

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Marie Moyer – Nurse and Midwife of Tyler County

[Part One](#) – published 2-9-12, 5, 6, 8B

Green beans and tomatoes – that’s all one father could pay Marie for the delivery of his child. And the tomatoes were taken from the neighbor’s garden.

Marie Moyer worked two jobs longer than most people stayed at one. Certificates of recognition mark several stages during her remarkable 46 years at the Tyler County Hospital (TCH). Photos of a few children represent only a portion of the 2,000-plus children she delivered over 35 years as a midwife.

Her steady caretaking history is evidence enough of her loving heart. That it all began during a time of radical hateful racism, even in Tyler County, makes her story all the more heartwarming.

She has lived in the same part of southeast Tyler County all of her 77 years, born across the dirt road from where she now lives, several miles off of Seneca Road.

When Hurricane Rita hit in 2005, they were without power for a month.

“It was very tough,” she said, quickly adding, “but we really came together as a community and helped each other out.”

That statement reveals a long habit, even a precious part of Marie’s character, which turns every difficulty into something positive. Looking past every tribulation, even past rugged persecution, she has resolutely looked to the future. Her hearty laugh shrugs off the bad.

Marie always finds the rose among the thorns.

She graduated from Scott High School in Woodville in 1952. Local legend Mayme R. Brown taught Marie homemaking. Brown is largely responsible for the preservation of the black



Leroy and Marie Moyer

history in Tyler County and authored *Historical Documentary of the Henry T. Scott School* (1998).

Marie remembers the courtship between Mayme and John Canada, a discreet and loving adventure in itself. Marie will not tell much there, which reveals more about herself.

Along with her faith in God, perhaps one key to Marie's positive outlook has been the ability to keep a confidence, hold a secret, at times overlooking the uglier things in life, including holding in trust the shame of deep poverty within many of the homes she visited.

While chatting with Marie, home health nurse Linda Hughes dropped by. Linda had worked with Marie at the TCH years ago. Linda helped the hesitant Marie to open up.

"Tell it like it was," Linda, a white woman, encouraged.

Everyone must know that it is hard for a kind heart, like Marie, to share the uglier side of racial hatred with a white newspaper man, even these years later.

While checking Marie's heart rate, nurse Linda said, "You have no idea how hard it was for a black person back then." That has been repeated before, by white and black persons, yet has a personal touch as we sit around the table with Marie who lived through it all.

Marie began at the TCH in 1954 as a maid scrubbing floors, cleaning bed pans, then promoted to the kitchen. It was hard work.

Just as racial integration came to southeast Texas, Iona Conner encouraged Marie to enter Lamar University's nursing program. Marie reflected, "Mrs. Conner said 'They are letting black people go.' She said she would bring the application."

Among the first five black women to enter Lamar's nursing program, Marie was the only one to stay. The racial hatred drove the other four away.

Several parents of Lamar students threatened Marie, and one day they forced her to leave town.

"Do not come back," they said. The threats were real.

"I ended up taking care of one of those parents in the hospital who had threatened me. I did my best by her," said Marie, smiling softly, determined to do what was right.

She almost did not return to school, but Dr. Watt Barclay encouraged Marie to stay.

Marie said under her breath, "It was easy for him to say that as a white man." Yet there was a serious tone in the doctor's encouragements. She believed him and went back to school. Barclay came to Woodville in 1933, started the first hospital in an old house, then became chief of staff of TCH, passing away in 1959.

Dr. Barclay had gotten a hold of the city of Beaumont and the school. Though he could not stop the hatred, he did get the police into action.

Marie had to park off campus, where a police officer would be waiting, and then escort her to school. Another would escort her out every day.

Marie had to face hatred every day for the entire program.

Among the many challenges, she could not use the regular restrooms. They were "white" restrooms. Equality was the law, but fiercely resisted. Nor could Marie use the cafeteria. She had to take her lunch with her and eat inside the classroom. She essentially stayed in the classroom all day, until it was time to go home.

When she graduated from Lamar in 1957, the school administrators did not even put a date on her diploma. Among several recognitions, she showed a letter dated 2011 from Lamar President James Simmons, who said he was "proud" of her 1957 degree. Better late than never, one supposes, and he congratulated her lifetime of service, saying the impact of her "important work has affected our entire region."

She almost went to work in Houston, then her father got sick, and she came back to Woodville and Married Leroy Moye in 1959. They have been together ever since. They adopted five children, the latter four from within the family: Demetrius, Madeline, Glen, Rachel, and Megan.

“I treat them all the same,” she said.

Marie could be a maid at the TCH; no one had a problem with that. But to be a nurse was another matter. The TCH Board of Directors was not certain they wanted a black nurse. Several did not want her as a nurse.

Dr. Barclay asked, “How do you like your white women bathing a black man?” That blatant remark, among others, helped shed light on the fact that his black patients were not getting the same care as the white ones. It was a battle, but Dr. Barclay won.

Marie became the TCH’s first African American nurse in 1958.

“It was still hard,” Marie said, “we had to say ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’ to every white person, no matter how old they were. Even to a baby and a little child.”

Dr. Barclay recruited Dr. Bob Swearingen in 1956, who joined with Drs. Gilchrist and Burton to serve the TCH.

“She was a good cook,” said Dr. Swearingen, reflecting his first encounter. “They had not integrated yet. Marie was the first black nursing graduate of Lamar, if I remember right. She became a good scrub nurse. Then she began to help deliver babies as a midwife. She had good judgment about it. Marie said to me, ‘I want you to promise me, when I need a C-section, you’ll cover for me.’”

Dr. Swearingen laughed. “About once or twice a year, I would get a call: ‘Marie is bringing one for you.’ I’d say, ‘Then get ready. If she cannot deliver it, I cannot either.’”

Dr. Gayle Burton was always worried about disease. He became worried about shoes and decided they were too unsanitary, collecting dried blood on them. He told Marie to put them in the autoclave, a small sterilizing oven, to cleanse them. They came out about half their normal size. Dr. Swearingen laughed as he recalled those days.

Marie was never late for surgery. But sometimes, when there was nothing going on, she would be a little late. A new administrator, a Ms. Kent, was gung-ho and fired Marie.

As Marie was leaving that day, Dr. Swearingen was arriving.

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“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Home. She fired me,” she replied.

“She can’t fire you. You go get your stuff. You’re not going anywhere.” He fixed it. Reflecting back then, Dr. Swearingen said, “She was the only scrub nurse we had. I dearly loved her. Still do. Great spirit.”

Yet, she is afraid of dead people. Does not really know why. She reflected back to her training at the old Municipal Hospital in Beaumont and all of the charity patients she worked with there. Reflected on the ghost stories and such.

Then, with a laugh, she recalled how they used a hearse!

“There were no ambulances then. They had a special coffin made to transfer patients from Woodville to Beaumont, and we had to call the funeral home to get the hearse.” Marie smiled broadly, knowing this was a bit of shock. “They used the same vehicle to transfer the living and the dead.”

She helped out with surgery, and a lot of stories could be told.

“Surgery?” she questioned, “They would talk about everything during surgery, but the surgery.” Then she hesitated, always discreet. “Some of that I am not going to tell.”

At the TCH, she was a black nurse, but she could not eat in the dining room.

“I could not eat until everyone else had left the dining room. Also, the white nurses would go and sit down, often, and I had to mop the floor.” Marie kept her spirits and recalled, “Dr. Swearingen would come in and bring me a thing of orange juice ... sometimes he would mop the floor. He saw. He was a good person.

“They promised me one salary,” she continued, “but did not give it. They paid me less than the white nurses. Any dirty work ... I had to do it. The white uniform did not mean much. At Christmas time, one of the board members bought all the white nurses a ham, but not me.

“Did it all. Primarily, I was to take care of black people, but ended up taking care of everyone.”

For 46 years!

“I saw some good days and some bad days ... but going to count them all good days.”

In 1963, Marie reluctantly started another profession.

“Inez Williams’ daughter-in-law was going to have a baby. She did not have the money. They asked me to help,” Marie said. “We had an agreement,” nodding, as firm today as she must have been then. “They were not going to tell anybody. Then a friend of Inez needed help, and then another and another.”

Marie became the person to call.

“We had no telephone,” she said, “they would come and get me. Or bring the pregnant lady to my house. I delivered three babies in one day in my own home. Sometimes I would wake the children up in the middle of the night. I’d get my children up and send them to my bed, because I needed their bed to deliver a baby.

“For 35 years, I was a midwife. I saw the second generation come, delivering the baby of a mother I had delivered. Some say the count was over 2,000 babies.”

As Marie was helping mothers throughout the Tyler County, several national nursing groups reorganized, and the American College of Nurse-Midwives incorporated in 1955 (Midwife.org). When *Varney’s Midwifery* came out in 1984, the midwife’s “bible” today, Marie had been delivering for 20 years. Remarkably, in 2012 the Center for Disease Control reported that home births had “a lower risk profile than hospital births” (CDC.gov).

“The hospital charged \$50 back then,” Marie said. “I started at \$5, then over the years raised the price to \$10, then \$15 ... the last one was \$75. I went all over these woods delivering babies. Zavalla, Jasper ... don’t know how many I delivered at the reservation.... Hillister, Doucette, Moss Hill.”

“One time there was a 13-14 pound baby coming. I called my husband to help push on the girl’s stomach. He would not come! He stayed at the dining room table.”

Leroy said, “I had a time book, working in the woods, and I wrote in it, ‘Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.’ Then I said, ‘Lord, I do not know where to push. Or how to push. You know how to push. You know where to push. You do it! I am not going in there.’”

A couple of minutes later, the baby came.

“I got my lunch and went to work,” Leroy said.

“I did a lot of praying,” Marie said. “People did not realize how dangerous it was to deliver a baby.”

What were the clues that something was going wrong?

“Sometimes the cord on the placenta would break. If you did not get all of the placenta out, the mother could get infected. Sometimes the mother could hemorrhage.

“Color of the embryotic fluid,” she said, “if it was green looking, then the baby was in distress. Or the cord could be around its neck. I had to determine if the baby was ‘head first’ or a ‘breech.’ A breech meant a feet-first baby. The head is the largest part, and if it came first, the rest of its little body would follow. But feet first! The head might get stuck.”

As Marie reflected the stories began to flood her memory.

“The veil over the baby’s face ... if the baby came out with part of the placenta over its head, it could suffocate. Or if the cord drops out before the baby comes ... you have to make sure cord stayed on the inside. Have to make sure the cord did not get clamped off or get wrapped around the baby’s neck.

“Some babies – you had to give mouth-to-mouth.”

Marie has a corkboard with several pictures of the children she delivered, just a few that the parents sent to her. There was a collection of nine children of various ages from one mother.

What did you do to prepare?

“Have you ever seen a delivery?” she asked.

“No.”

“You really do not know much, do you?” she asked with big eyes and a big smile.

“No, really do not.”

“Need a clean area,” she continued. “Clean bed. I’d carry my stuff. I brought rags I had sterilized in my own stove. I’d place a plastic bag on the bed, then a white clean rag to keep it clean. Sometimes the parents did not have any baby clothes. Sometimes they could not even afford diapers, and I would have to give them their first cloth diapers. No Pampers back then. It was about three-four dollars for a pack of Birdseye diapers.

“They had to cramp to get the baby out, and they had to cramp to get the placenta out. Sometimes they would have trouble with the placenta. We put some turpentine and hot water on the belly to induce a cramp to get the placenta out.”

Marie’s experience flooded the room. It was easy to see how her competence and confidence must have been a relief to new parents.

“One time in Spurger, way back in the woods, a couple had no money at all. The new father went to the neighbor’s garden and got some tomatoes out of the garden. Then out of his deep freeze, he got some string green beans. Got some green beans and tomatoes for delivering a baby. They were good too.”

“One time I got a big bottle of soda water for delivering. When I got home, my family tried to laugh at me, but they wanted that soda water too.”

She delivered a baby in the back of a horse trailer. She delivered several in parking lots.

“You cannot predict when a baby is coming,” she said.

“One time I breathed for a baby from Woodville all the way to Galveston. The baby made it and is a grown man now. I call him my ‘Miracle Baby.’ His name is John, lives in Silsbee.” She points to his high school graduation photo on her corkboard.

“I went to this old house in Woodville. No lights in that house. Amazing thing. I went in to deliver, near the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church. Old house. No lights. I sent the daddy to get some coal oil for the lamp, but he never came back. Then, like a miracle, the street light seemed to shine so bright. Seemed to light up the room ... Thank God.”

There was a pause. Precious memories.

“Another time, I had this coal oil lamp at the foot of the bed, the only light. The dish pan below. I told the mother, ‘If you holler and kick, you’ll knock over the coal lamp and set your behind on fire, and mine too!’ She did not budge. It was hard and funny too.

“One reason I do not like to talk about it all too much ... [she pauses] Ronnie Bean was doing this before me. She told me, ‘When you go into these homes, you do not bring anything into the home, and you do not bring anything out. Do not talk about it. No matter the conditions.’ I remembered that. Some of the homes were not suitable. Some were clean. Some were not. I was there for one purpose. I was there to deliver the baby. A baby was coming into the world ... and I am just NOT going to talk about what I see.

“Black or white ... so many were so poor. They needed someone to help them get that baby into the world.”

Marie retired from both professions in 1999. She had cancer, and she has diabetes and pulmonary hypertension. It is a struggle to get around tethered to oxygen all day and night. She is slower.

“I think I am doing very well,” she said. “I am so blessed. I am so thankful that I don’t let my health bother me.” Marie’s physical heart is wearing out, though her spiritual heart is stronger than ever. As midwife of Tyler County, there are countless mothers who hold Marie in their hearts too, as the person who safely delivered their babies – as only a mother can fully appreciate.