



The Frontier Nursing Service: America's First Rural Nurse-Midwife Service and School

By Marie Bartlett. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008. 264 pages. \$39.95, paperback.

Reviewed by: Kathryn Osborne, CNM, MSN.

As she stepped off the train and onto the railroad platform on a hot July morning in 1928, Betty Lester found herself questioning the wisdom of her decision to leave Great Britain and travel to Leslie County, Kentucky, to work for the newly established Frontier Nursing Service (FNS). Many midwives that followed during the next several decades would share those same feelings of doubt as they arrived at that train station, responding to a call from Mary Breckinridge to provide health care for mothers and babies in southeastern Kentucky. However, little time passed before these nurses became familiar with the warm arms that welcomed them and the dire health care needs of the families they would serve.

In *The Frontier Nursing Service: America's First Rural Nurse-Midwife Service and School*, Marie Bartlett tells the story of the establishment and first several decades of operation of FNS from a human interest point of view. Almost immediately, the reader is drawn to stories about the founder of FNS, Mary Breckinridge, and many of the nurse-midwives who were dedicated to caring for families in a remote region of Appalachia. Through the use of eloquent storytelling, Bartlett creates a human connection between reader and subject that is both compelling and informative. Unlike many historical works that are laden with facts, names, and dates, Bartlett uses creative imagery in conjunction with the words of early FNS employees and patients to provide readers with an insider's view of the early years of the first nurse-midwifery service in the United States.

The author of this book is not a nurse-midwife, nor is she known foremost for her historical writing. Bartlett has hundreds of publications to her credit, and this is her fourth nonfiction book. It is this reviewer's opinion that Bartlett approached this work with the skill of a seasoned historical researcher. The sources of information accessed by Bartlett include the oral histories of 192 FNS staff members and residents of Leslie County collected between 1900 and 1985; personal interviews with FNS pioneers who are alive today; films, photographs, books, and correspondences on file at The Big House in Wendover (the home of Mary Breckinridge); issues of the *FNS Quarterly Bulletin* (the FNS newsletter) that spanned from 1925 to the present day; and many of the writings of Mary Breckinridge. Bartlett also made several trips to Leslie County, spending

time in the home of Mary Breckinridge and in several of the FNS buildings that remain standing and in use today. She was clearly immersed in FNS and the lives of those who were touched by FNS.

Bartlett tells the story of FNS against the backdrop of American history. She carefully weaves experiences of the FNS nurse-midwives through a fabric of historic events, showing the tenacity of Mary Breckinridge, who was determined to keep the service running despite the loss of the original British midwives who returned home during World War II and the difficult financial times faced during the Great Depression. Bartlett also describes the FNS response to changing social times, including the changing face of maternity care as childbirth moved from home to hospital, the emergence of the feminist movement, and the implementation of government-funded health care programs.

The experiences of two prominent figures remain central throughout the story: Mary Breckinridge, who is portrayed as a stern yet compassionate leader who was as deeply committed to continuing the operation of FNS as she was to the families served, and Betty Lester, one of the first British nurse-midwives recruited by Breckinridge to provide midwifery and family care as an FNS nurse. Many other midwives, couriers (midwife assistants), and administrative staff come and go throughout the book, each with their own story. Perhaps the most incredible stories told are those of the people of southeastern Kentucky—people who endured extreme poverty and often difficult living conditions, yet who remained proud of their accomplishments and grateful for the care provided by the FNS midwives.

This book tells the story of a health care delivery system that provided affordable health care during financially difficult times, drastically improving the health outcomes of an underserved population that was considered at risk both socially and medically. As such, it is recommended reading for health care providers, sociologists, health care economists, policy makers, and historians alike. In addition to learning the history of this pioneering service, readers are treated to hundreds of stories about the FNS midwives, the births they attended, the families they encountered, the animals they cared for, and the nursing service they maintained. Midwifery students in particular are encouraged to read this book about the women who blazed the trail for midwifery in the United States, both literally on the difficult terrain they were required to navigate in order to reach their patients, and figuratively in a health care system that has been slow to embrace midwifery as the model of care for women in labor and birth.