

Family Album Northwest

by Kathryn H. Bogle

Who was the first Black Registered Nurse to practice in an Oregon hospital? When and where did she first work?

Audrey C. Ellis was the nurse, Good Samaritan Hospital was the place and 1943 was the year. Add thirty years and we have the date of Audrey's retirement — 1973.

Mrs. Ellis was born in Oklahoma but was reared in Missouri. For her nurse education and training, Audrey attended classes in General Hospital, No. 2, in Kansas City. In that hospital one of her instructors was Dr. De Norval Unthank. Their paths were to cross again within a few years with an important for Audrey as a result. General Hospital graduated Audrey in 1930.

Directly after being graduated, Audrey said she remained several months to work at General Hospital before she moved on to New Orleans and Charity Hospital there. An illness forced a return to Missouri and her family, Mrs. Ellis remembers.



Audrey Ellis, (standing, right) is shown with Anne Williams, Gertrude Rae and Charlotte (Rutherford) Williams in April of 1950. (Photo courtesy of V. Rutherford)

gone to the hospital to visit her mother. While there, attending to her mother's small wants, Dr. Unthank also dropped in to see his patient. Knowing only too well there were no Negro nurses in any of Oregon's hospitals, and, knowing equally as well that many hospitals were needing nurses during those war years, Dr. Unthank suggested in his special kind of quiet, wry humor that "this would be good timing to put Mrs. Ellis to work at Good Samaritan!"

The suggestion did not fall on deaf ears. Mrs. Ellis did her part. She applied. The hospital did its part. The hospital accepted the application and very soon Audrey received her assignment on the hospital floor.

Mrs. Ellis, a slender, attractive person of quiet, reserved demeanor, happens, also, to be of rather light complexion in her family. In public



Audrey Ellis

she may not be immediately noticed as being of different color from the majority.

In the close daily contacts in her work in the hospital wards and corridors there was someone, however, who did notice Mrs. Ellis' color — and objected. Objected to working beside a Black person in this professional capacity.

Relates Mrs. Ellis: "I did not mind being moved when I was told of my reassignment. The new ward I was

given was in Pediatrics and I loved working with children. They asked me if I wanted to know the name of the person who had objected to my presence. I didn't really want to know and I declined to hear the information. I felt that it would be easier for me to never know the identity of this person.

"During my thirty years at Good Samaritan, since that first early experience, I have not felt segregated or singled out because of my color. I have spent several years in Pediatrics, and have enjoyed my experience on Medical-Surgical duty. Most of all, I guess I enjoyed the time I spent at Wilcox Memorial (the Maternity Section of the hospital).

"Although I have been Charge Nurse and Assistant Head Nurse many times in my career, I am not fond of the administrative positions. I like bedside patient care and am always happiest giving this care and attention to my patients."

At an awards banquet, an annual affair at Good Samaritan, Mrs. Ellis, as honored guest, was given a commemorative pin set with diamonds in recognition of her highly esteemed work and faithfulness.

In retirement, Mrs. Ellis gives much of her time to the St. Vincent de Paul Child Development Center. And — you guessed it — she also volunteers in the Patient Admitting Department at Good Samaritan Hospital.

"I would like to be sure that every Black girl or boy who has an interest in the field of nursing knows that there is money now available for their education and training if they can qualify. The University of Oregon Health Sciences Center can tell them how and where to apply. Nursing has been a wonderful and satisfying career for me and I'm sure that for a young person the future here could be exciting and rewarding."

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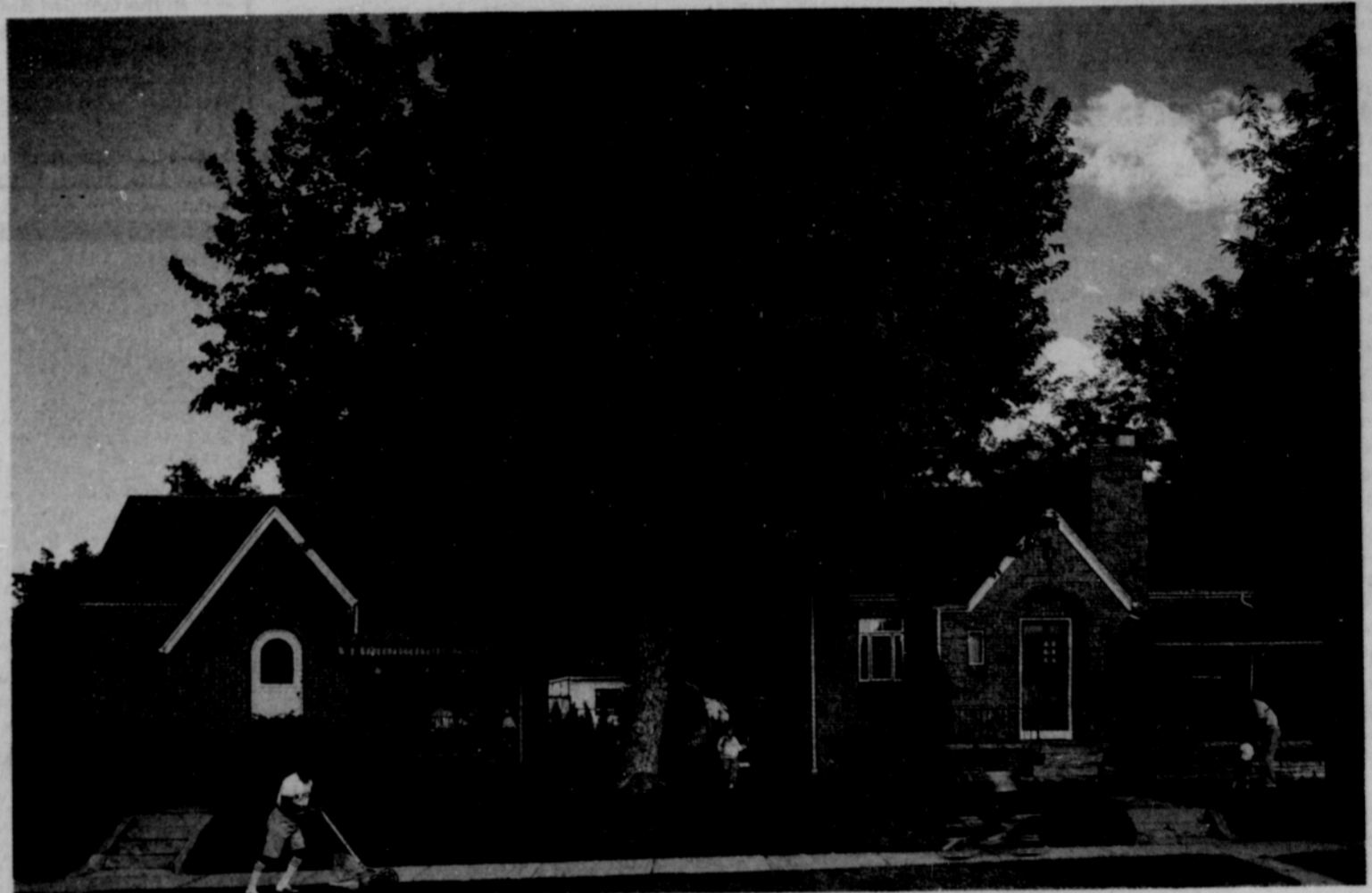
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