

A Triumph of Will

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Owen Sound's history as a safe haven for Blacks fleeing slavery in the United States is rich, but not without its marred moments. A stop on the Underground Railway, Owen Sound accepted Black settlers, but like so many other communities, it took time for the city and surrounding areas to respect their new inhabitants. It was an Owen Sound woman who paved the way for Black Canadians to enrol in, and complete hospital-run nursing education programs, but it was an Owen Sound hospital's resistance, rather than assistance, which helped her break down the barriers to do so.

Marisse Scott graduated from the Owen Sound Collegiate and Vocational Institute with honours in 1946, and wanted "to help others through nursing". When she tried to enrol as a student nurse at the Owen Sound General and Marine Hospital, her ambition was met with a rude and decisive "no". The explanation, brutal to our modern ears and hers, was: "Sorry, we don't accept coloured girls". This could have been the end of the story for Marisse Scott, but instead it was just the beginning.

Devastated by her unceremonious rejection, Marisse might have given up her dream to nurse, but instead she told her story. With the help of her parents, Marisse's story of injustice spread to friends, church members, government authorities in Toronto and Ottawa, and most importantly, to the press. Sympathy for Marisse's plight grew until J.A. O'Reilly, pastor of the Church of Our Lady in Guelph, reviewed Marisse's case and convinced St. Joseph's Hospital to accept her as a student. In August of 1947, Marisse prepared to move to Guelph from Owen Sound to begin her studies.

At the start of her third year of the program, Marisse's instructors termed her "one of the most willing and able student nurses in the history of the institution". She led her class in her two previous years of study and was looking forward to a long career of nursing in Guelph. But Marisse's greatest accomplishment was the precedent she set and the change it required in this country. By 1949, Owen Sound was among the growing number of communities whose hospitals had abolished prejudice from their enrolment system.

Marisse Scott was an Owen Sound woman who made history, in spite of, rather than with her community. The Owen Sound hospital rejected a woman who deserved the education she sought; and her strength led her to change not one admission policy, but many throughout the country. Black history in Owen Sound and Grey County comes in many shades, and contains both injustice and victory.