



# IMAGINING IN TIME

Virginia Gaffey, CRNA-ret  
Green Harbor, Massachusetts

## AGATHA COBOURG HODGINS: SHE ONLY COUNTED SHINING HOURS

*The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists' founder and first president Agatha Hodgins retired from clinical practice in 1934 and lived in Chatham, Mass, until her death in 1945. Little is known about her years in Chatham. Author Virginia Gaffey, CRNA-ret, describes her search for Hodgins' home and place of*

*burial. Biographical information on Hodgins is provided along with highlights of her distinguished clinical career.*

**Key words:** Agatha Hodgins, Lakeside Hospital School of Anesthesia, nurse anesthesia history, World War I.

Agatha Cobourg Hodgins was truly an anesthesia pioneer, a lady of valor, courage, intelligence, administrative ability, and determination to carry out her dreams. This was not an easy task in the early days of anesthetic practice.

Hodgins was born in 1877 to conservative but prosperous parents in Toronto, Canada, where she received her early education and graduated from junior college. Her father was a highly respected Episcopalian clergyman whose desire was to raise his daughters to become part of their sheltered home life and engage in the social circles of young ladies of the time. However, Hodgins was far too enterprising, and this was not the life she wanted. She had too much determination and progressiveness, and thus she left home and emigrated to the United States. The qualities of determination and progressive activities remained as her standard throughout her life.

Shortly after arriving in the United States, Hodgins settled in Boston, Mass. She immediately applied to the Boston City Hospital School of Nursing in 1906. In 1908, she went to work in the surgical department of the Lakeside Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. The chief of surgery was a brilliant professor at Western Reserve Uni-

versity—George W. Crile, MD. It was not long after Hodgins arrival that Crile recognized her professional skills and special qualities. It was at that time that Crile was seeking a solution to the problem of surgical shock. It amazed the medical world that Crile found in Hodgins an able teammate and the 2 minds and skills blended in a collaborative effort that made medical history. In 1911, Crile placed Hodgins in charge of anesthesia in the surgical department of Lakeside Hospital, and later the first school of anesthesia in the country was established there.

It is most difficult for the modern nurse anesthetist to grasp the anesthesia practice of earlier times. There were no electronic monitors; the finger on the pulse was the best monitor of the day. Imagine when intubating you not only searched for the epiglottis and the correct placement of the endotracheal tube if used, but you also had to keep your eye on the carotid pulse in the neck in order to assure a cardiac arrest had not occurred. Agents were limited to open drop ether and chloroform in most cases. It was due to the efforts of Crile and Hodgins that safer administration of anesthesia procedures were eventually developed.

Hodgins was not only a pio-

neer of national recognition, she also had gained international love and respect. Her professional life was beautifully described in an article that appeared in the *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists* in May 1946, soon after her death. It was written by her friends and colleagues Helen Lamb, Aida Allwein, and Clara Moore, and is excerpted below in order to give current members a better understanding of her professional life.<sup>1</sup>

In 1908, in response to numerous requests for the training of nurses in anesthesia technique, the hospital accepted a few applicants who had already had some experience in administering ether. This was the beginning of the Lakeside Hospital School of Anesthesia. Further development was delayed by the advent of World War I. A special American Hospital Unit was organized for overseas' service with Dr. Crile as Surgeon-in-chief and Miss Hodgins as Chief Anesthetist.

The "Lakeside Unit" sailed for Europe in December, 1914, and functioned at the American Ambulance Hospital at Neuilly, France, during the early part of the war. The nitrous oxide-oxygen technique introduced by the Lakeside Unit soon achieved wide acclaim. Many overseas surgeons visited Dr. Crile and asked that their anesthetists be trained in Miss Hodgins' procedures. As a consequence, a French physician, two groups of English nurses, and an American nurse were trained during Miss Hodgins' stay at this hospital.

Miss Hodgins' success as a teacher of these procedures was confirmed when the Lakeside Unit was

**Figure 1. Map of Cape Cod, Mass, with location of Chatham**



(Tiger Map Service, US Census Bureau, <http://tiger.census.gov>)

**Figure 2. Agatha Hodgins' home in Chatham, Mass, approximately 1930s to 1945**



(Courtesy of AANA Archives.)

replaced by the Harvard Unit and Dr. Harvey Cushing requested that she remain and continue teaching her technique until they were well established in that area of operation. Much of Miss Hodgins' work was necessarily done at the front and with anesthetizing apparatus haz- ardously transported to front-line trenches under enemy fire. Here, however, she was able to demon- strate under entirely new circum- stances the solution provided by nitrous oxide-oxygen anesthesia in

the problem of operative shock. Its usefulness was particularly evident in patients who had been gassed.

Shortly after her return to Cleve- land in 1915, Miss Hodgins, at Dr. Crile's urgent request, began the organization of what is believed to have been the first school of anesthe- siology in this country and, probably, the world. With definite educational prerequisites and a prescribed course of study, the Lakeside Hospital School of Anesthesia graduated its first class in 1916. This included six physicians,

two dentists, and eleven nurses. Later that year, the Ohio State Medical Board questioned the legal status of the new school, but in 1917, all obstacles were raised and the school [was] permitted to proceed.

Meanwhile, the United States entered World War I and our National Base Hospital plan was organized for overseas service. Miss Hodgins did not join any of the units recruited for this project, however, as it was considered more important for her to remain in America, and on the basis of her valuable war experience to train nurse anesthetists for such service. The striking services ren- dered by nurse anesthetists trained by Miss Hodgins for World War I duty added greatly to the prestige of the profession after the war.

Miss Hodgins devoted her life from World War I through 1934, when illness forced her retirement, to the development of teaching meth- ods in anesthesiology and the perfec- tion of an adequate course of study for the student nurse anesthetist. From her original nitrous oxide-oxy- gen anesthesia, with its then unique advantage of defense against surgical shock, she expanded her curriculum to include other gas-oxygen and car- bon dioxide techniques, as their mer- its were verified. From her school and from others patterned from it, graduate nurse anesthetists and teachers of nurse anesthetists, inspired by her great example, went forth to the four corners of the earth, carrying with them the boon of mod- ern skilled anesthesiology, often to areas where such service had hith- erto been unavailable.

It was Miss Hodgins' conviction that the professional position of the nurse anesthetist could be advanced through state and national organiza- tions and during the last years of her administration at Lakeside Hospital School of Anesthesia, she used her leisure to promote this idea. On June 17, 1931, she called a meeting of rep- resentative nurse anesthetists which resulted in the organization of the National Association of Nurse Anes- thetists; later renamed the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists. From its inception until her death on March 24, 1945, she served the Asso- ciation continuously as a member of the Board of Trustees.

## Research into Hodgins' later years

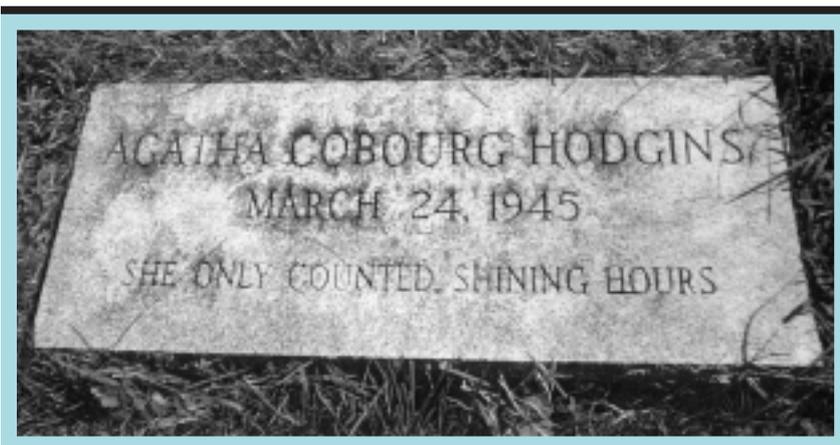
When I entered anesthesia I was fascinated by her career and pro- fessional scope of practice, but I was interested in knowing more

**Figure 3. Agatha Hodgins seated outside her home in Chatham, Mass, approximately 1930s to 1945**



(Courtesy of AANA Archives.)

**Figure 5. Grave marker for Agatha Hodgins located in Union Cemetery, Chatham, Mass, 2006**



(Courtesy of Virginia Gaffey, CRNA-ret.)

about her later years. There appeared to be no knowledge as to what happened after her death. However, the years passed and there never was time to research this project. Finally, my retirement came after a busy professional career that included service on numerous American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) committees and director of the Carney Hospital School of Nurse Anesthesia in Boston; then I had

the time to start my research. Kathy Koch, MLIS, CA, AANA archivist-librarian, sent me the few known facts about Hodgins' retirement. The information confirmed her early retirement to Chatham, Mass (Figure 1), due to poor health and the date of death, but no details as to where she was buried or whether her body was returned to Toronto for burial.

Thus my active research began. The town clerk's office in Chat-

**Figure 4. Tombstone of Agatha Hodgins located in Union Cemetery, Chatham, Mass, 2006**



(Courtesy of Virginia Gaffey, CRNA-ret.)

ham had a record of her death certificate. Hodgins purchased a home in Chatham on August 23, 1919, and retired to this home permanently in 1934 when her health failed. She made trips to AANA meetings and headquarters as her health permitted. The only address for her home was Bridge Street; the houses did not have numbers in those days. The Chatham town assessor said that Bridge Street still existed, and she suggested that I find a picture of the house and then travel to Chatham to locate the house. Since the houses are now numbered, I was advised to take the number of the house to the assessor office so they could research the records. The AANA Archives provided 2 photographs of Hodgins' home (Figures 2 and 3).

I went to Chatham, found Bridge Street, and immediately identified the house by the beautiful antique front door glass panels. It was the only house on the

street that perfectly resembled the photograph—335 Bridge Street—a beautifully kept historic home within a short walking distance of the famous Chatham lighthouse.

Having found the house, I then wanted to determine if Hodgins was buried in Chatham or Toronto. A cemetery department employee not only found the burial records, she made a visit to the grave as well. Shortly afterward I visited the Hodgins' gravesite in Union Cemetery, a small town cemetery of early settlers. As I entered the cemetery from Main Street, I passed through granite pillars, and within a few feet there was a large monument on the

right. I took the path on the left and went down 3 stones to Hodgins' grave. It is a quiet setting, nothing to disturb my thoughts but the sounds of birds singing. As I looked around the scattering of many beautiful wildflowers, my thoughts turned to a brilliant and courageous woman quietly reposing within the community she loved so much. Her tombstone (Figure 4) is a simple white granite cross, now covered with gold moss, commonly referred to as mold, and a grave marker in front of the cross engraved with the words "She Only Counted Shining Hours" (Figure 5).

There is a familiar old saying

that aptly applies to Agatha Hodgins and serves as an appropriate conclusion to this column: She came into the world and left it a far better place for her dynamic contributions to humanity.

#### REFERENCE

1. Moore C, Lamb H, Allwein A. Agatha Cobourg Hodgins. *J Am Assoc Nurs Anesth.* May 1946;14:32-35.

#### AUTHOR

Virginia Gaffey is a retired CRNA. She served as president of the AANA from 1969 to 1970 and was director of the Carney Hospital School of Nurse Anesthesia, Boston, Mass, from 1957 to 1986.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Kathy Koch, MILS, CA, AANA archivist-librarian, and the many Chatham, Mass, employees who assisted me.