

2022

Indigenous Nurses Day

A true trailblazer: Edith Monture

By: Eogle Andersen

Canada's first Indigenous Nurse, Edith Monture, led a life of unprecedented trailblazing, while still maintaining an unwavering bond with both her culture and family.



Photo Courtesy: John Moses
(Canadian Encyclopedia)

As of 2022, Edith Monture's legacy has been firmly established through all of the unprecedented feats that she accomplished in her lifetime, as well as through memorials and celebrations created in her honour. However, the greatest testaments to Edith's legacy are her descendants who have continued to uphold her values.

Many have gone on to lead interesting lives of their own. Some followed in her footsteps pursuing careers in the military and in healthcare, while others have done important work in education, activism, and community contribution.

"It must've been like going to the moon"

Born on April 10, 1890, into a Mohawk family on the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve near Brantford, Ontario, Charlotte Edith Anderson never came across a barrier that she couldn't breakthrough.

This trailblazing attitude became visible during her teen years when she decided to pursue a high school education in Brantford instead of attending the Mohawk Institute Residential School like the vast majority of Indigenous youth at the time.

Her grandson, an Associate Professor at McMaster University, Rick Monture explained the significance of this decision:

"To kind of think of that is mindblowing, really - to think about how we hear so much about our kids in residential schools, and then there's our grandmother and handful of other kids from the reserve made that choice to do that."

"It was kind of a middle finger to the colonial government - you know, an 'I'm doing this because I want to, and I'm able to. I'm gonna make a life for myself and I don't care what you have in mind for me but this is what we're doing' statement," Rick said.

Edith performed very well throughout her time learning in Brantford. However, upon graduation, she decided to set her sights on a new goal - a career in nursing. At the time this was not a career that was really attainable for Indigenous women in Canada.

Another one of Edith's grandsons, Canadian Armed Forces Veteran, John Moses expanded on why this was.

"Grandma had wanted to be a nurse from the time that she was a young woman, but unfortunately Canada's Indian Act restrictions of her era prevented her from doing that without putting herself in danger of losing her status."

"Under the Indian Act of that era, any status Indian registered band member who was in pursuit of any professional or technical training could be deemed to be civilized and assimilated, and thus they could arbitrarily have their legal Indian status and band membership removed."

"Her way around that was to take her nurses' training in the United States," John said.

That was exactly what Edith did. Edith's granddaughter, Terri Monture, who is an activist for labour and Indigenous rights spoke highly of her grandmother's courage to take this leap.

"She had to leave Canada and everything she'd known. It was 1910, I believe. At the time, leaving the Rez to go to New York City, it must've been like going to the moon."

“Especially for a woman, a Native woman in 1910. It’s a pretty intense accomplishment, and I don’t think we pay enough attention to what that must’ve been like,” Terri explained.

Building a legacy

After adjusting to life in the New York, Edith was able to succeed in her studies, graduating first in her class and becoming a registered nurse in 1914. This made her the first-ever Indigenous nurse from Canada, a title that enshrines her in Canadian history.

A few years later, while working as a nurse in a private school located half an hour away from Manhattan, Edith further cemented herself in the history books. As the United States entered the First World War, Edith decided that she wanted to be part of the effort.

“She volunteered for duty as a Nursing Sister with the US Army Nurse Corps of the American Expeditionary Force, which was the United States’ overseas army in France during the First World War,” John explained

As a part of the *Military Service Act (1917)*, all wartime nurses were given the right to vote in a Canadian federal election. This included Edith, and she became the first Indigenous woman to vote federally in Canadian history. It took until 1960 for all Indigenous women to be able to legally participate in the federal voting process.

Although Edith’s participation in the war effort was historical, it was not met with unanimous support.

Terri explained that Edith’s “decision to go to war at that time was extremely controversial at home because our people do not think of themselves as Canadians or Americans. We’re Haudenosaunee and we are separate, and our sovereignty is separate. But, at the same time we also believe that people have free will and they can choose to go out and do things.”

Her family also “sent her traditional burial clothes. Because it’s one of our beliefs that you have to be buried in our traditional clothing in order to meet our relatives in the Sky World,” Terri remarked.

While overseas, Edith was able to remain safe. She worked at Base Hospital in Vittel, France for over a year. During this time she treated soldiers for a variety of wounds that had occurred in battle.

After the war had ended, Edith returned to the United States, and shortly after returned home to the Six Nations Reserve and married Claybran Monture. She took his last name and would raise a family with him.

Edith remained on the reserve for the rest of her life working as a nurse and midwife, as well as advocating for better Indigenous healthcare.

David Monture, an author and another of Edith’s grandchildren remarked that he didn’t think that “there was a family on the reserve, at least in the older generation who didn’t know her or she wasn’t present at their birth.”

She had been present at his and most of his siblings’ births. This was the case for a lot of the births on the reserve during the first half of the twentieth century.

Truly a pillar of the community, Edith has been recognized in various ways since her passing in 1996. For instance, in Brantford, Edith Monture Park sits along Edith Monture Avenue, and there has also been talk of naming a school after her.

However, her greatest legacy lies with her descendants. Many of which carry the same courageous energy that Edith lived her life with. Her grandchildren remember her fondly, with great respect for the humble courage that she embodied.

“I think about my grandmother as always very generous, patient, kind, and affable. She always made time for you,” Rick recalled.

This sentiment is also shared by the many others who were lucky enough to know Edith.

