



# **Caring and Compassion: A History of the Sisters of St. Ann in Health Care in British Columbia**

*Darlene Southwell*

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The Catholic Congregation of the Sisters of St. Ann had a humble start in Quebec in 1850 and at first concentrated on teaching locally. But when Bishop Modeste Demers asked for help at his West Coast diocese, the Sisters said yes. At a time in history when most people were born and raised in the same area in which they would live and die, these women were embarking on a remarkable journey: leaving home for an unknown land in the wilderness with no expectation of ever returning. After a lengthy and exhausting sea journey via Cuba and the Isthmus of Panama, Bishop Demers and his entourage arrived, expecting to see a scattering of quiet cabins surrounding Fort Victoria—instead, the newcomers had arrived smack in the middle of a gold rush and the fort and its surroundings housed "a fair seasoning of gamblers, swindlers, thieves, drunkards, and jail birds." Not surprisingly, the Sisters started out teaching but quickly found they were needed to help nurse the sick too.

By March 1875, Victoria citizens wanted the Sisters to build a hospital, and even though the organization had no money, they were able to come through with St. Joseph's Hospital. The Sisters went on to open a major school of nursing in Victoria as well as hospitals in Campbell River, Smithers and Oliver and extended care homes in Victoria and Nelson, playing a significant role in the development of the province. While they only operate one health facility today, the Sisters' legacy continues in social work, in the scholarships they provide through the University of Victoria and through the women and men they have influenced since their arrival. Darlene Southwell, who was granted unlimited access to the Sisters' archives in Victoria, spent five years writing *Caring and Compassion*, which, against a backdrop of racism, war and seemingly insurmountable financial crises, serves as both a history of the Sisters' healing pursuits in BC and a mirror of the times.

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