

Isobell Tunzi (*nee* Johnson)

The Alfred Years

■ **Isobell Tunzi**, known always as **Isobell Johnson** during her nursing years, writes:

As long as I could remember I had wanted to be a nurse and the family cats and dogs were continually being bandaged and forced into being patients.

I was most professional with one of **Dad's** handkerchiefs tied around my head with a red-pencilled cross on the front.

Then I went to High School and discovered journalism and words but it was at the end of the **Depression**, cadetships were few and far between, usually in the country, poorly paid and I was a girl.

I put my name down at the **Alfred** and got a job in an office in the **City**. There were only two good times: Saturday noon, and pay day.

My father was always against the nursing idea but when I told him I had been offered a permanent spot with a theatre company as a dancer, he suggested I see about nursing. Probably thinking it was the lesser of two evils.

I wrote to **Nurse Wilson** stating I was going to **Queensland** for a holiday and could she give me any idea when I could expect a call.

I got an appointment for an interview and then the medical examination, and given an October starting date. I didn't have the fare for a trip to the **Zoo!**

I was off to **Swinburne Technical School** to do the required course in Invalid Cooking.

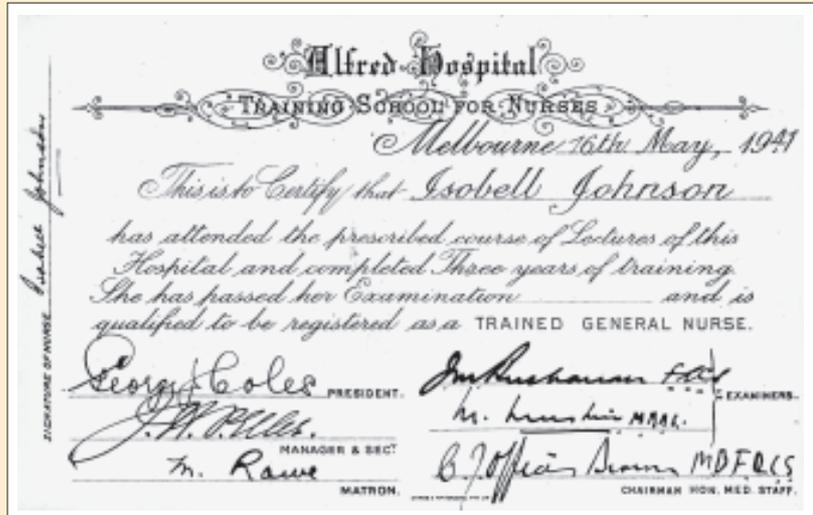
I am still waiting for someone to order Toast Water.

Examination night and a girl who was to begin with me at the **Alfred**, but lasted one week out of the school and I joined forces.

I burnt the potatoes and she strained her peas into the sink so we shared the remaining vegetables and to our great amusement got different marks for the same vegetables.

Then **Sunday, October 24, 1937**, armed with the case containing stockings and some new pyjamas in case of fire, a Certificate to say I was dentally fit and the very important Cookery Certificate, and I was off to the **Alfred** by 7pm.

The gate clanged and the big front door banged and my father said: "Are you sure you want to go on with



● Isobell Johnson became a triple-certificate nurse

this?" Well I really did and to this day have never regretted it and when I left nearly four years later there was only one person I hoped I never saw again. A good record I felt in an almost all-female institution.

I found the small room comfortable even if it was bare but I always had a room of my own and I was nervous of sharing.

The three caps on the bed appeared a mystery but they proved to be that part of the uniform described in the prospectus as "Part Uniform Supplied".

I enjoyed the company of the girls in the school because I had no sisters and my mother had died many years previously.

The food I didn't always appreciate, particularly the **Fric Rabbit** and the mystery bags, but I certainly enjoyed getting up from the table and not having to fight about whose turn to do the dishes, which usually ended up being mine.

I had some definite ideas about nursing and could never understand why nurses were always tired.

They only had to make beds, feed people and take temperatures. What a rude awakening that first morning in the wards - and I was only a helper!

I never suffered sore feet and my legs which after all these years I still consider my best feature, a little heavier of course, never let me down.

I have always had, like many others, a very strong sense of justice, so the pettiness of some girls (in a very small number) worried me, not to

take the blame for small misdemeanours, not finishing tasks and leaving jobs for others.

To demand you do some of their jobs while your duties still had to be done and you were considered slow and then in trouble.

One girl won a medal and I always felt it was *our* medal as we had done so much of her work as juniors.

This enabled her to do extras for her patients. She was also then ready with still clean apron and cuffs on to go off on-time.

I vowed when, if ever, I came to authority, I would never do this and to the best of my knowledge I never did.

Later in another time and place I heard two nurses discussing me and one said to the other: "**Sister Johnson** never asks anyone to do anything she won't do herself" High praise I thought.

I began in **Ward 5, Men's Surgical**, and learnt two valuable lessons I never forgot. The ward isn't tidy if the wheels are not straight, also the importance of fluid balance charts and how not to upset the **Charge Sister** and the **Ward's Maid**.

Empty bottles and chart result, not by bottles running over, and have the **Ward's Maid** on your wheels.

I spent my first **Christmas** in **Ward 5** and could not believe what the staff would do to make **Christmas** a happy time for the patients: flowers, greenery, balloons, carol singing and the beautiful **Christmas** tree.

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As a junior in **Ward 7** I was as reluctant as everyone else to answer the telephone: no beepers or any other system, only the telephonist ringing each ward.

Hands behind the back I approached **Charge Sister** and **Resident Doctor**: "Excuse me **Sister**, is **Doctor Hold Me Bow** in the ward?"

Dr Oldmeadow said "thank you nurse", without blinking an eye. Later **Sister** gave me a list of the Residents' names.

My stint in the children's ward had its highs and lows and the death of a small child left us all with saddened hearts and a cloud over the whole ward, but a lighter note I will never forget.

Picture **Ward 15**. Two juniors left in charge while **Sister** and the rest of the nurses and a Doctor or two gather in the day room for afternoon tea.

Small child begins to fit. Senior of the two juniors notes time and instructs junior in guiding arms and legs, and position of tongue.

Senior junior walks briskly but clamly to the **Day Room** door, knocks and enters: "Excuse me **Sister**, so-and-so is having a fit."

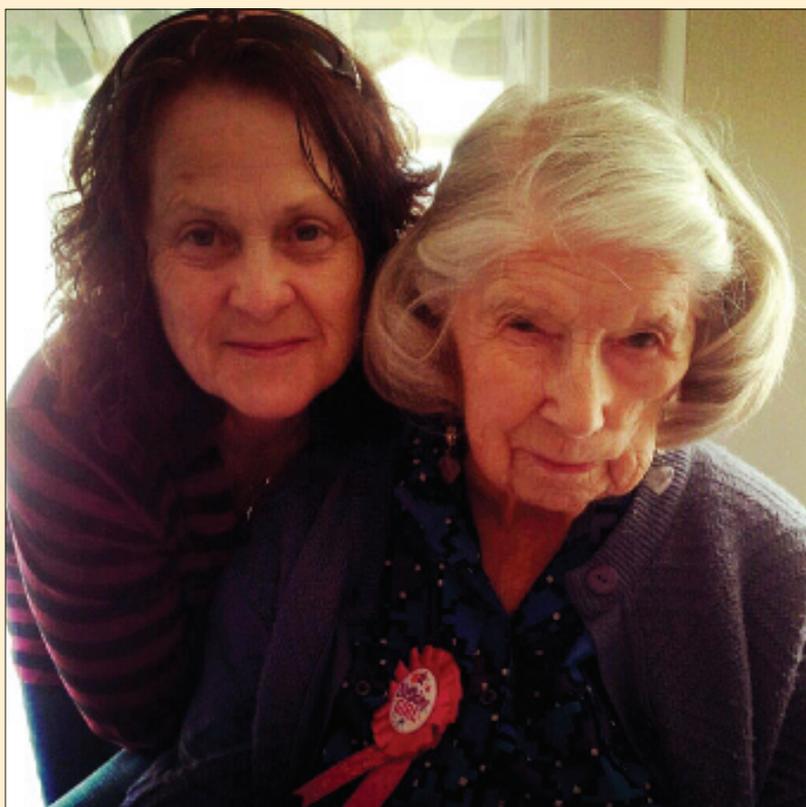
General pandamonium. Chairs pushed back on the polished wooden floor and the **calm** nurse in the doorway nearly killed as everyone tries to get out the door at once. Like a **Laurel and Hardy** comedy.

Where was the **calm** we had been instructed in? Perhaps I was the only one who attended that lecture.

I was fortunate in not meeting death until my second ward. It was Sunday morning and I was told if the post-operative lady, aged 90, died, I was to help.

One of my tasks on a Sunday morning was to go to the pharmacy for any urgent medicine.

When I arrived at the pharmacy,



● **Fleur Long (*nee* Tunzi), also a nurse, with her mother Isobell Tunzi (*nee* Johnson) on her 95th birthday on November 10, 2011.**

on duty was a friend of my father's, and he said: "What's the matter, **Miss Whiteface**?"

I told him and he gave me a small bottle of **Sol Volatole** in case I needed it.

The lady didn't die before 1pm, and I cannot recall the next time, but I do not know that by then I didn't need the medication I had carried for some time.

The care of the patients' clothes and valuables always appeared in the **PTS** lectures as a very important and responsible part of admitting a patient.

One night an unknown male was admitted and his clothes placed in the clothes cupboard in the corridor.

After several days he was identified and he eventually regained consciousness.

He then asked about his money. The clothes book was produced and it was noted one watch and 2/6 in money.

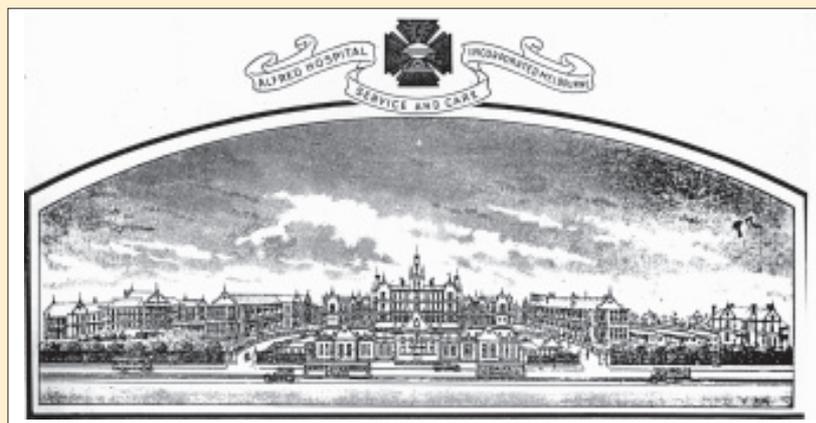
He said he had some hundreds of pounds, he was an agent for market gardeners.

The clothes were obtained from the cupboard, and there in the pockets was the exact sum he had mentioned. About £1200.

As you will imagine there was a shake-up in the care of patients' valuables and a very relieved patient and admitting nurse.

I was very glad I was not the admitting nurse but we all got the message.

One **Sister** who will remain nameless, as soon as the papers were delivered to the ward, returned to the toilet where she read it from cover to cover, then came out and said she was ready to face the day, but none of us would have dared to disturb her for flood, fire or famine. Perhaps we would have for **Matron**, but I never had to try.



● **The Alfred Hospital as it appeared on the 1941 certificate**

Isobell Tunzi (*nee* Johnson): The Alfred Years

My **Casualty** and **Outpatients** experience does not stand out very clearly in my memory.

There must have been patients and the never-ending cleaning.

I know we were stopped making toast in **Outpatients** because of the aroma, and had to resort to malt biscuit sandwiches.

In **Casualty**, everyone crowded around to read the social column in *The Argus*, and someone told me I had filbert-shaped finger nails!

A stint in **Ward 2** kept everyone on their toes. The **Sister** was either very, very affluent or she had connections in the oyster business, because large bags of oysters were delivered to the back door of **Ward 21**.

The soup **Sister** made was mana, also not something I had not previously enjoyed.

Often she decided someone was not shaping up, we always said it had something to do with the moon.

When my turn came she told one of the other nurses she was giving me hell and she certainly was, and when I went to be excused, she told me to sit down and have afternoon tea as usual.

We had beautiful blue china, with white spots. I loved it. Next day back to normal.

When she married, I asked her husband how she was. He told me she had hit her head on the mantle piece, and when he returned home, she had sawn the corner off the mantle piece!

Betty was the ward's maid and one day a large bird's nest dropped on her to the Sterile Table from a ventilator.

Enter **Betty**, five foot nothing, hands on hips, saying "Oo done that?" Our family have been "Oo done thating?" for years.

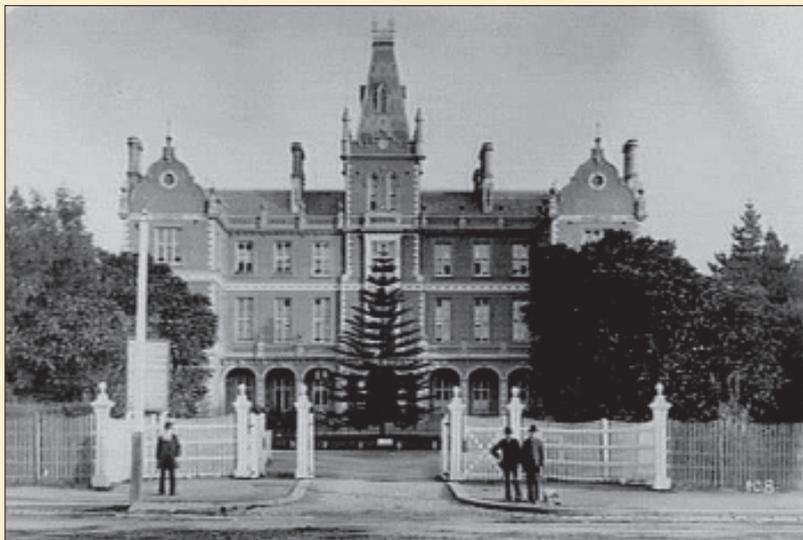
My first 'A' appointment was an education. One order said "shorten tube ½-inch each day". This I did with great care, but on the wrong side of the safety pin!

When I asked the **Sister** to examine the wound and the tube, out it came. She said it was ready to come out, no questions asked.

When the three shifts were introduced, we left the wards later than previously.

As we went along the corridor one evening, with no authority in sight, we up-ended the smallest member into a linen basket and sat on the lid.

Matron arrived from nowhere and said: "Off, don't loiter, no noise", and we were forced to move off, leaving our colleague in the basket.



● The Alfred Hospital, Melbourne

As soon as **Matron** turned into the main hall we raced back to redeem our friend who was too frightened to get out, in case someone was about.

She had to hope we would return and was not amused.

One day in **Ward 12** I recalled discussing with another nurse over the never-ending task of diabetic urine testing (oh for dip sticks!), what we would have in our wedding bouquets, and my desire for a bunch of **Arum** lillies.

Years later, pushing a pram up **Swanston St**, I met my urine testing comrade, also with pusher.

We greeted each other, and looking at my pride and joy, said: "Did you have the **Arum** lillies?"

We thought the occasion worthy of a cup of tea so we went down to **Coles Cafeteria**, fed the kids sticky buns, and had a great laugh.

My third year night duty was spent as senior surgical reliever, a job that no one envied, a new ward every night and patients only beds and ailments.

One **Sister** greeted you each morning with "Anything broken, anything borrowed or lent, good morning nurse."

During the night juniors were often sent to borrow pillows and fracture boards etc. And I can recall saying "go away, go somewhere else". I never thought of lending and lying. I don't think anyone ever did.

Also on this duty I arrived in **Ward 4** to find an elderly man in extension, very disturbed. I rang the **Night Sister** who came and rang the **Resident**. He ordered **Paraldehyde** orally and we were soon both wearing it.

We became more confused, and **Sister** rang for the **Resident**. As the **Resident** entered the ward, the **ZO** came off his foot and he gently slid down behind the locker.

While **Sister** rang for porters to put him back to bed, I asked the second junior to strip and remake the bed. At breakfast next morning I heard that all **Nurse Johnson** could think about when patient was out on the floor was remaking the bed.

I had thought I was pretty smart getting the bottom sheet and draw sheet changed so easily. You could never win.

They later decided he had **DTs** and gave him brandy medicinally.

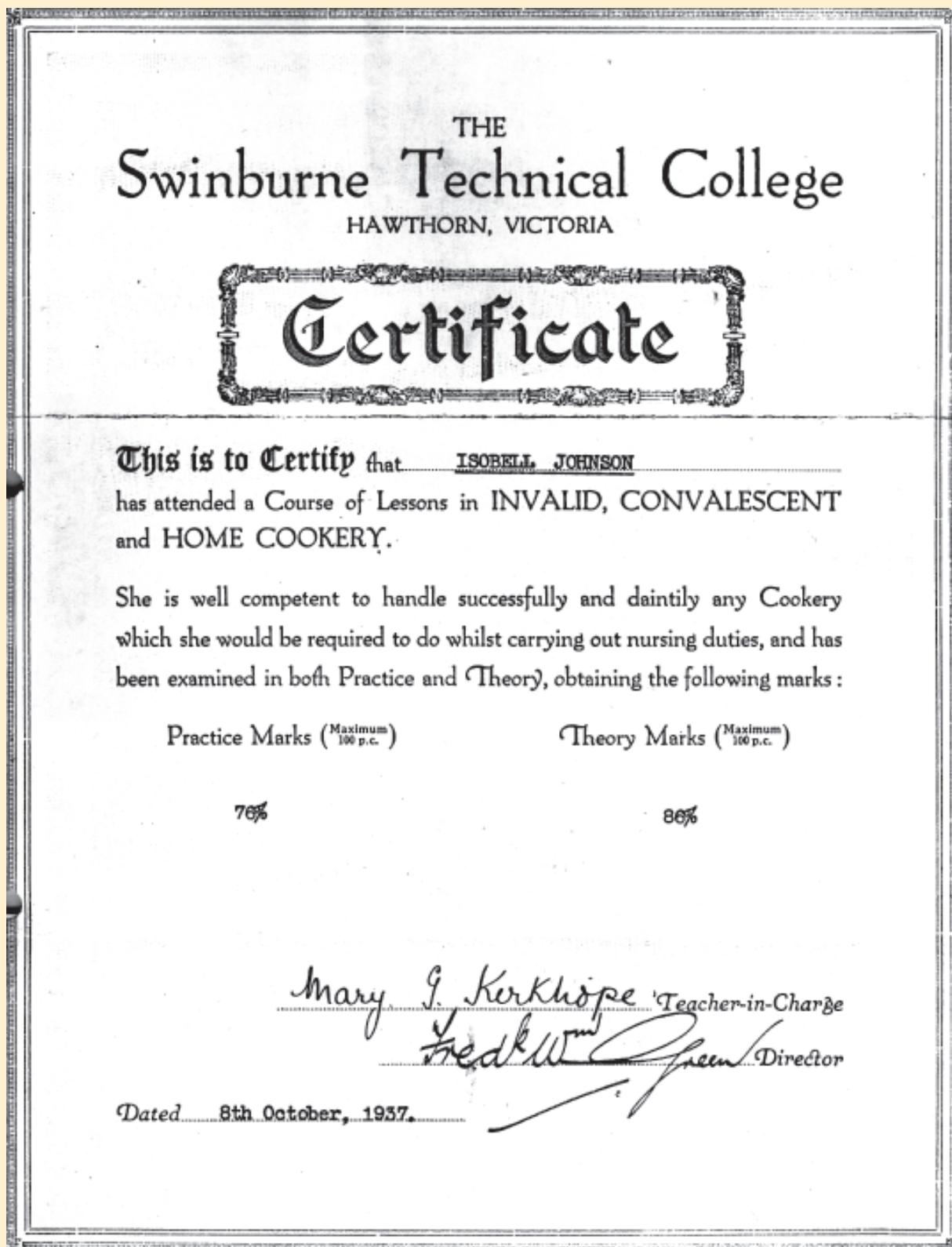
My theatre experience was varied and I learnt very little except for cleaning and tea and sandwich-making. Although I knew the instruments and sutures perfectly when asked by **Surgeon** during the operation, I was an absolute idiot but I do remember eating the fish cooked in the **Auto-Clave**.

I was given another chance in the theatre with the same result and the only time from then on that I voluntarily entered a theatre was to take a baby after **Caesarian Section**. Happy occasion.

It was during my theatre time that **Mr Kennedy** said to have my urine tested by **Albumen**, result **Solid Esbach**.

I landed in **Ward 15**. It was certainly banishment, but I must admit as I walked down that long corridor with nightie in one hand and toothbrush in the other, and hardly able to see out of my eyes, that bed looked very inviting.

Isobell Tunzi (nee Johnson): The Alfred Years



- Isobell Johnson's Certificate in Invalid, Convalescent and Home Cooking gained from Swinburne Technical College, Hawthorn, in 1937

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Sick nurses were always an embarrassment to administration because they were off the roster.

Medical Superintendent, because he had to remember to visit occasionally, and so the **Sister** in **Ward 15** because she had to see that someone went into the small wards to check up on the patient's condition and needs.

During my many weeks there I rolled more wool, made more swabs and fed more babies than when I was on staff.

The only joy I had with my companion was baiting the junior diet **Sister** by refusing her **Fric Rabbit** or some other delicacy and asking for a small omelette for tea.

I must admit we only did it when we were alone. We just remained dumb until she said "very well".

As I was in my third year, I knew many people but juniors were very lonely because their friends carried out the rule that you had to have **Matron's** permission to visit and this was not always easy to obtain.

The old hands could always find a reason to visit the ward.

Mr Maclure was my Honorary and he sometimes called in on Sunday morning to see me and have a chat, probably got more from me when **Sister** and **Doctor** were absent.

After one visit a school nurse asked if he was my Grandfather. How I wish I could have said yes. Who wouldn't?

Many thoughts come and go as you think back to those days:

■ The surgeon who said that plastic shoes made him think of pigs trotters in aspic.

■ Going to the picture theatre and the warmth of the theatre bringing out the ether in your hair, although you washed it often. With no hand dryers it was a problem.

■ Getting up at 10.30pm to go on duty because you had been to bed at 4pm, and thought the **Sister** was calling you, not putting you to bed.

■ Being sick during my time in the school and my dear friend **Margaret** crying with me as she cleaned up because I didn't get the bathroom in time. She said she had come to be a nurse so she had better get used to it. That's friendship and this lasted 46 years.

■ Another friend sent to **Miss Wilson** because of holes in her stockings and when **Miss Wilson** made her take off her shoes she had very little feet in the stockings.

She made her darn them and take them back. They were huge, even my grandmother would have baulked at them.

■ The diet kitchen porter, I think his name was **Noble**. He pushed or pulled the diet trolley. If he pulled, you jumped on the back and had a ride. One day he went around a corner too quickly and disaster. You should have seen the mess when he arrived back at the diet kitchen.

The diet kitchen caught us all out one way or another. I had to make X pints of junket, and was given X number of junket tablets.

I measured the milk into a cream can and put it into the Bain Marie, dissolved the tablets and poured them into the nearly-full can of milk. Result: a cream can of junket. Trying pouring that into those little stainless steel containers. Also, try pouring it into the gully trap without detection.

■ All was not bad with me. I left from **Ward 9** and I had a lady in the small ward who had to have a colostomy and bowel washout daily.

After the **Honorary** had come 4-5 mornings and found the room in a mess, newspaper, buckets, jugs, funnels, etc., I apologised and to my joy he said "Nurse, when I come and see all this, I know the patient is getting the treatment.

"If they are sitting up pretty I can never be sure." So much for tidy patients for **Honoraries**.

■ My embarrassment in meeting my brother, a sailor, with some of his crew mates, and them all insisting on escorting me back to the home, all marching in formation down the long corridor. They may have been wearing blue but my face was red.

■ Of **Mr Brown** insisting his first lobe-ectomy some back to **Ward 6** for his post-operative care. Having to go to the **Medical Superintendent's** office to have the bed card signed to get the early sulpha drugs for a patient.

■ Of the world-famous **Dr Ainslie Meares** coming as a junior resident to **Ward 6** with his arm in plaster. He had been playing a ball game with his son, also now a psychiatrist.

■ Going to the old smoke room to hear any new gossip. Of a friend, in clear voice on a tram, telling a man she didn't know him with his clothes on.

■ Of a girl who left to marry a sailor, and because I walked on duty each night with her, should have known about it!

■ Of the surgeon at the **Orals** who scratched his name on my card and said "Go I can't compete with **Mr Trumble**", all because I told him **Mr Trumble** said a patient in a properly made plaster bed should not get a bedsore!

■ And nearly dying of fright on entering the bandaging examination and seeing what others were doing, and the great relief when asked to put on an arm sling.

★

I have always enjoyed medical nursing believing what I once read. There were more dramas, and need for care and kindness in a medical ward than in the ward of high-powered surgical procedures.

The urineferous aroma of **Ward 6** will stay with me forever, particularly one Sunday morning when I was **Charge Sister, Staff Nurse, Senior Nurse**, etc.

I looked up the ward to see two young Constables escorting into the ward one of my old daddys from the small wards in dressing gown and slippers, but no pyjama pants.

I raced up the ward and in no uncertain terms told them he was my patient.

The smiling Constable said: "That's all right Nurse, you can have him. We found him in **Chapel St.**"

As far as I was concerned the only good thing was I hadn't missed him, and added to my already heavy work load and he was no worse off for his adventures.

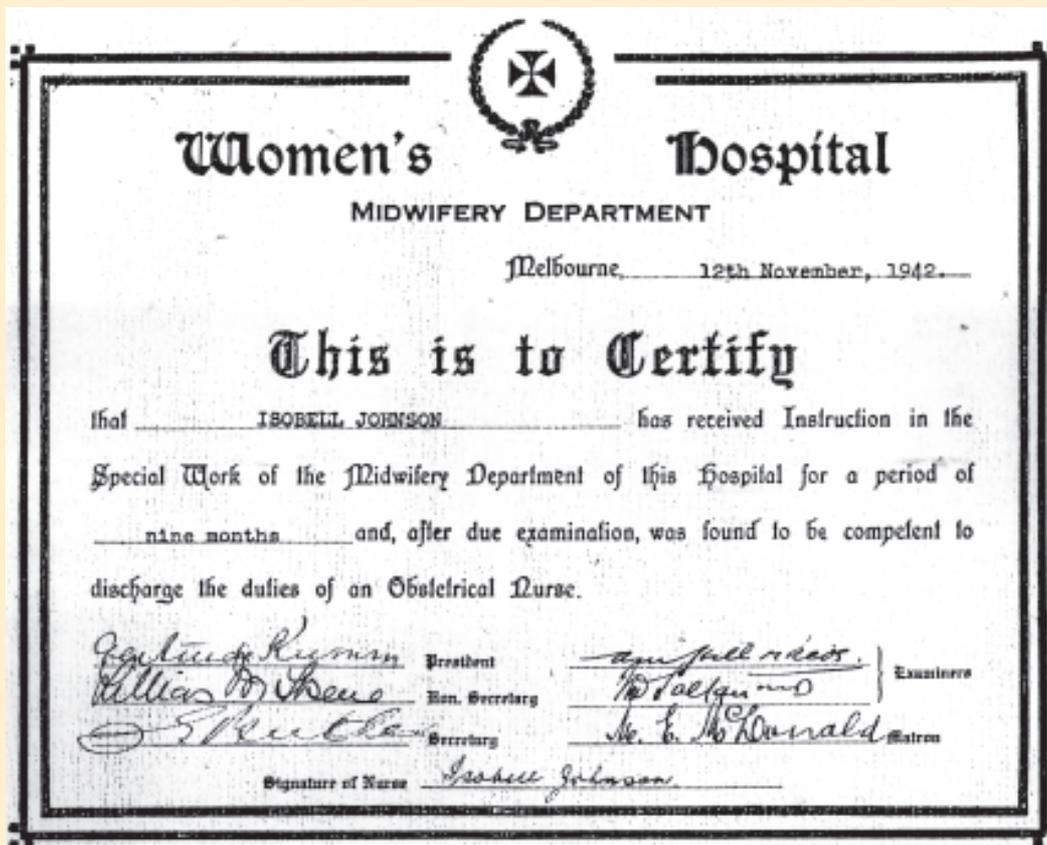
I was never a social success but I did have my moments and that trip down those iron stairs behind the residents' rooms and the walk back along the long corridor had all the thrills of a **Barbara Cartland** novel, and took as much daring as **Armstrong's** walk on the moon, and if caught, as much danger.

I was never caught, but probably they (Authority) thought I was doing what I hoped they thought I was doing, posting a letter.

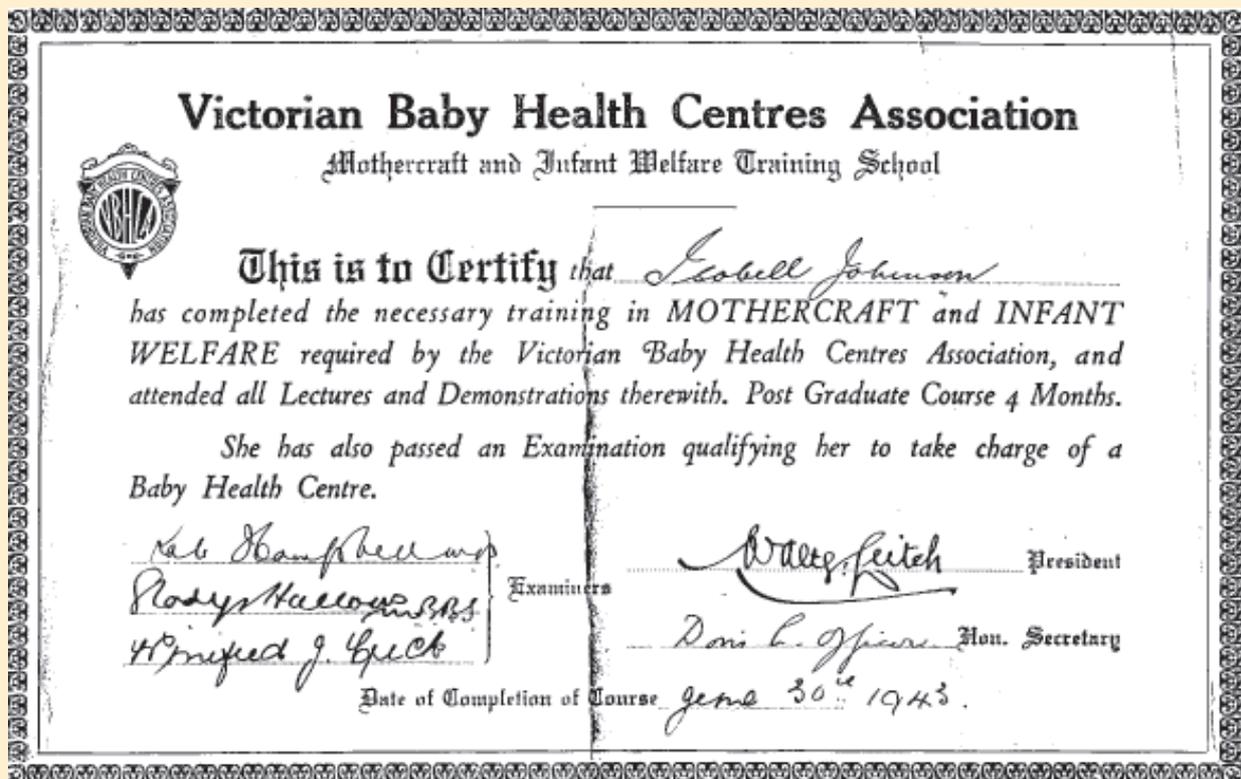
No-one will ever forget **Miss Wilson** all in white, like a ship in full sail, doing a round of the ward, with the **Charge Sister**. Keeping up a steady conversation and nodding to each bed, whether occupied or not.

After my first two days off I hadn't brought back anything for afternoon tea. No one told me and by the time the juniors got to afternoon tea there was nothing left to see what was on the menu.

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● Isobell Johnson's Midwifery Certificate from the Women's Hospital in 1942.



● Isobell Johnson's Certificate as a Mothercraft and Infant Welfare nurse from the Victorian Baby Health Centres Association, in 1943

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I was told of my responsibility and as I cared for **Mr Raft** from **Mildura** I told him of my problem and he produced half a **Christmas** cake from his locker.

I took it surreptitiously to the day room as my offering. I didn't dare say where it came from but my honour was saved.

■ As a junior cleaning the steriliser and putting all the monometal out to be counted by the **Charge Sister**, I always seemed to pick a time when the **Senior Nurse** needed a tray to prep. someone and I should have known.

Heating plastines on the steriliser until they were too hot to handle and by the time you could they were probably too cold, but the penalty for a burn I was not prepared to risk.

Plastine made a very good cleaner for the brass sterilisers.

If have often wondered why **Sister** always wanted the **Linen Room** shelves scrubbed during the Sunday visiting hours and just when you started called you away for some important mission or something happened in the ward and you were probably still putting the scrubbing brush away at going-off time.

Another Sunday trick was to get you to clean out the patients' lockers. I hated it but sometimes you found something to make it interesting.

My first night duty was in **Ward 7** and in those days the first duty of the junior after being signed on in the **Home Lounge** was to rush to your ward, collect a tray, jug, plates, etc and go the night nurses party, to collect the supper.

If you had a friend in your ward she had the tray ready for you.

It was a case of first on best fed, and some pretty poor pickings for 21-22.

As a junior on this duty the second junior and I were in league to keep the senior from having any time (on duty) with her resident admirer. We were always there!

■ And the terrible night I dropped four bedpans in the small wards right near the head of a thyroid patient in **Ward 9**.

Remember we always had notices outside **Ward 9: 'Quiet Thyroid'**.

I couldn't sleep all day waiting to be sent for by **Matron** or **Honorary**.

■ The nights when young Policemen from **Prahran** would sit all night with would-be suicide patients.

In the mornings they always gave

the coffee, gathered up the cups and washed up. These young contables always seemed to have plentiful supplies of fruit cake and eggs.

We often saw these young fellows on point duty at the corner of **Chapel St** and **Commercial Rd**. We always gave them a shout.

■ On night duty if **Australia** was playing **England** in **England**, the long term patients would listen all night, so you could always get the score.

Sometimes if it was very quiet you could sit by a bed and have a listen.

I always suspect the person who usually turned off the wireless was a cricket fan so he left it on.

■ I once read an article by the **Dean of Melbourne** about hysteria and I could relate this to Night Nurses breakfast when the noise was terrific, all talking at once and voices higher than usual.

The truth of this story I cannot vouch for but it could well be true. A junior was told to clean the patients' dentures. She carefully collected these in tooth mugs. Cleaned them but forgot to label them.

■ The new wards of 2-4 patients may be a great breakthrough in care of patients but in these long wards the patients and staff were always under supervision of the **Sister-in-Charge** and the **Staff Nurse**. The **Sister** at her desk at the end of the **Ward** was a sign of security and comfort to the patients, particularly the very ill who were usually near her desk.

Somewhere I learned how to make soft soap, my method was perfect, the quantity anything but perfect. A large bar of **Velvet** soap carefully grated up enough soft soap to clean out all the patients and staff by the a.m. When I ran out of containers I poured it down the slop hopper. I had to buy a bar of **Velvet** soap to replace the four weeks' supply.

Hair was always big on **DOs** and **DON'Ts** as I favoured the page boy style. I was always in trouble trying to keep it of my collar as I few around the ward.

"Trying to get done" my hair was usually about two feet behind me.

Then one day a friend told me the great properties of egg shampoo.

Well, I spent hours getting the scrambled egg out of my hair which was thick and longer than regulation.

I never tried this again. It didn't do much for my hair, temper and friendship with my hair advisor, and I wished some ulcer patient had got to that egg first.

Sister Campbell was big in **ANNL** and if you knew the meeting was on you used an alternative entrance because she caught you and you had to serve supper to those old nurses.

Asd most of us had very little money entertainment when paid for by ourselves was pretty simple.

At the **Australia Hotel** a popular band played each afternoon and for 1/3 you could buy a **Southerly Buster** (heaven knows what it contained) and sit all afternoon.

The same band played at the **Gallean Coffee Lounge** in **St Kilda** every evening and we could walk there and another 1/3 have sandwiches and coffee, as much as you could drink.

Those evenings were never late, but a good 1/3 value.

These entertainments only were possible after pay day when we juniors received £1 per fortnight, rising in our second year to £1/10, and our last year £1 each week, whether we had earned it or not!

I don't remember the tax man getting any of our hard-earned cash.

Well, the years passed, and so did I with the support of my **Grandmother** who darned by black stockings, fed me and let me sleep without question. She loved me dearly and showed how proud she was of me.

To people like **Sister Whiteside** who I always admired from afar and who by her encouragement and read and green pens, must have seen some hope for me.

To **Miss Rowe** who let me come back and back until I made it.

The years I worked and contributed to nursing I hope in some way repaid them.