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Louise Knight on porch of typical home in the land of inopportunity; at 4 a.m. after helping deliver a baby; passing supplies from jeep to horseback; on next page, two "legendary" mountaineers are examined.



Kentucky Mountain Courier

AN American eyesore about which we have been very uninformed until the beginning of the Anti-Poverty Campaign is an area in the Cumberland Mountains of southeastern Kentucky, well known now as the Poverty Pit, the heart of Appalachia. As a courier for the Frontier Nursing Service this past summer I have seen first-hand the plight of the most backward and underprivileged part of our country. A child's stomach bloated with worms; a toothless mouth and saddle nose, the defects of familial disease brought about by two centuries of intimate human inbreeding; thrush, a form of tissue rot, as common among people here as among animals; a family of 13 children squeezed into a two room shack—all this was a routine sight of my daily existence in the Kentucky mountains, where oblivious to the Cold War and isolated from the peripheral outside world remains our nation's last frontier.

Almost forty years ago Mrs. Mary Breckinridge, a nurse and midwife, brought help and a promise of health to

these people when she founded the Frontier Nursing Service. Today, although in her eighties, she still directs this highly organic "national philanthropy". Wenderover, the headquarters of the F.N.S. acts as the hub of the organization and supervises the activities of the small hospital and five nursing centers spaced throughout seven hundred square miles. The F.N.S.'s permanent staff members consist mostly of English nurse-midwives, some of whom were trained in the Frontier Graduate School of Midwifery in Hyden, now in its forty-eighth session. For their work in the organization, one of the nurses was awarded this past summer the title of Kentucky Colonel by the governor and another received recognition by Washington, D. C. when she was asked to speak at the White House in July.

As a courier I found my position a multilateral one. My roles included serving as an assistant to the nurses on their district calls, in their clinics in especially remote locations, and in their hospital

work; in addition, I functioned as a stable boy, veterinarian, mechanic, cook, milkmaid, ambulance driver, and reception committee to guests from foreign lands. For performing these tasks a twenty hour day was not out of the ordinary. Several early morning hours were spent in the care and grooming of the F.N.S. horses, all Tennessee Walkers famous for a gait which provides the smoothest means of transporting medicines; they are still used by the nurses in many areas inaccessible by jeep. Yet the jeep is the main means of transportation in a terrain where rivers are forded daily, where a creek bed may be the only route, and where heavy rains can wash out a primitive dirt road bordering on a steep cliff.

This is the land of inopportunity. Existence is at a standstill. The standards of these people are unchanged since their English ancestors arrived here in the eighteenth century. Time and generation mean nothing; once in making rounds with a nurse I encountered a fifteen-year-old girl married to a sixty-



By LOUISE KNIGHT, '66

five-year-old man; at another time I met a seventy-year-old woman with a ten-year-old half sister, and on yet another occasion I assisted at the delivery of a baby born to a fourteen-year-old girl married to a man many years her senior. There exists here an unadulterated genealogy; the same families have been intermarrying since the beginning and often continue to occupy the same house together. A normal family consists of often as many as fourteen children with such names as "Golden", "Okey", "Columbus", "Levi", "Isaac", "Sary Belle". Home may be a filthy pasteboard shack with nothing but a dirt floor, one window, and newspaper decorated walls. A more elaborate dwelling might be a log cabin with two rooms instead of one, with walls covered by contact paper. These crowded and squalorous living conditions result in a life of chronic ill health but of long span; I saw one man still mentally active at one hundred and five. They are, in general, a handsome, "God-fearing" race who hold their religion, politics, and the location of their moonshine still as strictly confidential. Men who find employment work as occasional loggers or coal miners. The women's existence is comparable to that of a pioneer woman; her hard life is evident in her weather-beaten, prematurely aged face. She spends her time sowing fields, putting up food for the winter, and providing her family's necessities from scratch. The children are well-disciplined, filled with the old family sense of respect and consideration for their elders and for each other, qualities less likely found in city children. The language and accent of old and young alike is impossible to describe but several expressions I managed to decipher are "neck" which means "throat", "a right smart while" which means "a long time", "Tim corn" which means "I'm

ing"; anyone who is "natural" is a good friend; "I don't care to" means "I don't mind if I do"; "dead" means "injured", and "stone dead" means "really dead." In addition to a well-preserved dialect, many old world customs have survived also; the proverbial village idiot "Crazy Jack", who threw rocks at me upon more than one occasion and who was always seen walking down the middle of the road with a steering wheel in his hand pretending to be a jeep, was generally ignored; mail is still transported on horseback in several districts; gunfights are not yet antiquated—I talked to a young girl blinded from a pistol shot in the head.

None of the raw details of life and death were kept from me and I consider that the most enriching aspect of my experiences with the Frontier Nursing Service was that without hesitation I was exposed to those facts of life ordinarily discreetly withheld from the curious public for the sake of privacy and pride. I felt the excitement of witnessing and assisting at several baby deliveries. I was called to the hospital late one Saturday night and told to scrub and to put on a cap, mask, and gown and to enter the delivery room to assist the circulating nurse. This particular delivery was carried out without the use of anesthetic, as all deliveries in Hyden Hospital are. The woman, who had had several children under general anesthesia in another hospital, was especially nervous and anxious about her first "natural" delivery. Her anxiety made for a difficult and unnecessarily painful birth, and I was called upon to hold her in position as she kicked and screamed. Because she was extremely uncooperative the whole delivery process kept all present busy for over two hours; I then had my first experience of sleeping in a maternity ward and was awakened periodically in readiness to

occurred at 6:00 a.m. More and more deliveries are being performed in the Hyden Hospital rather than in the home because state medical care programs have helped to defray hospital expenses. However, nurse-midwives are still kept busy in each of the F.N.S. districts. As a courier I had the privilege of attending lectures, classes, demonstrations, and films at the Frontier Graduate School of Midwifery; because of this I was qualified to aid in the care of newborns.

However, the thrill and happiness I felt at this very personal occasion of birth stands in alarming contrast to the grim scope of disabling illness and malingering revealed to me in district nursing. During a two week stay at the Wolf Creek Nursing Center I encountered many disheartening cases. I saw three men who paid a heavy price for a life in the coal mines; one lay paralyzed in bed, his spine crushed in a mine cave-in; another struggled to breathe with emphysema; and another lay wasting away and dying with respiratory diseases complicated by lung cancer. A nurse and I bandaged a girl suffering from advanced multiple sclerosis and hopelessly riddled with decubitus ulcers worsened by parental neglect. I viewed a woman furiously trembling with Parkinson's disease. I saw a little boy severely retarded and a young girl deafened by cases of meningitis discovered too late by ignorant parents. Another pitiful sight was a young woman, hereditarily high-strung from family inbreeding, who slowly progressed from a severe but not hopeless nervous breakdown to a complete withdrawal from reality, perhaps never to return to her family of eight small children. Yet the most amazing sight was of two aged women, completely isolated high in the mountains, who have become a notorious legend, known to fire their shotgun

