

Featured Article

Mayo History Pages: Who was Sr. Theodora Mikolai?

Those familiar with even a little bit of early Mayo history recognize the names of Mayo pioneers and legendary surgeons, Drs. E. Starr Judd, Donald Balfour and of course, Charles and William Mayo. Relatively unknown, though, are the names of those pioneer Sisters who acted as their surgical nurses.



This photograph of the sisters who worked in surgery was taken May 12, 1922 at the opening of the surgical pavilion (later named Joseph Building.) From left: Sisters Lucille O'Donnell, Bertilla Lebbens, William Fishenich, Theodora Mikolai, Sylvester Burke and Virginia Guiney.

One nurse in particular, shines a light on those early days in an oral history captured and transcribed in the archives at Assisi Heights. Sr. Theodora Mikolai, born in Germany in 1880, emigrated to America with her parents in 1883 after a six-week ocean voyage. (Interestingly, William Worrall Mayo took a similar trip leaving England in 1845 and Mother Mary Alfred Moes, foundress of the Sisters of St. Francis, set sail for America from France in 1851.)

In 1897 Sr. Theodora entered the convent after celebrating her 17th birthday. She started work at Saint Marys in 1900, eventually earning a diploma in nursing in 1908 from the Saint Marys

School of Nursing. In 1907 Sr. Theodora went to the operating room of Dr. Will Mayo as the unsterile nurse. The unsterile nurse counted the salts. * She also worked as a nursing supervisor for seven years with Dr. Judd and then with Dr. Balfour.

Her own words eloquently describe what life was like in those early operating rooms.

"When I went to the operating room, the sisters were still preparing the raw catgut and horse-hair. When needed Sister Joseph {Will Mayo's first assistant and hospital administrator for 47 years} went to the horses and got the hair. We had three horses. We soaked the horsehair in good strong soapy water changing it each day for a week to remove the odor. When the odor was gone, we soaked it in clear water for one day. We then took the hairs one by one and coiled them the size of a silver dollar and put them in a sterile jar with 75 percent alcohol.

"Once a man came from the east and asked how we prepared sterilized catgut. Someone also came to find how we made sponges. We used two yards of gauze for pelvic sponges and 18 inches for upper. The salts were 10 x 12 inches - nearly square. Each sponge had black tape with a metal ring at the corner. We had a big boiler to sterilize the sponges. Our swabs were 12-inch squares folded into three-inch squares with the raw edges safely enclosed. One night we had no supply for the next day so I made swabs until 9 pm. That night I made 500."

Sister Theodora recounted other memories from her days in the operating room with one in particular standing out to her. She relayed the story of a time when a young intern complained to Dr. Will about a particular sister. Dr. Will quickly responded that if it weren't for the sisters, he wouldn't be there. The intern was silenced on that occasion but frequently repeated that story thereafter.

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Sr. Theodora worked in the operating rooms at Saint Marys Hospital for 25 years, but her service didn't end there. According to "Reciprocal Development and Progressive Responsibility: The History of the Mayo Clinic Neurology Residency," Boes, et al., 2020, "The neurology residents at Mayo Clinic learned not only from the neurologists but also from the nurses. For example, Sister Theodora Mikolai worked in the spinal puncture room from 1932 – 1960. She assisted the neurology hospital service residents with lumbar punctures, being involved in approximately 40,000 procedures over her 28 years of service. A resident observed that 'it was said . . . that all a fellow had to do was to hold the syringe straight, while Sister Theodora would guide the patients interspace onto the needle.'"

Sister Theodora remained at Saint Marys Hospital until her death in 1986.

*Special thanks to our own legendary surgeon and history buff, Dr. Bruce Wolff, for providing more background for this story and for clarifying what "salts" were. According to Dr. Wolff, "During the Civil War, the South lacked silk sutures because of the blockade. So they took horsehairs and boiled them to make them pliable. This also sterilized them, so they had a lower infection rate than northern patients though they didn't know why. Salts – just big sponges – were a Mayo phenomenon in use when I came here in 1981. Some were soaked in saline (hence 'salts')."

Thanks, also, to Sr. Marisa McDonald, archivist at Assisi Heights, who helped discover this priceless look back to the earliest days of our history.

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