THE RAIMENTS

A distinctive student uniform was an accepted tradition by the time the School for Nurses opened in 1917; it had not always been so. Pupil nurses at the Bellevue Hospital in 1874 resisted a uniform even though it was deemed advantageous on the ground of economy, neatness, and its effect on esprit de corps. The Bellevue School felt it was inadvisable to insist on a uniform and instead devised this plan:

*In the first class of nurses was a daughter of an old and prominent New York family.... She was also, by good fortune, very beautiful, tall, and dignified.... it was arranged that she should have a couple of days leave of absence. On her return she made her appearance in the wards dressed in the greyish-blue stripe with apron and cap of white. So charming was she to behold, and so dowdy and insignificant did all the non-descript print dresses look beside her, that prejudice vanished and as rapidly as possible the uniform was adopted, and never again questioned.*

Uniform and Cap

The young woman entering the University of Nebraska School for Nurses in 1917 was attired in a long-sleeved blue and white gingham dress which measured exactly ten inches from the floor. Miss Burgess sent the pattern for this dress with the letter of acceptance, and the student made her own “probationer” uniforms. The School thus
sustained no economic loss if the student did not pass the probationary courses — no money had been invested in her uniforms. A white bishop collar, white apron, and black or brown shoes and stockings completed the uniform.²

Following the successful completion of the probationary courses, the student was given a long sleeved blue and white pin-striped dress (worn with white cuffs in the senior year), white apron, bib, and cap. The cap was designed by Miss Burgess and was patterned after the cap of her alma mater, the Illinois Training School.³ For many years Miss Burgess reportedly cut out the dresses, supervised the fitting and was known to check the length with a ruler on occasion.

Members of the Class of 1954 before and after capping ceremony
In 1936 the "probie" uniform was discontinued and the sleeves of the dress were shortened, but the beginning student was still readily identified. She wore the dress with white cuffs, the apron, and white shoes and stockings (worn since 1933).\(^4\) The cap and bib were given after she was deemed "suitable" for a nursing career.

Every probie looked forward to the "capping" ceremony, which was held on campus or in a church and was attended by family and friends. The Director of the School placed the cap on the head of the kneeling student as her Big Sister presented a lighted Nightingale lamp. The Nursing School choir performed and a speaker was engaged to give an inspiring message. A tea sponsored by the School of Nursing Alumnae Association usually followed in the lounge of the nurses' residence. The capping ceremony was a momentous event in the life of the student nurse; it symbolized acceptance into the profession and is recalled by many students as the most significant event of their nursing school days.

The capping ceremony was held annually except for a few years during World War II when students received their caps with their
weekly laundry. In the early 1960's the ceremony was the victim of progress and change. The School was now becoming collegiate, and was trying to shed its diploma school image. The faculty felt that the capping was a diploma school symbol; the last ceremony was held on December 18, 1961. The next year entering students received the complete uniform; a dedication ceremony, which resembled the capping, was held during the fall semester. Sophomore students received the Nightingale lamp from their Big Sisters and repeated the Nightingale Pledge. A reception was hosted by the Student Council and Alumnae Association. This dedication ceremony was discontinued in the late 1960's.

A major change in the uniform was made in 1966. The cotton "starch and stripes", which had been laundered and ironed by the hospital laundry, was replaced by a pale blue and white pin-stripe A-line dress with a white dickey neckline; male students wore white slacks with a blue pin-stripe shirt. This wash and wear uniform was a boon to students, who were now required to do their own laundry. The cap became a perma-starch creation — no more starching, drying on the refrigerator, folding and pinning! For the first time in many years, everyone's cap looked the same as it could only be folded to one size. The cap was purchased at a local uniform shop rather than ordered from the School of Nursing.
A.S.N. and B.S.N. student uniforms, 1970's

Student uniform, 1985–present

Faculty member Sue Kloch and student, 1987
The uniform was changed several times in the next 10 years as a result of problems with companies making the uniforms, student preferences, and program changes. The opening of the associate degree program in 1970 necessitated a uniform different from the blue and white pin-stripe worn by baccalaureate students. A yellow pin-stripe was initially chosen for the associate degree students.9

In keeping with fashion trends, the pant suit for female students first appeared in 1973; the pant suit was a welcome change from the short hem-lines so popular at this time and was more practical for nursing activities in both the hospital and community.10 Until the closure of the associate degree program in 1986, these students wore white slacks, yellow over-blouses, and white shoes. Baccalaureate students in the articulated program wore white uniforms of their choice; blue pants and white over-blouses were worn for community experiences. An arm patch identified students as University students.

As preparations were made for the closure of the articulated programs and the opening of the four year BSN program, the question of uniforms was raised again. Dean Yeaworth appointed a committee of faculty and students to choose a uniform. Following consultation with students, alumni, faculty, clinical agencies and other colleges, the committee recommended that students would wear white uniforms in the hospital and blue pants with white over-blouses in the community. Female students were able to choose from pants, skirts,
tunics, and dresses for the white uniform. An arm patch and name pin clearly identified the students.

The cap has not been a part of the student uniform since the early 1970's at the request of students. This request mirrored the trend of staff nurses in many hospitals to doff their caps.

Six water colors depicting the evolution of the uniforms of the College of Nursing were presented to the College by Dr. and Mrs. Harry
W. McFadden, Jr. on January 9, 1973. The paintings were done by Nadine Hammon, wife of Bill Hammon who produced the mural of the DNA molecule for the Medical Center Library. Dr. McFadden, Chairman of the Department of Microbiology, gave the paintings in honor of his parents, the late Dr. and Mrs. Harry W. McFadden, Sr. of Greenwood, Nebraska. The watercolors are on permanent display on level seven of the McGroogan Library of Medicine.¹¹

Cape

The nursing cape was an optional part of the uniform from 1934 until the mid 1960's. The original knee-length cape was maroon with a scarlet lining; UNSN was embroidered in gold on the stand-up collar. Miss Burgess selected the design after a request by the Alumnae Association for a school cape.¹² In 1947 the colors were changed to maroon with gold lining.¹³ In 1954, the Alumnae Association approved a recommendation by the faculty and student body to change the cape to grey/blue with a red lining.¹⁴

Pin

The official pin worn by graduates has withstood the test of time and has remained essentially unchanged since it was designed in 1921 by Dr. Alfred Brown, Chief Surgeon at University Hospital. Design suggestions were made by Miss Burgess and the Alumnae Association, which was organized in 1921.¹⁵

The central lamp represents Florence Nightingale's nursing career; the blue border symbolizes truth and loyalty; the gold symbolizes worthiness. Semper fidelis is a well known Latin phrase meaning
“always faithful”. The only design change in the pin was made in 1972 when "School" was changed to "College" to reflect the change in status approved by the University of Nebraska Board of Regents. All graduates of the College are eligible to purchase the pin, and thousands have worn the pin with pride.

Summary

The progression from the "starch and stripes", which identified University students for 49 years, to the permanent press uniform worn today was the result of economics and practicality. The "starch and stripes" was considered the property of the School, although in later years students did pay a nominal fee for the uniform. As such, uniform maintenance was also assumed by the School; as classes became larger and students began living off campus, it was no longer economically possible for the School to pay for uniform laundry. Since the heavy starching and ironing precluded student maintenance of the uniform, the permanent press uniform was a practical alternative.

Those who had worn the "starch and stripes" viewed its demise both gladly and sadly. Who can forget the time it took to put the buttons on the dress and apron, attach the collar and cuffs, pin the bib, and fold the cap? Worn under an isolation gown in a private room in the summertime heat, the uniform was not viewed with compassion. The stiff collar rubbed many a neck raw. And yet the uniform had been worn with the pride of being a University nurse; an old friend had been lost and it was sad to see it become a victim of progress.