

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Motherhood and a Mission

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Mary Breckinridge's unfilled desire to be a successful mother was a key factor in both her founding of The Frontier Nursing Service and its eventual success. After Breckinridge's failed marriages and the death of her two children she devoted her life to the service of other women and their children. The development of The Frontier Nursing Service allowed Breckinridge the opportunity to assist women in the welfare of their children and families. Breckinridge earned the trust of the Appalachian people through her love of service and her devotion to child healthcare, but also through her skillful use of maternal themes.

The 1920s were a time of progress for all of America but especially the South and the Appalachian Mountains. Before the 1920s the South was a place of social homogeneity and traditional attitudes. The ideals expressed through the Bible influenced social standards. Women were considered the moral backbone of society. The idea of motherhood was important to the public standard of morality. Women were the home makers, the child bearers, and the teachers of ethics. However, during the progressive era, women began to demand a different role in society; Southern and Appalachian women were hesitating towards progression. Mary Johnston wrote in 1910, "Southern women were yet strongly held by the traditions and customs, the manners, the habits of the past. As idealists, they attached themselves to the principles of chivalry and had merely reversed direction, and placed their ideal in the past rather than in the future."¹ The basic family structure of the South and Appalachia restricted women from progress. The ideals of motherhood placed women in domestic service and provided little opportunity of escape.

Southern Appalachian women who supported progressive reform tended to be quiet reformers. Most of the Southern Appalachian women reformers were religious, respectable, and

¹William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-193* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 299.

southern in outlook. Dewey Grantham writes, “While revolting against the traditional constraints that fixed women’s place in southern life, they were careful to preserve the image of the southern lady and to reassure their male contemporaries that they were not out to undermine the fundamental verities of southern civilization.”² Women like Mary Breckinridge incorporated the Southern ideal of motherhood and morality in their attempts to improve the South and Appalachia.

Mary Breckinridge was progressive in nature in that after the failure of her first marriage she vowed to be more mature and less willing to shrink into the shadow of her husband. Mary’s second husband, Richard Ryan Thompson, was a professor at Crescent College in Eureka Springs. According to Melanie Beals Goans in her book *Mary Breckinridge: the Frontier Nursing Service and Rural Health in Appalachia*, Mary used the prestige of her husband in order to promote such issues as literacy, child welfare, and suffrage. Although Breckinridge pushed her social agenda, her progressive goals revolved around the Southern ideals of motherhood and morality, allowing her the ability to appeal to Appalachians as well as Southerners more effectively than most of her predecessors.

Mary Breckinridge understood the important place motherhood held in Southern and Appalachian society and greatly supported mothers at all stages. Mary Breckinridge suffered the loss of her child Breckie Thompson when he was four. Because of his death Mary spent the rest of her life in service to other women, making her a progressive in action but traditional in approach. As she stated in her book *Wide Neighborhoods: A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service*, “I cannot carry you, my readers, with me into the work I was to do for rural children,

² Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

into the Frontier Nursing Service, unless I first share with you the child in whom all childhood is symbolized for me.”³ Breckie Thompson, Mary Breckinridge’s first and only son, was born January 21st, 1914 and died January 23rd, 1918. A few years following the death of her son, Breckinridge would establish The Frontier Nursing Service as a vehicle to help her fulfill her desire to serve mothers while also promoting progress in the South and the Appalachian Mountains.

Mary Breckinridge and the Frontier Nursing Service has been thoroughly researched and written on however, the theme of motherhood has not been addressed as the underlying reason for Breckinridge’s success. For example, *A Social History of the Frontier Nursing Service* written by Nancy Dammann argues that Mary Breckinridge came to the rural Appalachian Mountains to modernize medicine.⁴ Dammann suggest that because Mary was born in rural Appalachia, she was eager to return and be a help to the poorest people in the country. I agree with Dammann because I believe that since Mary Breckinridge was an educated woman during the progressive era, she understood that few people would be accepting of her success as a woman. Dammann argues that Mary chose Southeast Kentucky for her experiment because of the deprivation experienced by the Appalachian people. Although Breckinridge was concerned for the welfare of the Appalachian people, she still chose rural Kentucky because she believed the people were in such a desperate need of help they would not turn her away. Dammann’s book also presents the reader with social and economic information that is important in understanding the hardship these mountain people were facing.

³ Mary Breckinridge *Wide Neighborhoods: A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 61.

⁴ Nancy Dammann, *A Social History of the Frontier Nursing Service* (Sun City, Arizona: Social Change Press, 1982).

Mary Breckinridge: The Frontier Nursing Service and Rural Health in Appalachia

written by Melanie Beals Goan argues that Mary Breckinridge was successful in setting up a nursing service in rural Appalachia because of her ability to present herself in many different ways. Goan argues that Breckinridge was accepted by the people of Appalachia because she had the “heart of a woman, with the tireless tenderness and concern for anyone in pain of need. Yet she also demonstrated the swift, logical clarity and scope of a man’s mind.”⁵ Goan argues that Breckinridge’s ability to seem versatile allowed her the opportunity to be successful during the progressive era as a woman. However, the author also explains Breckinridge’s false expectations of the Appalachian people’s willingness to accept modern medicine and the challenges that the mountainous environment would present. I agree with Goan in that Mary Breckinridge was probably unaware of the difficulties she would encounter with gaining the trust of the Appalachian people. Although the Appalachian people were the poorest and most uneducated people in the country, they still wanted to maintain their traditions. I don’t agree with the book that Breckinridge’s ability to display qualities of both genders gave her an advantage towards dealing with the people of Appalachian; however, I do believe that her transgender qualities helped her to run a more successful business. Goans talks about the many progressive women who came before Mary Breckinridge providing services to the people of rural Appalachia. I believe that knowledge is important because of the different approaches women took to make their ideas successful in a poor region. In contrast to the progressive women who came before her, Mary was more interested in providing good healthcare rather than reforming the Appalachian traditions.

⁵ Melanie Beals Goan, North Carolina Press, 2008), 32.

*The Frontier Nursing Service: America's First Rural Nurse-Midwife Service and School*⁶, written by Marie Bartlett discuss the progression of the Frontier Nursing Services. The book presents the reader with past and present information regarding the Nursing Service and the area which it serves. The book includes useful statistics that would allow readers to better understand the continuation of hardships faced by the Appalachian people and exemplifies the importance of the healthcare Mary Breckinridge provided. Nevertheless, all three sources miss the fact that Mary Breckinridge's determination to provide proper healthcare to the women of rural Appalachia was driven by her ideals of motherhood. Without the understanding of Breckinridge's maternal ideals it is difficult to understand her determination to serve.

Mary Breckinridge was born on February 16, 1881 to an influential Kentucky family. Breckinridge's father was a US Congressman, and a diplomat to Russia under President Cleveland. Her grandfather, John Cabell Breckinridge, had been Vice President of the United States under Buchanan, and secretary of war under Jefferson Davis. Mary Breckinridge had three siblings, a brother Carson, born in 1878, a sister Lees born in 1884, and brother Cliff, born in 1895. Raised amidst wealth and high society, Breckinridge traveled extensively in her youth. She grew up on her mother's plantation home in Mississippi, in her father's ancestral home near Lexington, Kentucky, and her great aunt's estate in Hazelwood, New York. She later recalled, "The place where my mind was first drawn to the Kentucky Mountains was called Hazelwood. This was a large stone rambling country house, near High Bridge, New York, where we stayed every summer until we went to Europe when I was thirteen. It was the home of my great aunt, Mrs. James Lees, whom we children called grandmother."⁷

⁶ Marie Bartlett, and Company, 1949)

⁷ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 3.

The educational advantages that Breckinridge experienced because of her prestigious family were remarkable for a woman during the time period in which she lived. For example, during her teenage years Breckinridge traveled to Europe with her father. While in Europe she was tutored by French and German governesses and later she attended the Rosemount Dezaley Boarding School in Lausanne, Switzerland. However, according to Breckinridge her education was minimal: "I had no education, my sister Lees and I had governesses. That had been my mother's own education and it was the kind she wanted for her little girls."⁸ Well-educated women were not considered desirable; women were to be trained to be proper housewives and mothers. At the age of seventeen Breckinridge returned to the United States in order to study at Miss Low's Finishing School in Stamford, Connecticut. Several years later Breckinridge began a brief marriage that ended in the death of her husband. Breckinridge writes, "Marriage when I was young was an everlasting kind of thing and not entered onto lightly. For a woman it meant that she gave up her own ambitions, which she might cherish otherwise in the hope of their ultimate fulfillment, to embrace the career of the man of her choice. Marriage called upon a woman for renunciation, entire and complete."⁹ After the death of her first husband, Breckinridge decided to pursue her own ambitions and she began a career in nursing. In 1907 she traveled to New York to study in the St. Luke's Hospital Training School, Breckinridge graduated in 1910. She reported:

When I was left a young widow, with some money of my own, and parents whose liberality sought to match their compassion, I could have started to train for the explorations I had so much wanted in my girlhood. But now I wanted them no more. I had renounced them once and for all when I married a man in larger intellect than mine whose career, on which he had embarked with high promise, lay in law and state craft.

⁸ Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 5.

⁹ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 48.

The longing for exploration had died not so much with this man's death, as with my marriage to him. It never came back."¹⁰

Mary Breckinridge seemed to epitomize the new women with her advanced training in nursing and the independence that widowhood offered, but she remained convinced that "motherhood was women's highest calling,"¹¹ and she did not wait long before she embraced domesticity once again. In 1911, Breckinridge began her second marriage to educator and businessman Richard Ryan Thompson. Her dream of having a house full of children, whom she had abandoned after her first husband's death, was rekindled.

On January 21st, 1914, Mary Breckinridge Thompson gave birth to her first and only son Breckie Thompson. Breckie Thompson was the center of Mary's joy: "I started a journal again when Breckie was born. I began it because of him. In the weeks following his death, I wrote a book about him for private publication before I destroyed the journal. The lives of few young children have been recorded in such detail as was his."¹² During the four years that Breckie lived, Mary laid aside her ambitions and dedicated her life to her son. Mary believed that motherhood was the most important journey a woman could embark upon. Mary spent day and night tending to Breckie's every need as she felt a proper mother should do. Mary wrote concerning Breckie, "When Breckie was two years old we began hoping for another baby to bless our lives as the first had done."¹³

On July 8th, 1916 Mary Breckinridge Thompson gave birth to her only daughter Polly Thompson. Polly was born prematurely, and in six hours she died. Breckinridge wrote

¹⁰ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 51.

¹¹ Melanie Beals Goan, *Mary Breckinridge: The Frontier Nursing Service and Rural Health in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 37.

¹² Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 60.

¹³ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 65.

concerning the death of Polly, “This short story of Polly will be read by women who have, like me, lost an infant at birth. For you who share with me a memory like this, I have a message. Keep your baby alive in your heart. Even if your infant did not live in this world at all, it is yours and it needs you.”¹⁴ After the death of Polly, Mary Breckinridge wrote, “I often felt discouraged and ill, but I continued to feel deeply the blessedness of my condition with one little child playing by me and another next to my heart, and I thought of myself as the mother of children, nor just of one child.”¹⁵ Breckinridge’s love of her own children and the hardship she faced because of their deaths forced her to direct her maternal energies towards nursing. However, shortly after the death of Polly Breckinridge; Mary would experience the biggest hardship of her life, the death of her son Breckie. On January 23rd, 1918 Breckie Thompson died of an unknown illness. Soon after the death of Breckie, Mary and her husband Richard Thompson divorced. “Of my second marriage I shall not write except as it enters into the next chapter, where I tell the story of my children. The generations to which I belong think it in poor taste to discuss a broken marriage, and mine was broken after the children were dead. I was allowed by court to take back on own name. This I did, with a feeling not unlike that in which one puts on again an old pair of workaday shoes.”¹⁶ Although Mary Breckinridge’s marriage had failed and her children were dead, she took the love she had for her children and invested it into service of other women and their infants.

The death of her two children motivated Breckinridge to devote her life to improving the health of other women. In 1918 she traveled to the slums of Washington to nurse those fallen ill in the influenza epidemic. A year later she joined the Comité Américain pour les Régions

¹⁴ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 66.

¹⁵ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 65.

¹⁶ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 59.

Dévastées de la France. Within a few months of reporting to a small town just north of Paris, she asked permission to organize a visiting nurse program. Two years later, her program was a success; she was supervising dozens of women, trained as both nurses and midwives, who would travel about France caring for young children and pregnant women. In the United States there were no schools of midwifery, and when Breckinridge returned home in 1921, she vowed she would start one. In 1922 she entered the Teachers College of Columbia University in NYC, to study public-health nursing and learn the nursing methods used in the United States.

Breckinridge's contribution to the nursing community was that of her ideals concerning the care and development of children. The death of her two children allowed her to personally understand the needs of children. As she observed, "Work for children should begin before they are born, should carry them through their greatest hazards which is childbirth, and should be most intensive during their first six years of life."¹⁷ Breckinridge understood the importance of child healthcare which allowed her to understand the importance of competent mothering. Mary Breckinridge's ideals of motherhood provided her with courage to succeed in her dreams despite the sad experiences she had as a mother and a wife.

In 1923, Mary Breckinridge decided that she wanted to practice nursing in the rural Mountains of Appalachia. Before 1923, Breckinridge had spent her time working in the projects of Washington DC. Mary quickly realized that her skills and understanding of motherhood and child health care would be more beneficial to the people of the Appalachian Mountains:

In the country, the mother is the heart of the household in a way that has come to be old-fashioned in city life. The man, it is true, gets out the timber and plows and raises the crop. But it is the woman who tends the garden, dries the beans, pickles the beets, turns the cabbages into sauerkraut in crocks, cans the tomatoes and corn, and is in all these

¹⁷ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 111.

ways the provider for the long winter months. She makes the quilted coverlets for the beds. She usually milks the cows and feeds the chickens. In all of this, she has the help of her children whose lives revolve around hers. In a country home, the mother is irreplaceable.”¹⁸

Mary Breckinridge believed that the women in the Appalachian Mountains were progressive in their own way in that they performed tasks that were not gender specific. In order to live in the isolated Appalachian Mountains, women were required to take on tasks that were best suited for males. Breckinridge was progressive in that she believed women were equal to their male counterparts but was conservative in her opinion that women and men needed one another to survive in the Appalachian Mountains. Mary’s progressive thinking allowed her to work with Appalachian mothers and their husbands because Breckinridge’s progressive ideals were considered a way of life in the Appalachian Mountains.

The isolated region forced men and women to cooperate as equals in order to live. Breckinridge writes, “The rural mother talks less than her city sister but she misses her man throughout the long days in which formerly she worked with him. The rural home is a partnership.”¹⁹ Mary Breckinridge believed that motherhood allowed women a new sense of responsibility and loyalty they had ever experienced before. Motherhood gave women the opportunity to love unconditionally and unselfishly. The struggles the Appalachian mothers faced were hard work. Before Mary Breckinridge, the Appalachian mothers only had the help of “grannies”²⁰ to aid them in birth and childcare. Mary had a desire to help women and she knew

¹⁸ Mary Breckinridge, “The Rural Family and Its Mother,” *The Mother*, April 1944 [a popular magazine].

¹⁹ Mary Breckinridge, “The Rural Family and Its Mother,” n. p.

²⁰ Ernest Poole, *Nurses on Horseback* (Norwood, Mass.: Norwood Press, 1932), 12. The early midwives were called granny women because nearly all of them were rugged, gnarled old mountaineers, most of whom had neither nurse training nor equipment.

her services would be most needed in the Appalachian Mountains. Breckinridge writes in the *American Journal of Public Health*:

In this discussion my point of departure is not going to be the medical profession, greatly as I honor it, or the nursing profession of which I am a member. My point of departure is the rural mother, because once I was a rural mother and I understand her position that is why I became a midwife, feeling that the midwife only could reach the rural mother's deepest need.²¹

When Mary first arrived in the mountains she understood that the isolation of the Appalachian people would cause them to be wary of her at first encounter; however, she hoped with time the mothers of the Kentucky Mountains would grow to love her and her nursing service.

Mary Breckinridge began her work in Leslie County, Kentucky in May 1925. Before Mary decided to start the development of her nursing service that would later be called the Frontier Nursing Service, she wanted to experience the region and its people.

Since her purpose was to work through the people and not for them, she began by organizing a strong local committee of the leading mountaineers. With their cooperation, she opened the first nursing center, with herself and two trained nurse-midwives in charge. They had no quick success, for some of the mountaineers at the start were suspicious of such "brought on women" which means women from outside. But in the saddle in all weathers, the three workers found their way to hundreds of rough cabins, made friends with the children, cared for the sick, gave help and advice to weary mothers and to others big with child, and when the time of crisis came, brought babies into the world in ways unknown up there before.²²

Breckinridge wanted to develop a nursing service that not only cared for the children but also supported mothers prior to pregnancy, during pregnancy, and throughout the lives of the women

²¹ Mary Breckinridge, "The Nurse-Midwife: A Pioneer," *American Journal of Public Health* 17 (1927): 1148.

²² Poole, 16.

they called patients. Mary found in Leslie County that after several months the new nursing service had acquired over five hundred registered patients. Mary Breckinridge claimed that it was the small comforts that encouraged mothers to register for her nursing program: “Exhausted mothers from their beds saw women cleaning, washing, scrubbing, and doing things for babies and children.”²³ Mountain women had too much work to do. The much needed days of rest after childbirth could cost a family food, clothing, and the necessities of life.

Breckinridge understood the hardships women faced and made them top priority in her healthcare system: “For us, the mother is a country dweller with the responsibilities and burdens that go with country life lived at its hardest. We believe that we have been and can be of help to such mothers.”²⁴ Breckinridge dreamed of a nursing service that not only provided its patients with healthcare but also could be of help with the necessities of life. The small nursing program that Mary Breckinridge had established in Leslie County in 1923 was not large enough to provide all the services Mary intended on giving. Mary Breckinridge decided the way to achieve her dream was to write an investigation of midwifery in the Kentucky Mountains. In 1923 Mary Breckinridge began her investigation.

Mary arranged with the Shepherd-Towner Law Firm in Kentucky, under Dr. Veech, as director of the Bureau of Child Hygiene of the State Board of Health, to investigate the already existing midwives in selected counties. Leslie, Knott, and Owsley were the chosen counties for the investigation. Breckinridge writes in her investigation, “Fifty-three midwives were included in this investigation, which extended from early July until mid-September. In order to see them in their surroundings and to get into natural conversation with them, all were visited in their homes. A vast deal of time was spent talking with the young mothers since they served as a

²³ Poole, 17.

²⁴ Mary Breckinridge, “The Rural Family and Its Mother,” n. p.

check on their statements.”²⁵ Breckinridge wanted to provide the best healthcare possible for the mothers of rural Appalachian and in order to do so she had to better understand the care they were already receiving. Breckinridge writes in her investigation that “to see one midwife would sometimes require a detour of five or six hours riding. Sometimes they were not at their homes and thrice I rode miles out of the way to locate them with patients, but was never so lucky as to find them actually functioning.”²⁶ Breckinridge knew she needed to hire trained nurses to accompany her on the trip. For several days on the investigation Breckinridge was accompanied by a Miss Caroline Whitney. Who was a fourth-year medical student at Washington University? Later the women also received aid from Miss Ella Woodyard of the Institute of Educational Research of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Throughout the investigation Mary and her nurses comment on the hospitality and the appreciation given them by the mothers of the Appalachian Mountains. Breckinridge soon realized the mothers of the Kentucky Mountains had little to no healthcare. She reported, “Fifty-two of the midwives are white and one is colored. All are native mountains. Their ages range from 30 to 90 years. All have been married, five of them twice and one three times. Eighteen are widows. These are living with their married children or alone on their own lands.”²⁷ All the existing midwives of Kentucky had other jobs and responsibilities’ aside from nursing.

Breckinridge believed in order to give proper care to mothers one must remain with the mother after the birth of the child in order to insure the success of herself and her child. However, Breckinridge understood that the pre-existing midwives had no formal education and could not have known the post natal risk:

²⁵ Mary Breckinridge to Dr. Veech, 1923, “Midwifery in the Kentucky Mountains: An Investigation,” box, folder . .

²⁶ Mary Breckinridge to Dr. Veech, 1923

²⁷ Mary Breckinridge to Dr. Veech, 1923.

When it comes to their professional qualifications and practices it is difficult to classify my 53 midwives because they have in a sense no professional status, and the origin of their obstetrical practices lie in unrecorded time. As to one thing I am certain. None give post natal care whatever, and in that differ altogether from the midwives in Europe with whose work I am familiar. When the delivery is over and the mother is fixed up and the baby dressed they go away and, unless something goes wrong, and they are sent for again, or they happen to be near neighbors, they do not return. This is universal prenatal care is also unknown and no nursing care as we understand it, is given. In fact, the mother, if she can possibly do so usually gets up after three or four days. The results of this are broadcast for all who want to hear.²⁸

The infant mortality rate in the Appalachian Mountains was greater than that of anywhere else in the United States. Moreover, mothers were not receiving the care necessary in order to be successful at recover. The work required of the mountain mother allowed her no recovery time. Mary Breckinridge wanted to create a nursing service that allotted women time for recovery as well as time with their newborns. The lack of healthcare caused deaths among children as well as mothers. Breckinridge reported on an older mountain nurse who called herself Aunt Tildy. Aunt Tildy was the most sought after nurse because she seemed to be the most educated. However, Breckinridge was not impressed by Aunt Tildy and the healthcare she provided. Overall, Breckinridge was astounded by the post and pre natal care the Appalachian mothers had been receiving. “One case told me by Aunt Tildy, the midwife who attended it, will serve as an illustration. The baby was ‘crossed ;’she could not reach either head or feet and after trying all day and night Friday she sent Saturday morning for two ‘doctors.’ From then until Sunday morning she and they all tried unsuccessfully to deliver the patient, and at last after over fifty hours of labor they sent to the county seat for a doctor would ‘could cut,’ but before he reached

²⁸ Mary Breckinridge to Dr. Veech, 1923.

the home the young mother had died.”²⁹ Mary Breckinridge believed that if the midwives had proper training the death rate could be reduced significantly. However, the opportunity for training was not available.

In 1925, Mrs. Mary Breckinridge founded a unique health agency, the Frontier Nursing Service, in Southeast Kentucky. Her idea was to demonstrate the feasibility of using the nurse-midwife to deliver health care in a socially and economically deprived area. Breckinridge understood the hardships that rural Appalachian women faced during childbirth. Breckinridge writes in the *American Journal of Public Health*:

Maternity is the young woman’s battlefield. It is more dangerous, more painful, more mutilating than war, and as inexorable as all the laws of God. There is no escaping it. But for her there will be no drums beating or trumpets blaring. Off on the lonely farmstead where the true heart the young mother is facing her agony and danger that the hope of America may come into life. It is not what we are doing in cities that count for her, but the service actually available way off there.³⁰

The death of Breckinridge’s two children allowed her to understand the struggles faced by the mothers of rural Appalachia. Breckinridge came to Appalachia to provide mothers with healthcare that would be accessible and practical for the mountainous terrain. The people of the Appalachian Mountains were isolated in regard to progress. The Appalachian Mountain people experienced the worst healthcare in the United States before the establishment of the Frontier Nursing Service. Mary Breckinridge used prior knowledge and experiences to relate to the mountain men and women. Because Mary was progressive in her beliefs but traditional in approach she was capable of gaining the trust of the Appalachian people. In doing so she ensured the success of her mountain nursing business. Breckinridge was not interested in a small nursing

²⁹ Mary Breckinridge to Dr. Veech, 1923.

³⁰ Breckinridge, “The Nurse-Midwife: A Pioneer,” 1148.

practice but rather a successful healthcare facility that the Appalachian people could rely on. The executive secretary of the Frontier Nursing Service, Caroline Gardner, wrote, “Mrs. Breckinridge is not content to deliver most of the babies born in an area of nearly eight hundred square miles, she has underway a vast health program, which leaves hardly any department of physical welfare untouched.”³¹

The South and the Appalachian Mountains were areas in the United States that relied heavily on religious beliefs. In the development of the Frontier Nursing Service, Breckinridge chose a motto that would appeal to the local’s belief system. “He shall gather the lambs with his arms and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young (Isaiah 40:11).³²” Mary Breckinridge used Christianity in order to explain the success of the Frontier Nursing Service. In her book *Wide Neighborhoods*, Breckinridge accredits her success to God and his generosity. In 1955, the thirtieth anniversary of the Frontier Nursing Service, Breckinridge wrote, “The best way in which to observe our thirtieth birthday is to thank God for the blessings we have received during so long a span of time.”³³ Many of the Appalachian mothers found the nurses from the Frontier Nursing Service to be blessings from God. Caroline Gardner writes:

We were enormously relieved when one of the nurses came tearing up to the fence and through the corn to the place where the patient lay, she was a fresh faced English girl and we came to know her later under the name of Jim, which suited her better than Gwendolyn, the name foisted on her in hapless infancy by her cruel Sponsors in Baptism.

³¹ Caroline Gardner, *Clever Country: Kentucky Mountain Trails* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1932), 16.

³² “The Frontier Nursing Service,” 1925 [pamphlet]

³³ Frontier Nursing Service, *Thirty Years Onward: Frontier Nursing Service 1925-1955* (Lexington, KY: Frontier Nursing Service, Inc., 1955), 35.

Jim took charge of the situation like a general on the field of battle. We thanked God for Jim.³⁴

Before the establishment of the Frontier Nursing Service the mothers of the Kentucky Mountains had little to no prenatal healthcare. The chances of childhood survival were low to none.

However, after Appalachian mothers began to receive proper healthcare their children had a higher survival rate. In turn the mountain women of Kentucky found the women of the Frontier Nursing Service to be gifts from God.

The Frontier Nursing Service aimed its services mainly towards mothers and women. Mary Breckinridge writes “We in the Frontier Nursing Service think of and work for the mother as the most essential member of a family unit, but always as a member of the family unit and not as a patient taken up for her pregnancy and discharged after post partum care.”³⁵ Although, the Frontier Nursing Service and Mary Breckinridge developed a business that would be directed towards mothers, the Frontier Nursing Service also provided Appalachian men with work that could be done in order to help support families while allowing the Nursing service an opportunity to establish itself in the Appalachian community. Mary Breckinridge believed that by providing Appalachian men with jobs that would allow the mothers of Appalachia the opportunity to attend to their children. Breckinridge wrote, “For all her physical hardships, the frontiersman’s woman were greatly cherished by her men folk.”³⁶ From the establishment of the Frontier Nursing Service Mary Breckinridge wanted to provide the ultimate healthcare to mothers in the Appalachian Mountains regardless of the need Breckinridge and her nurses strived to meet the needs of the mountain people. Breckinridge recalled:

³⁴ Gardner, 29.

³⁵ Mary Breckinridge, *An Adventure in Midwifery: The Nurse-on-Horseback Gets a “Soon Start,”* ca. 1920s [pamphlet] where did you find this?

³⁶ Mary Breckinridge, “Where the Frontier Lingers.” (1935) 10.

We found a pregnant wife and the five children with only a few potatoes between them and actual starvation. We invited the women to come and visit us and she had her baby in our house. We took the younger children to the mountain hospital and found nothing the matter with them but starvation and worms; when these conditions had been corrected they looked like other children.³⁷

Breckinridge's success was due to her ambition to provide mothers with healthcare that not only affected them as mothers but also the whole family. Through the use of this strategy the Frontier Nursing Service gained the respect of the Kentucky Mountain people and its success is present today in the remaining hospitals, schools, and midwife facilities still accepting patients in the Mountains of Kentucky.

Mary Breckinridge is considered today a progressive woman who through hard work and dedication established an Appalachian nursing service that's successes go without saying; however, Breckinridge never dreamed of her success in the nursing field. Breckinridge's desires to be a respectable mother and wife and the unfortunate circumstances that left her alone also provided her the ambitions to help other mothers. Breckinridge wrote,

It would not be honest to say that I had been interested in nursing, as a career, at any time in my girlhood because I wasn't. This record will have shown that, although much in my life had helped to fit me for the Frontier Nursing Service, the desire for such a service, or even the thought of it did not cross my mind in the days when I was young. I liked children always. I wanted a lot of my own.³⁸

The loss of Mary's two children Breckie and Polly Thompson provided Mary Breckinridge with the desire to serve other women. The 1920s in the United States was a time of progress especially in the South and the Appalachian Mountains. However, Mary Breckinridge did not set

³⁷ The Corn-Breadline [pamphlet]

³⁸ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 51.

out to modernize medicine or develop a modern nursing facility but rather to provide mountain women with the care and maternal understanding they deserved as mothers. Mary Breckinridge understood hardships in life and no other region experienced hardships as did the Appalachian Mountains. Breckinridge learned through the short life of her son Breckie in order to walk you must learn to fall down. Breckinridge wrote concerning Breckie:

Such was my Great-Heart. Even so did his soaring spirit overreach the limitations of its embodiment? He was always falling down, but he said that he could fly. It is because I wanted other children to feel that they could fly as well as fall that we have the Frontier Nursing Service today.³⁹

The sadness that Breckinridge experienced through the death of her children allowed her to redirect her maternal desires towards a positive goal that today is known as the Frontier Nursing Service.

³⁹ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods*, 73.

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