at Sage Memorial included: First-Year Courses: Basic sciences, professional adjustments, nursing arts of bandaging, massage and personal hygiene, nutrition, cookery, pharmacology and therapeutics, aseptic techniques, and nursing care of conditions involving respiratory, circulatory, gastro-intestinal, endocrine, and muscular-skeletal systems Second-Year Courses: Medical-surgical nursing; nursing conditions of the eye, ear, and reproductive tract; and communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, gonorrhea, syphilis, obstetrics, diet therapy, and social problems in nursing Third-Year Courses: Psychiatric, pediatric, emergency, and public health nursing, along with another course in professional adjustment

Within a few months, First Lt. Viola Garcia shipped out from Camp Carson to Los Angeles, where she, along with 600 other nurses, embarked on the largest U.S. Army Hospital Ship at the time, the *USAHS Marigold*, with an unknown destination. After two weeks, the ship arrived in [Hawaii](#), and 300 of the 600 nurses disembarked, but Viola's group remained on board. After leaving Hawaii, ship's public address system announced their destination: Tokyo, still a heavy battle area as the war in the Pacific raged on. "My heart just dropped, I was so frightened," Viola recalled. The U.S. military was fighting Japanese troops on many Pacific Islands and an invasion of the Japanese mainland was thought to be imminent. The costs in human life for both sides would be high.<sup>6</sup>

The ship was under the command of General Douglas McArthur, who over saw the military operations in the Pacific. The 300 nurses in Viola's grouping were to be part of the U.S. invasion actions in Japan. Military leaders expected heavy casualties among those nurses during the invasion operations; the 300 nurses left behind in Hawaii would be their replacements.

Under international rules of combat, hospital ships were not to be attacked at sea, and thus were to be lit up at night and clearly marked with a red cross. Not long out at sea, the Japanese attacked one such marked ship, and the *Marigold* was immediately ordered to go into complete darkness. As the lights were put out, those in surgery raced to cover the windows of surgeries in progress. A frightening silence fell upon the crew as the *Marigold* steamed along in darkness on its way across the Pacific.

The *Marigold* stopped in the Philippines, and the nurses were allowed to disembark for a few days before the ship went to Japan. While docked there, however, the United States dropped the atomic bombs on Japan, and World War II was brought to a close. Yet, the *Marigold* continued on to Tokyo, but this time with a different mission. The *USAHS Marigold* was the first U.S. ship to enter Yokohama Bay after the Japanese ended the war, and it was in Tokyo Bay where General McArthur accepted the formal surrender of the Japanese on the *USS Missouri*. That day the sea was filled with ships and the air was filled with flyover planes celebrating the end of the Second World War.

### *Rebuilding in Tokyo*

Over the next eight months, Viola was stationed in Tokyo at the 42nd General Hospital. She treated survivors of the Bataan Death Camp and Corregidor Island (a military stronghold in the Philippines). The hospital had five surgical rooms that had been stripped of all equipment by the Japanese at the end of the war. They were filled with soot and rubble. Several Army nurses ranking higher than Viola were assigned the task of restoring these rooms to their full function. According to Viola, none of the higher-ranking nurses could deal with such an overwhelming task; each time, Viola was asked to "fill in." After a third nurse was left in tears at the monumental task, Viola was asked to take on the responsibilities as acting head surgical nurse.<sup>6</sup>

Viola walked into surgical suites devoid of the equipment necessary for performing operations—no surgical tables, no IV stands, no surgical tools. She remembered entering the rooms: "I just wanted to cry too and said to myself, 'Oh Lordy, what am I going to do?'" But Viola went on to do what she had always done—she rolled up her sleeves and got to work. Viola called in her

military crew and ordered them to wash and scrub all the rooms from top to bottom. When that was done, she began looking for equipment for her surgical rooms, including salvaging items from the hospital ship.<sup>6</sup> She even taught herself to speak Japanese, just as she learned to speak Dine as a nursing student.

First Lt. Garcia's work in Tokyo was supported by her own ethic of care, as well as the training she received at Sage Memorial Hospital School of Nursing. From those days following the war until her death in 2004, Viola continued caring for others, marrying Herbert Schneider, another member of the U.S. Army, and raising three daughters. Her legacy, one of determination and pride, compassion and grace, lives on.

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