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# THE FRONTIER NURSING SERVICE

KENTUCKY, USA

AUTHOR:

SHEENA MARTINEZ (PICKARD)

This is the address Sheena gave on becoming President of the Berwickshire Naturalist's Club in 2016.

Sheena trained at Barts from 1956 - 1960 and then did Part 1 Midwifery at Simpson's Memorial Maternity Pavilion in Edinburgh. A chance meeting with an American nurse led to her leaving Edinburgh to join the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky.



It is a fascinating read.

## **THE FRONTIER NURSING SERVICE, KENTUCKY, U.S.A.**

Being the Anniversary Address delivered by Sheena Martinez S.R.N,  
S.C.M., President of the Club, on 11 May 2016

Becoming president for this most prestigious club brings for some, the daunting task of delivering their Anniversary Address. Usually this takes place at the A.G.M. in October. I was not anxious to become President (of anything) but under the circumstances relented and the worrying thought crept in, what to talk about.

About a week before our First Field Meeting in May, Michael Braithwaite (President in 2004 and Treasurer for over 10 years and Botanist extraordinaire) was planning to give us a talk but became unwell. Not wanting to cancel his talk, he and I decided to do a swap. I would give my Anniversary Address and he would give his talk in October. No time to ponder any more! I had worked for the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky, albeit a far cry from Berwickshire; and also the name Martinez, so a brief explanation.

My grandfather's family had farmed at Eaglesham in Renfrewshire since the 17th century but as Glasgow grew he came across to Berwickshire in the late 19th century and took on the tenancy of Printonan on the Charterhall estate. Then came the tenancy for his brothers of Hilton and Milne Graden East and West Mains. Grandfather took the latter and so my mother was born there, near Coldstream. Although her father disapproved she went to London and trained as a nurse at St George's Hospital, at Hyde Park Corner. I was born in Hertfordshire and at age nine years had my own pony, riding for hours alone, across what was then lovely countryside. Very often a dog came too. From 1956 to 1960 I did my nurse's training at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. Three years to qualify and then a year as a Staff Nurse. This was followed by midwifery training in Edinburgh at Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion. In those days it was necessary to be a qualified nurse before doing your midwifery training which was in two parts, six months each.

Near the end of Part I and not really enamoured with midwifery, I was asked by an American nurse who had come to live in Edinburgh in her retirement, what I was planning to do. I replied, 'I don't know.' Then came the question, 'What do you like doing?', to which I gave

a rather wistful reply, 'I like riding horses.' Without a moment's hesitation she said, 'Well then, you should join the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky, those midwives ride horses.'

That was all it took and within a few months I was there. It was August 1961 (aged 24 years) and now as I look back I realise how lucky that chance remark was.

The Frontier Nursing Service (F.N.S.) was founded by Mary Breckinridge in 1925. She was born in 1881 and came from a wealthy family. Her grandfather was U.S. Vice President under President Buchanan and her father, who served in the U.S. Congress, became ambassador to Czar Nicholas II of Russia from 1894 to 1897. It was here in Russia that a baby brother was born, an event that had a lasting impression as a Russian midwife did the delivery. This was at a time when women in America were more likely to die in childbirth than from any other condition. When Mary Breckinridge was born, her mother developed 'childbed fever' and so she was fed by a coloured wet nurse and also with goats' milk. She had an older brother and a younger sister and throughout their lives they remained a very close-knit family. A governess was employed for the sisters and the older brother went to a private school in Washington D.C. The family travelled considerably both in America and Europe and by the age of 15, Mary Breckinridge could read and write in three languages. A love of English literature lasted a lifetime and she often quoted passages and/or poems during a conversation. While in St Petersburg her health was not good and so she was sent to a school in Switzerland for two years.

In her autobiography called *Wide Neighbourhoods* written in 1952, Mrs Breckinridge, as we always called her, writes about her 'wandering youth'. A youth full of out-door adventures. She describes staying at one of her favourite places called 'Oasis', a plantation in Mississippi belonging to her Aunt and Uncle. Here she goes deer-hunting, riding side-saddle and carrying a rifle '... to be ready to raise it and aim the minute you sighted a deer'. And this was riding through '... slimy water in a dense tangle of semi-tropical forest hung with vines'. She only ever shot one deer and regretted it ever after! The etiquette of that time frustrated her and so adventure was her antidote.

Eventually she married and must have been blissfully happy for a year, when her husband died suddenly. In her youth she had

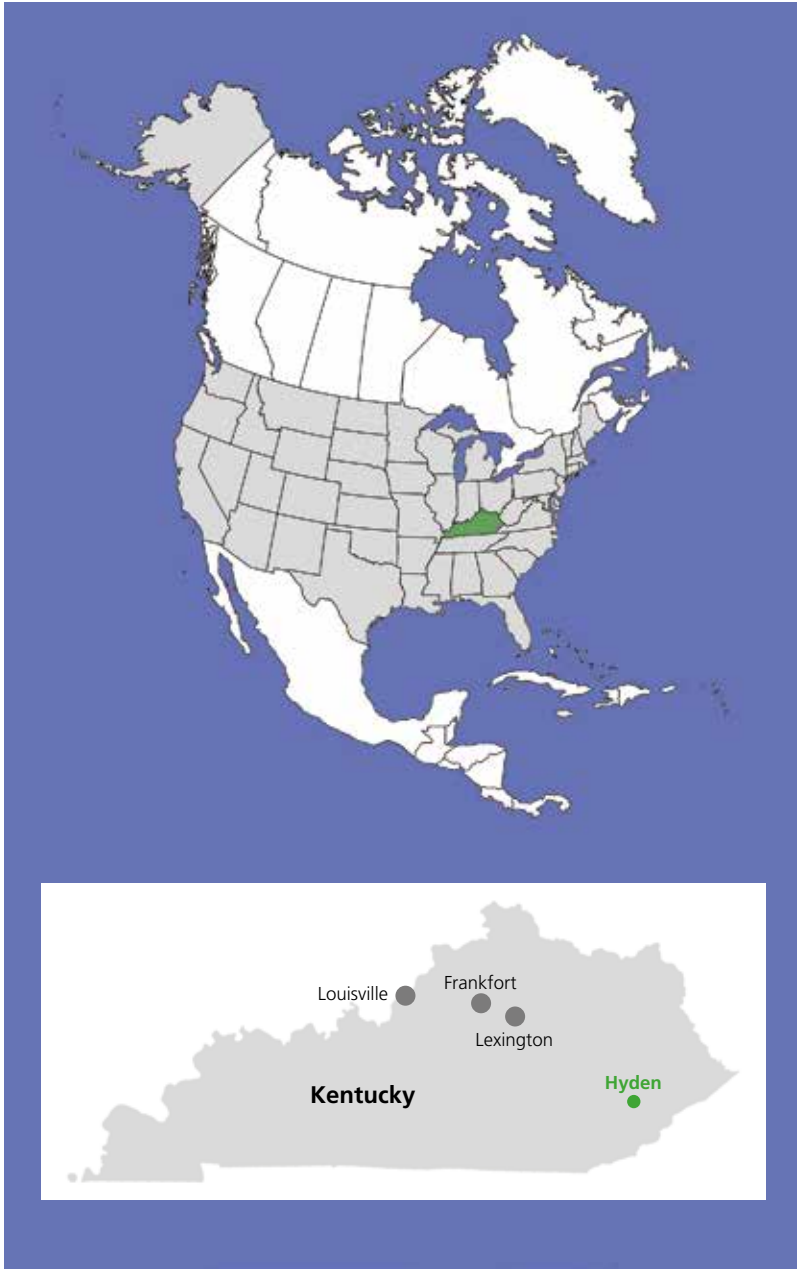
always wanted to be an explorer but this tragedy prompted her to become a nurse. She trained at St Luke's Hospital in New York and after her three years there she came home to care for her mother. This was followed by her second marriage and the birth of two children, a boy born in 1914 and two years later a little girl who was born premature and only survived for a few hours. Her adored little boy died aged four years. Distraught, she decided to join the American Committee for Devastated France with a strong desire to care for the children there. From 1918 to 1921 she worked tirelessly helping the families return to their war torn land.

The details in her autobiography are due to the fact that she kept a journal from the age of 14 and also from the letters she wrote home to her mother. In one she says she wishes she had '...a thousand goats right now, I wish I had fifty.' These letters were passed around the family and before long goats were arriving in Northern France from the Pyrenees.

Here I quote from her autobiography as this is where the seeds are sown for what was to become the F.N.S. 'In France midwives were not nurses. In America nurses were not midwives. In England trained women were both nurses and midwives. After I had met British nurse-midwives, first in France and then on my visits to London, it grew upon me that nurse-midwives were the logical response to the needs of the young child in rural America.' She ends this paragraph with, 'My work would be for them.'

Returning to America she decided to explore an isolated and mountainous region of Eastern Kentucky on horseback where there were no roads or railroads. She had in mind an inexpensive, effective and culturally tolerant service where nurse-midwives who could ride a horse, would care for not only the mothers and babies, but the entire family. From the start Mrs Breckinridge wanted the service to be a model so that it could be copied. She felt that if she could succeed here it could be done anywhere.

Next came a trip to England where she trained as a midwife at Woolwich, near the dockyards in the east end of London. (This was the area where Jennifer Worth worked 30 years later and which she wrote about in her now famous book, *Call the Midwife*.) Following this she met with Sir Leslie MacKenzie in Edinburgh and with his encouragement went to study the Highlands and Islands Medical



The United States and Kentucky.

and Nursing Service in the Outer Hebrides. She was not only impressed by the beauty of these islands but also the system the service used and so this was adapted for the F.N.S. She also visited and studied the district nursing in Perthshire and Argyllshire and followed this with a post-graduate midwifery course near London.

And so it was to Leslie County in Kentucky in 1925 that she returned and started with a survey covering 376 square miles, recording the births and deaths of families there. This was quite a feat, as records until then consisted of perhaps a list in the family Bible. The accurate records kept by the F.N.S. throughout their first 25 years were so good that when a clinical study was done in 1958 regarding the contraceptive pill, their records were made available for research purposes.

The families who lived in this area were direct descendants of the Anglo-Saxon pioneers. Their expressions and code of conduct dated back to the Elizabethan era. This was still so when I was there in 1961. As F.N.S. nurses we were never afraid going about our work. We wore a uniform which was a white shirt, black tie, confederate grey jacket and jodhpurs and boots. Although the men were 'of few words' they were completely chivalrous. Stealing was considered a far worse crime than shooting someone.

Building first started on a site Mrs Breckinridge had seen the summer she explored the region, a region criss-crossed by rivers and creeks (Fig. 1). This site overlooked the Middle Fork of the Kentucky River and it was here she managed to get built a two storey log cabin. It became her home, called Wendover (Fig. 2). The locals were keen to help and were capable of doing a lot, but supplies from outside the area had to come by mule team, a journey of two days to the nearest railhead.

Gradually it all took shape and by 1930 six outposts had been built covering an area of 700 square miles (Fig. 3). During this time the capacity for work by all concerned was incredible. The F.N.S. was run as a charity as Mrs Breckinridge did not want to be hindered by government red tape. Her fundraising ability was extraordinary. Using her many wealthy connections she travelled to many big cities all over the eastern seaboard, setting up committees not only to raise funds but to legitimise the service. She was a talented public speaker, able to inspire and emotionally move



Fig. 1. Mrs Breckinridge on horseback.



Fig. 2. Wendover.



Fig. 3. Some of those who rode 15 to 20 miles to Wendover for this picture to be taken in 1931, before riding back to their outpost centres the evening of the same day.





Fig. 4. Outpost on Wolf Creek.

people, hardly surprising perhaps with descriptions and pictures of six inch worms found in some of the children.

The outposts were about 12 miles apart, with two nurse-midwives at each (Fig. 4). All were self-sufficient in that there was a barn for the horses and a cow, chickens, sometimes a pig, vegetable patch and pasture. A local lady would help as housekeeper and cook and by milking the cow. This not only gave local people work but was invaluable to the nurse-midwives who in those early days may have ridden miles, day or night, and on their return would still have their horses to care for and records to write up.

In the entire F.N.S. area the population was about 10,000. Roughly this breaks down to each outpost caring for 400 families and often around 6 children in each family (Fig. 5). They paid \$1.00 a year for general care and \$5.00 for maternity care. Many times they paid in kind such as fixing fences, painting barns and with food. Early on a father arrived at the hospital riding a mule and driving a cow before him and in his arms he carried a two week old twin and his daughter sitting sideways on the mule's rump held the other twin. The mother had died of 'childbed fever' and they had ridden many miles to seek help. The cow was to pay for the twins' care and he asked that his daughter be taught how to care for them. She did come back a year later and took home her healthy brothers who had by then been inoculated for diphtheria, typhoid and smallpox.



Fig. 5. A typical home.

The hospital was built half way up Thousandsticks Mountain overlooking the small town of Hyden, roughly central to the outposts (Fig. 6). Asked why she had built the hospital up on the hill, one of the reasons was because it was quieter up there. In those early days the young men with nothing better to do used to ride their horses madly through the town shooting in the air. Water and sewage and cooler summer air came into the equation, plus as always the possibility of flooding. Sir Leslie and Lady MacKenzie opened the hospital in 1928. Much later in 1949 when the nurses' home was built beside the hospital, a brick from Florence Nightingale's house in London was placed in the stone chimney above the mantelpiece. It had been given to Mrs Breckinridge years earlier when she was staying with a friend in London.

Couriers played a very important part in the successful running of the F.N.S. (Fig. 7). At first they were mostly the daughters from wealthy family friends who could ride. Not only did they do all the fetch and carry work but they were responsible for the overall care of the horses, such as tack and shoeing etc. Later they did the same sort of care for the Jeeps! As they travelled around they brought first-hand news of whatever was going on elsewhere. Also, all the various committees wanted to know what was going on and so a Quarterly Bulletin was published as early as 1925 and mailed to connections.



Fig. 6. Hyden Hospital on Thousandsticks Mountain.



Fig. 7. A FNS nurse-midwife on horseback retrieving a message from a courier.



Fig. 8. The author, off to work.

Needless to say there were plenty of moonshine stills in Kentucky! As nurses we were instructed to see nothing, hear nothing and say nothing. I came home with a bottle and it did a great job of lighting the Christmas pudding for years to come.

When war broke out in 1939 quite a few British nurse-midwives returned home. Mrs Breckinridge had been aware of the need for a midwifery school and this situation triggered its start and it continues at Hyden to this day.

I worked for a few weeks at the hospital before going out to Brutus, an outpost in Clay County, joining a nurse-midwife from Somerset. I have many happy memories and found this lifestyle exhilarating (Fig. 8). We had a lovely lady named Daisy to help us and she also milked the cow, Sulky Sue. Everything connected to the F.N.S. had a name. We all had a Jeep and most of us had a dog. Luckily for me soon after I arrived at Brutus some puppies were born under the water tank tower, just up the hill. They were a bit muddy to start with, so I chose one and called him Clay.

We were expected to go to Wendover for dinner every so often. Now in her 80th year Mrs Breckinridge did not travel any more but she certainly knew what was going on. She had handed her job as

director over to Helen Browne, someone who had done her nurse's training at Barts.

One of my fondest memories was going with Mrs Breckinridge one afternoon to feed the chickens, ducks and two geese named Dilly and Dally. I remember her chatting about some lovely blue Morning Glories that grew along a fence. Later I learned they had an association with her little boy. No wonder she paused to admire them.

As the roads extended through this once isolated area the horses began to be replaced by Jeeps, but there were still families living up rocky creek beds needing to be reached by horseback (Fig. 9). Whether by horse or Jeep, we always took the saddle bags. One side for general nursing care and the other for a maternity case. And that age old question asked by little children 'Where do babies come from?' is answered with 'The nurses bring them in their saddle bags.'

I will end with a delivery we had one day. We knew it would probably be a very short labour, there would be no time to sit and read the walls papered with a Sears Catalogue. So we had everything ready including the Jeep facing down the drive. The call duly came and so we wasted no time and hopped into the Jeep only to discover that Jill's dog Red had been even quicker and was ready to go. For a moment we considered turfing him out but there was no time to spare. He was really quite well behaved and basically we forgot about him. Sure enough we did not have long to wait before the baby was born. All was well and we were waiting patiently for the placenta to be delivered and it duly was, when out from underneath the bed appeared Red, nose in the air, sniffing in expectation!

Mrs Breckinridge died at Wendover aged 84 in 1965. She had not only introduced midwives to America but she also achieved what she set out to do, namely the care of mothers and babies and the entire family in a very rural area – and from the midwifery school at Hyden these trained midwives continue to work in many isolated regions across the world.

I returned home and completed my midwifery training in Edinburgh with every intention of returning to the F.N.S., but a chance came to go to Australia to work on a sheep station and I never did get back to Kentucky. Instead I eventually met and married Carlos Martinez in California which explains the name of this President.

It has been a great honour. Thank you.



**"HELL-FER-SARTIN" CREEK**  
In the Kentucky Mountains

Fig. 9. Hell-Fer-Sartin Creek.