

Chicago's Nurse Parade

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In 1948, Fr. Clarence M. Brisette, OSM, a Chicago priest, decided that his city needed a parade that would honor its nurses. Under his leadership, the first such parade was staged the following May. It quickly became a popular annual event, attracting nurses and nursing students from as many as 40 area hospitals as participants. Tens of thousands of Chicagoans turned out to applaud the spectacle.

Chicago's Nurse Parade describes the parade's creation, history, and final occurrence in the late 1950s. The authors are Chicago nurses who were told about the event by older colleagues and decided to publish their book as a means of preserving the parade in memory. (Ms. Smeltzer, the book's senior author, is today a member of the board of Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Health System, Lenexa, KS.)

Chicago's Nurse Parade is primarily a book of photographs, most of them preserved by archivists of the Order of Servants of Mary, Fr. Brisette's congregation. Many of the photos are wonderful. The world they reveal—Chicago of the 1940s and '50s—was different from the one we know today. The marching women all wear white uniforms and caps (and navy capes in cool weather). Male nurses from Alexian Brothers Hospital are dressed in white trousers and jackets, looking like sailors. Escorting the marchers are floats, high school bands, fire engines, and detachments from the American Legion and the National Guard.

Fr. Brisette hoped that the parade would inspire similar events in other U.S. cities. Unfortunately, this did not happen. And after 1958, when Fr. Brisette was transferred to other work, Chicago's own annual procession came to an end. But for a decade it had been an occasion that gladdened city residents' hearts. Now, thanks to this book's authors, other hearts can be gladdened as well.


Gordon Burnside

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