Wide Neighborhoods

A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service

Mary Breckinridge

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[excerpts: chapters 9-12]

FOREWORD

By Marvin Breckinridge Patterson

Wide Neighborhoods is the story of a woman of vision with sound practical sense. Nothing in Mary Breckinridge's origins or upbringing would have led one to guess that she would become one of the great nurses in history, to follow in the footsteps of Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton. Her great achievements lay in introducing into the United States the concept of the trained nurse-midwife, modeled on those of the British Isles, and in establishing a demonstration project of complete family health care in a remote rural area through the organization which she founded in 1925 and directed until her death in 1965---the Frontier Nursing Service.

I was fortunate enough to know Mary Breckinridge and to work with her in the formative years of the Frontier Nursing Service. She was my father's first cousin, and I remember her staying with my family when I was a school girl, first in France and later in New York. During those visits she told us of her plans to establish a nursing service primarily for mothers and babies in the remote mountains of Eastern Kentucky. When the FNS became a reality, I wanted to help in her work, to live as frontier Americans had lived a century earlier, to share in the adventure, and at the same time to be of service to the public. So in 1928, a year after graduating from Vassar College, I went to Hyden, Kentucky, as the FNS's first girl "courier"---as the volunteers were and are called. I lived mostly at Wendover, the two-story log house which Mrs. Breckinridge had had built with her own money.

My duties at Wendover were mainly in transportation, as they are for today's couriers, but in those days it was all done on horseback, for there were no roads for automobiles. One of Mrs. Breckinridge's duties was to make monthly "rounds," which meant riding half a day to an outpost center, reviewing the records and problems for half a day with the nurses, and then proceeding to the next center. It took almost a week to cover the six centers then open. I vividly remember one such occasion when I accompanied her. It was winter and the weather was bitterly cold, but we were dressed properly---she in her gray-blue riding uniform and I in riding breeches and boots, both of us with yellow slickers over all. The horses . . .

[...]

Chapter 9
I

NORTHERN France was a part of the world where I felt I could be of use to children in 1918, but I could not plan to go until June. Meanwhile, a ruling was passed by the State Department that no one with a brother in the military services could be sent to the war areas. My mother went with me to Washington to see Miss Jane Delano, head of the American Red Cross Nursing Service then. Since she could not send me overseas until "the brothers ruling" was rescinded, she gave her permission for me to accept a three months' contract with the Children's Bureau, under the Child Welfare Department of the Council of National Defense. My work, which took me as far West as Montana, Wyoming and New Mexico, was to gather reports on the nation's children, and to make speeches in their behalf. Miss Julia Lathrop asked me to carry on in California as well but, by the time my contract was up, the ruling in regard to brothers had been repealed. I therefore went East to make my final reports, and to get my loyalty papers and passport cleared for work with the Red Cross Children's Bureau in France, to which I was assigned.

I hit Washington at the height of the 1918 influenza epidemic, when the sick numbered several hundred thousand in that congested city.

The United States Public Health Service had charge of the medical and nursing services, with Miss Mary Lent as chief nurse. From her I learned there were almost no nurses so, with Miss Delano's permission, I volunteered. The District of Columbia had been divided into four medical areas, to one of which I was assigned as assistant nurse in charge. The head nurse of my area fell ill soon after I reported for duty so that I was plunged into the direction of nursing care for thousands and thousands of stricken people. I don't recall how many patients we had in my district at the peak of the epidemic, but it could not have been less than forty thousand. Nor do I remember how many nurses I had to help me, but I don't think there were more than five. We used hundreds of aides for day and night care of the patients with pneumonia in the families where everybody had come down with influenza. Many of these aides were clerks turned over to us for the emergency by the government bureaus, and only a few of them had received training in home care of the sick. They were, however, keen young people who had volunteered for the assignment and had a good will. We issued masks to them and gave them special instruction in the care of their hands. Not many caught the infection. We used the token force of nurses to make rounds of the houses, give hypodermics where ordered, and instruct the aides in regard to other treatments and drugs.

Our physicians were mostly elderly men, who had ceased to practice before the war, and Army and Navy doctors loaned us by the Armed Services. At our headquarters in a schoolhouse we had three telephones, all reporting new cases every minute, while a queue of people stretched out into the street from early morning until around midnight. Cars were put at our disposal so that we could get doctors, nurses and the aides off in the quickest possible time. The filing system was a madness of improvisation in which the vital thing, with thousands of patients, was the correct address of each. Some of the reports the aides dictated, after a day or night on duty, would have been comical had they not been so tragic. One said of a pneumonia who had died, "Patient's condition got pretty bad towards the end." Another, who had been in a government bureau handling food rations, reported on a housewife, "She has twenty pounds of sugar salted away"

One of the most awful things about this Washington nightmare was the condition of the houses in which both our white and colored patients lived. They were riddled with bedbugs. We devised a system of disinfecting the beds, then pulling them out from the walls and putting their legs in tin cans of carbolic. But the bedbugs dropped down on the patients from the ceilings. Years later, when I traveled into Washington on the same train as my cousin, John Mason Brown, I told him about my struggle with the bedbugs. He said, "Yes, I see. You lost the cherry blossom approach."

During the influenza epidemic I hadn't a mind for anything but that. After it was over I found that it would take more than a few days to get my passport and loyalty papers. Upon the advice of Miss Ella Phillips Crandall, I decided to spend the intervening time with the Boston Instructive District Nursing Association for the special training and experience in public health and visiting nursing of which I stood greatly in need. Miss Mary Beard took me in at the house of the Association on Commonwealth Avenue, as a guest. I was put through an abbreviated but intensive course, which included an affiliation with the baby welfare work under Miss Winifred Rand. I was to be grateful a thousand times over, after I got to France, for all that I learned in Boston. My work in the slums lay mainly in the Italian and Irish Sections. I thought the tenements even worse than the New York ones, but nowhere did I find so many bedbugs as in Washington.

The Armistice caused the Red Cross to cancel sailings of its personnel, and I obtained my release from Miss Delano. Through Miss Elizabeth Perkins, a family friend, and my cousin, Mrs. John C. Breckinridge, I was introduced to Miss Anne Morgan and was accepted by her as a volunteer with the American Committee for Devastated France. Miss Morgan was First Vice-President and Chairman of the Executive Committee of this organization, of which Mr. Myron T. Herrick was President. From the first I was enthusiastic about the Committee, and I came to love it more than I have ever loved any group except the Frontier Nursing Service itself.

II

The French name of our organization was Comité Américain pour les Régions Dévastées de la France, called C.A.R.D. for short. We who worked with the Committee were frequently spoken of as the Cards. Our Paris offices and our *entrepôt* were out on the Boulevard Lannes. I reported, immediately on arrival in Paris, to our Commissioner in France, Mrs. Anne Dike, and was charmed with her. I was to learn in the course of time that she was not only a delightful woman but a brilliant executive. War restrictions were still on, so that I could not go to the war zone until I had a military permit. I had also to get bread and sugar cards, and fill out a lot of forms. One day, as I left the gloomy portals of the Prefecture de Police, by a different way from that in which I had entered, I suddenly found myself face to face with Notre Dame. I caught my breath before this shimmering glory in stone, then I crossed over to the cathedral, and passed through its doors into the hushed darkness. No guides, no noisy clattering, as there would have been in other days--only a few women in black, praying, and some American soldiers as awed as I was.

Eager as I was to get to work among the children, I was enchanted to have a little time in Paris because my sister Lees was there. Since I last saw her she had married Warren Dunn, but my new brother was with the Army elsewhere. Lovely as it was to see something of my sister I was glad when my papers were ready and I could report for duty in the devastated areas at Vic-sur-Aisne. Miss Margaret Parsons was the Director of the unit at Vic. From her, old in years but young in heart, I received the warmest understanding of what I had come to France to do and soon embarked upon my work for children. But in some of our villages there were no children. The clearest way in

which I can depict that war-devastated land of France is to quote from one of my first letters to my mother a description of one of our villages:

Tartier, before the war, was a village of 365 inhabitants. Now it has four men and three women---no children---who have returned. It stands on a hill above the valley of the Aisne overlooking a country so lovely that, almost, one could imagine it as it once was. But we drove up through that country on a road broken with shell holes, past fields still massed with barbed wire, and seamed with trenches and dugouts, and past those pathetic roadside graves of soldier; with often a helmet on the cross, and a bayonet stuck in at the foot to mark them, "*Soldat inconnu. Août, 1914*," or some later date. Tartier is so old that the people don't know when it first began to be, but things like Goths and Gauls are buried in the valley below the village. It was made of the sandstone, of which all these villages of the Aisne of this region are built, and the quarries, used as dugouts by the Germans during their domination, are lived in now by the seven people whose ruined homes are not habitable. Walls of old, old houses still stand, and picturesque wells are labeled *"Trinkwasser,"* just as the Boches left them.

One man and his father, named Dufour, sturdy hardy types, to whom we are sending seeds, showed us around. They pointed out the gardens they were spading, the quarry where they lived underground, and the old tower where the elder Dufour had, before the war, five hundred pigeons, and the ruins of the rabbit hutches where the younger had two hundred rabbits. The younger Dufour had just been demobilized and still wore his old uniform. His wife would soon join him, but they dared not bring the child yet. The hand grenades and unexploded shells lay all about. As we talked, he picked up a hand grenade that lay at our feet and threw it down into the valley, where it burst with a wonderful display of starry lights. Then he took up another and threw it. We saw it drop on the ground below and a moment later it exploded with a reverberating roar that woke the echoes. The younger Dufour was bright and strong and hopeful. He said it was hard to begin over again but it had to be done, and so why not do it? The spirit of the man and his father was as everlasting as the hill they stood on. So was that of the other peasants of the group of seven whom we visited. Coming out of their lonely holes in the rock to greet us they were smiling, every one of them. The spirit of the peasants of France! It explains Verdun. You can't weep with them for you never find them weeping.

The first need for everybody in the devastated areas was for food, clothing, bedding, and a few household utensils, but especially food---what the French called *"ravitaillement."* In the parts of France occupied by the Germans, it was not a question of the people returning to their shattered homes because they were already there when the Germans withdrew, but all around them the ground, the bridges, the roads, were destroyed so that it was almost impossible to get supplies to them. In some villages in the *Nord,* people had to be fed by airplane. With such widespread destruction, the problem of transport assumed gigantic proportions. Soon after I was sent to our sector, one train a day got through from Paris to Vic and Soissons. But the train could not go where the railroad tracks had not been restored, and most of our villages were not near railroads at all. We supplied them by trucks, or camions as the French call them, huge trucks driven down from Paris by Frenchmen, and small Ford camions driven by our volunteer chauffeurs. Some of our villages had no food but what we took to them, nor could any of them have procured a mattress except from our dépot of supplies---not at any price, because there were no mattresses except those we brought in. As soon as a train could run, our Committee was given a high priority for carload lots of supplies.

Laon, the capital of the Aisne, where we first housed our unit for work in the wrecked canton of Anizy, had been occupied by the Germans until the Armistice and so had escaped destruction. This old-world walled city, rising on a hill beyond the Chemin des Dames, was the birthplace of Père Marquette. The children there, like all who had been under German occupation, those who had not died, were horribly undernourished, but their city had survived, with its cathedral of ageless beauty. Soissons, on the other hand, taken and retaken several times during the war, was terribly damaged by artillery fire, and its cathedral had gaping holes, On my first visit to Laon, I was sent to an office called the Tiers Mandataire, armed with a sheaf of demands for wheat seed from legions of small farmers in our villages. These the Tiers Mandataire took over and gave me in return authorizations called *"Bons."* Within twenty-four hours we had these *"Bons"* stamped officially by the village mayors, and had begun to deliver the wheat. Since ours was the only transport service in all that territory, except for a few military cars, it was our girl chauffeurs in their camions who made possible the spring planting.

From Soissons to Laon one crossed the Chemin des Dames. For miles, as far as the eye could see, where for years the two contending armies had fought, the earth was torn apart, broken into ghastly crevices, seamed with jagged openings, thrown over and over, and furrowed with huge craters. Nothing recognizable was left of what had once been a smiling and fertile country, not a weed, not even ruins for long distances. They had been swallowed up by earth so tortured that it billowed like an ocean in a typhoon. The road over which our camion passed had been mended and a military bridge thrown across the little Ailette River. It had lost its banks and wandered through that stricken country, where one hundred and fifty thousand Frenchmen lay buried.

Kilde: http://www.ourstory.info/library/2-ww1/Breck.html