

Imagining in Time

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The *AANA Journal* welcomes manuscripts on subjects pertinent to the history of nurse anesthetists for its column, "Imagining in Time." Authors are invited to submit inquiry letters or their completed manuscripts to Kevin D. Corbitt, MA, AANA Archivist-Librarian, 222 S. Prospect Ave., Park Ridge, IL 60068-4001.

Voice and touch: Florence Henderson on the skills of an ether specialist

In this issue of the AANA Journal, "Imagining in Time" continues an occasional series that reprints historical articles by early and pioneer nurse anesthetists. The purpose is to keep the past alive and stimulate research interest. A brief commentary will accompany each article and whenever possible, a bibliography will be included.

Florence Henderson, CRNA (1874-1956), like her mentor Alice Magaw, CRNA (1860-1928), promoted excellence in anesthesia practices through professional society presentations and publications. Featured is Henderson's second article titled "Ether Anesthesia," which was published in a 1914 issue of The Saint Paul Medical Journal.

Key words: Anesthesia techniques, Florence Henderson, ether anesthesia, pioneer nurse anesthetists, suggestive technique in anesthesia.

Florence Henderson, CRNA (1874-1956), served as anesthetist for Dr. Charles H. Mayo, a surgeon at St. Mary's Hospital, Rochester, Minn, who with his brother, William, founded the Mayo Clinic. Born in Illinois and raised in Seward, Neb, Henderson graduated from Bishop Clarkson Hospital Training School for Nurses in Omaha, Neb, in 1900. After graduation, she became superintendent of nurses, taught in the school of nursing, and learned to administer ether and chloroform anesthetics. Hired by Dr. Charles H. Mayo in 1904, Henderson became an ether specialist under the watchful care

of Alice Magaw, CRNA (1860-1928), her mentor and coworker who had worked for the Mayo brothers since 1893. Henderson replaced the departing physician anesthetist, Dr. Isabella C. Herb.¹

Magaw's and Henderson's refinement of open drop ether administration and the subsequent dissemination of their knowledge through their teaching at Rochester and the papers they presented demonstrate the contribution of early nurse specialists to modern anesthesia development. Their contributions are well-documented in the histories of nurse anesthesia.^{2,3}

Henderson's account of her ether technique reflected Magaw's previous writings.⁴ Henderson emphasized the necessary skills of close observation, the importance of frequency of practice, and the use of suggestion to gain the confidence of the patient. She found that a smooth ether induction, minimizing the excitement phase, relied on psychological prowess as it did on technical expertise.

Importance of feminine qualities

Although no longer true today, in the early 1900s, the gender-specific roles of female nurses and male surgeons were unquestioned. Surgeons of the time recognized the importance of feminine qualities in the administration of anesthetics and came to rely upon the dependability, focus, and patience of trained nurses as their anesthetists. The vigilance required to maintain the airway and closely observe the stages of anesthesia was paramount, for early anesthetists had no monitoring technology upon which to rely compared to the complexity of current anesthesia monitoring devices.

Henderson's first recorded description of her ether technique at a professional society meeting occurred in 1909 (Figure and Table). She and

Figure. Portrait of Florence Henderson, circa 1909 (courtesy of the Olmsted County Historical Society Archives, Rochester, Minn).



Table. Articles authored by Florence Henderson, CRNA

1. Henderson F. The nurse as an anaesthetist. *The American Journal of Nursing*. 1909;9:947-949. Discussion, 950-953.
2. Henderson F. Ether anesthesia. *The Saint Paul Medical Journal*. 1914;16(2):74-81. Discussion, 81-82.
3. Henderson F. Ether anesthesia. In: *Collected Papers by the Staff of St. Mary's Hospital, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, 1913*. Philadelphia, Pa: WB Saunders Co.; 1914:701-708. [Reprint of previous article with slight editorial changes and without discussion.]

Agatha Hodgins, CRNA (1877-1945), a nitrous oxide specialist who would later found the National Association of Nurse Anesthetists (now the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists), discussed the merits of ether and nitrous oxide anesthesia at the Twelfth Annual Nurses' Associated Alumnae Convention.⁵ In 1913, Henderson had the opportunity to read her paper, "Ether Anesthesia," before the Southern Minnesota Medical Association where she was 1 of 16 speakers and the only nurse.

Defended use of ether

In "Ether Anesthesia," Henderson defended her use of ether and proved its qualities above emerging anesthetics, such as nitrous oxide, of which she candidly shared her opinion. Henderson considered the use of ether alone or combined with local anesthesia to be the safest method within her practice and yielded the most satisfactory results for the surgeon. Her teamwork with Dr. Charles H. Mayo over 10 years required a very dependable anesthetic for his predominant specialty of thyroid and goiter operations.⁶ A dependable anesthetic by a skilled anesthetist unquestionably contributed to the advancement of modern surgical techniques.

In commenting about the trends of anesthetic agents other than ether, Henderson expressed skepticism about their use. This may have invited questions of progress in anesthesia, including "who is the efficient anesthetist," in the discussion following her paper. It is interesting to note that now, as in 1913, similar discussions continue. Henderson's knowledge and skills, as well as her association with a famous surgeon, gave her the credibility as a nurse not only to read her paper before a medical association meeting, but also to have it published in *The Saint Paul Medical Journal*.

Henderson's career as an ether specialist at the Mayo Clinic flourished for 14 years. During her time at Mayo, she administered anesthetics and taught others her techniques. Henderson moved to California in 1917 and gave anesthetics for a group of surgeons in the Los Angeles area, retiring from anesthesia practice in the 1920s. After retirement, she remained active in the California State Nurses Association as well as the American Red Cross and lived in Los Angeles until her death in 1956.¹

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- (3) Bankert M. *Watchful Care: A History of America's Nurse Anesthetists*. New York, NY: Continuum; 1989:17-38, 66.
- (4) Magaw A. A review of over fourteen thousand surgical anesthetics. *Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics*. 1906;3:795-799.
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