

AUNTY RIGGS--MIDWIFE AND MISSIONARY

[Her first name is Katherine which is the reason that many of the 2,000 babies she has delivered in the hills of Wolfe County have the same name.]

By CLARIS SUSAN MUNRO



Mrs. Katherine Riggs of Campton has been a midwife in Wolfe and neighboring counties for 50 years, during which she has delivered more than 2,000 babies. She is 73 years old.

Wolfe County has more than its share of Katherine's, and it's due to the popularity of Mrs. Katherine Riggs of Campton. "Aunt Riggs", a 73-year old midwife in the mountain county, has more namesakes than she can remember.

In 50 years in the baby business, the Wolfe County woman, badly stooped with arthritis, has delivered more than 2,000 babies. That number is considered high for any midwife elsewhere in Wolfe, or any other mountain county.

"And I've never lost a mother," claimed Mrs. Riggs. The fathers? "Well, one fainted once--that's all."

Doctoring is in the blood of Katherine Riggs. Her great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were all physicians. They were Braxton Dickerson Cox, Braxton Jason Cox, and a second Braxton Dickerson Cox -- all well known names around Fincastle, KY, where Aunt Riggs spent her girlhood days. Also Physicians were the midwife's older brother, John L. Cox and her cousin, the third Braxton Dickerson Cox.

Katherine Cox, youngest child of the second Braxton Dickerson Cox, had an unusual curiosity about her father's work. As a child she became familiar with his books, and was pretty well prepared in theory, when at 17, Katherine worked with her father on her first confinement case. At 19, Katherine handled her first case alone. It was one of those emergencies when the mother "became ready to be taken care of" while the doctor was on another case. When medical help finally arrived, the stork's mission had been accomplished, and Katherine had mother and baby comfortably resting. "That baby is 50 now and looks as old as I do, I reckon," said the stooped little midwife. "Why, he's brought up a family of his own." At 23, the young midwife (at that time Mrs. Reynolds) was widowed. "I had four children to raise," she recalled, "and not a roof over our heads." Now the midwife is a great-grandmother to eight youngsters, and has six grandchildren, four of which she delivered herself.

These past 50 years, Mrs. Riggs has worked in four counties --Powell, Lee, Breathitt, "and all over Wolfe." And the folk of the hill counties have kept the midwife busy. Often there have been three confinements a day.

For many families, Katherine Riggs has brought into the world seven babies, and the chances are there'd be a Katherine among them. In two instances she has served as midwife to three generations of mothers. And there have been lots of twins.

She's pretty good at foretelling the sex of an expected child, and doesn't give a fig for all this ballyhoo about not being able to do so. "Why", she said, "if the baby is located on the right side of its mother, it'll be a boy. In the left side it's a girl. Nine times out of 10 I've guessed right."

"They're mighty brave, these mountain women," mused

Mrs. Riggs. She is referring to the uncomplaining ways of her patients in "waiting it out," and the fact that, lacking telephone service, husbands often have to leave their wives alone at the 11th hour to go for help.

Working within a 25-mile radius, Aunt Riggs answers calls at all hours of the day and night-- whenever the call of the stork is heard. And she goes in snow and sleet, by wagon, sled, truck and mule-back, along ridges, under cliffs, and up creek beds. "I've gone on about everything with wheels and legs and runners," she said. Especially does Aunt Riggs remember the time she answered a call on a winter night when it was "snowing and sleeting something awful."

A baby was about to be born in a cabin deep in the snow on Tar Ridge, with a seemingly impassable 2-1/2 mile distance between mother and midwife. "Three men came and got me, with a big gray mare and a farm sled," recalled Mrs. Riggs. "In the snow and sleet we inched along, with the mare rarin' up all the time for fright, and me trying to keep myself covered on the open sled." "We bumped along like that for 2-1/2 miles, over ditches and all." There was a fleeting smile on her face, revealing satisfaction. "We saved the mother, though, and the baby, too." Many times the mountain midwife, crippled and cane in hand, has picked her way through the snow by foot, following tracks to a patient's cabin.

Once, two sisters at Rogers began having babies at the same time. The two women, each of whom engaged Aunt Riggs, lived at opposite ends of the town. The midwife went backwards and forwards, checking first one and then the other, until she saw her mission completed in both cases, with babies born 2 hours apart. The mountain stork is no respecter of times and places. Mrs. Riggs many times has been called from church services and meetings of the Eastern Star Chapter, for which she was secretary. Sometimes there'd be no time to go home and change, or pick up the midwife's all-important bag, which stays packed and ready at all times.

But there's one thing Aunt Riggs refuses to do, and that's work in her best dress. She has delivered in some mighty queer outfits. She'll work in a borrowed dress, or a man's shirt, and has at times dismissed all the menfolk and worked in her underslip. "Why," she said, "to think that nowadays women go right out on the street no better covered than that!"

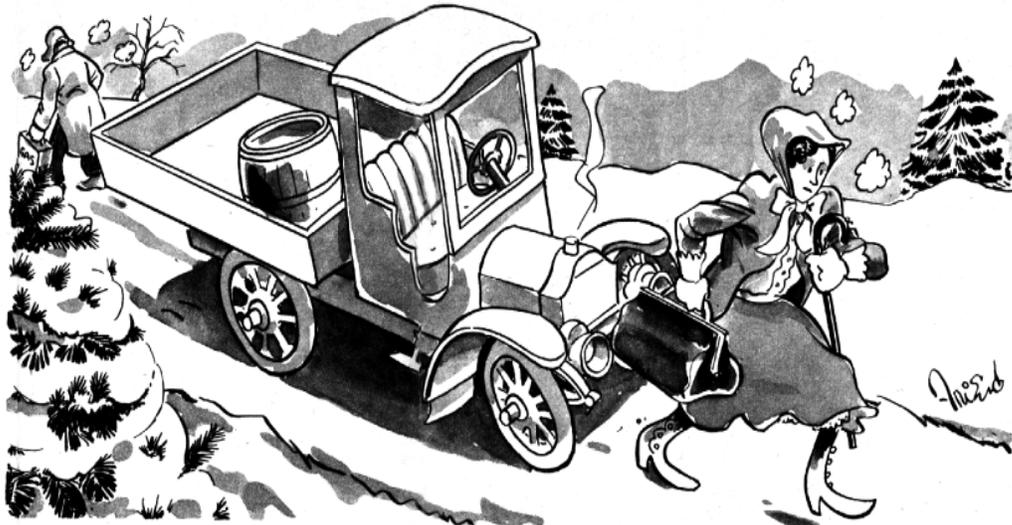
One morning about sun-up, an excited husband came for help from Mrs. Riggs. The midwife and man set out together in an old farm truck. About a mile from the destination, where a woman waited alone in the most distressing stage of labor, the truck stopped running.

"Out of gas!"

Mrs. Riggs declared, and made a quick decision. Cane in hand, she grabbed her bag from the truck, and set out to walk the last mile while the man went back for gasoline. The midwife reached the cabin just in time to welcome into the world a good sized baby boy. The father made it home with his truck when the delivery was all over.



In this old photo, Mrs. Katherine Riggs (then Mrs. Reynolds) poses with her four children she supported. At left front is Mary Elizabeth, who died at age 26, and whose two children were reared by Mrs. Riggs. William Herbert Reynolds, right front, was recently Mayor of Jackson. At rear are James Reynolds, left, and J. T. Reynolds, both of Lexington.



A mile from its destination, the truck ran out of gas. Mrs. Riggs grabbed cane and bag and walked the rest of the way.

"Most mountain women have their babies easy," the midwife maintained. "They work hard in the fields, and hard work's good for a woman." Sometimes, though, the babies are a good size. Aunty Riggs has delivered more than one 14-pounder. Her largest was a 16-pounder, her smallest a 2-pound, 8-ounce mite. "Sewell Perry's son, that little feller was." The tiny baby, born prematurely, was reared by a devoted grandmother, without help of an incubator. Wrapped in medicated cotton, he was fed syrup and raw egg white with a medicine dropper.

It used to be that Aunty Riggs took cases into her home. "But the relatives came, too," she said. "It got to be a nuisance, especially at mealtimes."

When on a case, the midwife takes no interference from relatives, especially mothers of patients, and in-laws. "I make it clear they can get another midwife if they're going to give trouble," she declared. She believes, though, that it's good for the father to be present at a delivery.

The midwife has often been approached by agencies seeking babies for adoption, but has never found an unwed mountain mother who would part with her child. There are some pitiful cases, with no father, and no in-laws. Here Aunty Riggs, midwife, becomes Aunty Riggs, missionary-counselor. Her counseling has saved many a prospective mother from despair.

There's prenatal counseling for all the patients of Katherine Riggs, provided she knows beforehand of the impending confinement. But, often as not, she is not engaged until the mother is already in labor. The midwife is known by everybody in the county, and they know she'll not see a woman go without help.

A baby comes cheap in the mountains. For most of her career, Aunty Riggs' fee was \$5. Now it's \$10. However, a chicken, potatoes, a few eggs, or sorghum molasses are just as likely to be her payment— or nothing at. For, in a county where the average annual income is below \$500, there's not much of anything to spare. Usually, when Aunty Riggs goes on a case, she takes a gift of food, or baby clothes, or a few flowers from her garden. And she prays all the way. Mrs. Riggs, a deeply religious woman, is a member of the Baptist Church in Campton. She wouldn't think of tackling the simplest delivery without the help of

prayer. Moreover, she prays with her new mothers before taking off for home. If there's a real need, and often there is, she stirs up her missionary society to do something about it. "She's the pastor's right-hand woman," said the Rev. Ed Cunningham, her former pastor. "She seldom misses a meeting, and when she cooks she never counts the number of servings."

Around Campton, Katherine Riggs is about as famous for her sewing as for her midwifery. Wedding dresses, layettes, casket linings, shrouds— she makes anything, and all her own dresses too. "Sunday sewing I'll not do," said the kindly woman, "unless it's a shroud that's needed. And then I'll do it, because that's a labor of love. Likely, the material has been bought with money from a community collections, and the sewing's my part."

Mrs. Riggs is in demand, too, for laying out the dead. All over the county she has gone, and has lost count of the number of people she has attended in death. Strangely, though, the midwife has never prepared for burial anybody she has brought into the world.

Though now severely crippled and stooped, Aunty Riggs can still turn a bed patient. She declares it's all in the will-power and a good stout bed-rail against which to brace her bent body.

Up every morning at 5:30, she maintains a man-sized garden behind her neat cottage. There are flowers out front. She boards an occasional nurse or schoolteacher needing a place to stay. "I've worked hard all my life," said little Aunty Riggs, "As a girl, I sawed logs and rolled them, hauled fodder to cattle, plowed, and handled a horse and sled."

But Mrs. Riggs doesn't do as much midwifery as she used to. She swears by young Dr. Paul Maddox and his county clinic. "I think the world of the young doctor," she says, "and I tell all my patients to go to him."

Surrounded by her grateful namesakes, Aunty Riggs, midwife, missionary and counselor, will never lack friends as she spends her energies now in helping sponsor a new era for childbirth in the mountains. [This article is from the May 31, 1959 Louisville, KY Courier-Journal Magazine. Mrs. Clarice Susan Munro is a native of New Zealand, now an American citizen who contributes to Courier-Journal from time to time.]