

Island Without A Doctor

# Three Maine Nurses Act In Emergencies

By Elof Bernstorff

Portland Press Heralds April 8, 1951

The lack of a doctor on an Island seven miles off the coast of Maine and 25 miles from the nearest hospital might well be a source of dread or even panic to the unfortunate community. But Swan's Island is lucky. Three of its busy housewives are registered nurses, although 'long ago they doffed their caps and put away their uniforms in favor of husbands, families, or for careers in other fields.

But nurses are like soldiers who, on hearing the call to arms, snap to attention and rush forth to join the fray. In the dead of night may come the frantic knock, the anguished cry. There may follow a jalopy ride over ice-covered roads in the dead of Winter, the perilous climb down a slippery ladder into a bobbing lobster boat, the mad dash through a storm tossed sea ending with the mile-ride in a jolting taxi, all laws forgotten until it careens up to the hospital entrance. Only then is the terrible responsibility over. After a first soul-warming cry of a lusty new citizen the nurse turns tiredly and gratefully toward home.

At present, the acting health officer on Swan's Island is Mrs. Leila Whitehill, RN, wife of Jack Whitehill, manager of the electric co-op. A young mother, vivacious, pretty, she is a graduate of Maine General Hospital in Portland. During the present emergency she is working under the generally telephoned direction of Dr. Herbert Wilbur of Southwest Harbor. She is well supplied with drugs and medical equipment to be used at his orders. Mrs. Whitehill also is superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School and vice president of the Young Adult Fellowship. In her spare time she assists her husband and operates an ice cream parlor.

Mrs. Irene Kent, RN, .wife of Capt. Maurice Kent is a graduate of Presbyterian Hospital In New York City. She met Captain Kent very romantically on a trip to see the Passion Play at Oberammerjgau. Later, when they were married, she never imagined that coming to Swan's Island would mean a return to nursing. Today in the doctorless community, she leaves her big house and family to answer sick calls, happy to give the service for which she was trained.

Helen Webb Bernstorff Is the third nurse. An English major at Syracuse University, she Jeft college for a nursing career. After she graduated from the House of the Good Samaritan in Watertown N. Y., she practiced at Presbyterian-Columbia Medical Center. From there she went into Lord and Taylor to do institutional nursing but became interested in merchandising. For several years she served as buyer in leading department stores of Baltimore and Hartford. Her book. *A Buyer Ad Libs*, was serialized by Earnshaw's Magazine and used in many stores as a text, for retailing classes. In 1950. Mrs. Bernstorff migrated to Swan's Island to write the Great American Novel. She finds a great part of her time taken up with bandages and thermometers rather than with her typewriter.

We asked Mrs. Whitehill, "What was the most exciting emergency in your nursing experience?"

Her brown eyes sparkling, she recalled a time in 1942. soon after her graduation from Maine General. She had come home to Swan's Island to visit her parents.

"It was a cold November night," she told us. "The island doctor was off on the mainland. Near midnight came an urgent call from an expectant mother. I located the doctor and asked him to meet us on the wharf at Stonmngton. He said he'd stand by, and we bundled the patient aboard a fishing boat. By the time we tier up to the pier, labor was well advanced. But there was no doctor to be seen. The men who brought us over scattered in three directions to find him, leaving me alone with the mother. The cabin was icy cold, for as soon as the engine was turned off, the heat stopped. I worked as well as I could with numb fingers and no light but a flashlight. Thank goodness the batteries held! Within half an hour, and before anyone came, the baby was born. I wrapped him In our only blanket, leaving the mother shivering from cold and shock. Today the boy is a sturdy citizen and one of the smartest pupils in Minturn School."

Although having planned her life away from nursing, Leila has found an inner strength quite apart from the deceiving fragility of her body. Her easy self-assurance and ready humor inspire confidence in the hearts of her neighbors.

"She's as good as a doctor!" they say.

"Nonsense!" snaps Leila. "No nurse can be as good as a doctor. I don't know what we'd do if Doctor Wilbur didn't sacrifice a day a week to make the trip over here. I only do my best."

All three of the nurses do their best. Doctor Wilbur says, "The girls are doing a fine Job on Swan's Island. Not many nurses would want the responsibility of living on an Island without a doctor.

### **Health Sentinels Of Lonely Outpost**

Mrs. Lelia Whitehill, left, and Mrs. Helen Webb Bernstorff are two of three nurse\* who respond when emergency illness strikes a man, woman or child of lonely Swan's Island, seven miles off the coast of Maine.