

Hospital Care And the  
Vanishing Midwife.

## HOSPITAL CARE AND THE VANISHING MIDWIFE

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**P**RIOR to World War I, about 40 per cent of the confinements in our country were attended by midwives (1). By 1935, when nationwide data first became available, the proportion had dropped to 10.7 per cent. Since then, the trend of midwife deliveries has continued downward almost without interruption, the proportion reaching an all-time low of 3.4 per cent in 1953. The data for recent years appear in Table 1.

A number of factors have contributed to the rapidly diminishing role of the midwife. For one thing, the number of midwives permitted to practice has been sharply reduced in recent years by the growing number of states that have established minimum requirements with respect to their education and training, and that have also made provisions for supervision and regulation of their practice. At the same time, physicians have become better trained and more skilled in obstetrics and large numbers of them have specialized in this field.

Hospitals have also greatly expanded and improved their maternity facilities and services. At present, more than nine out of every ten babies are born in hospitals, compared with less than four out of every ten only two decades ago. Moreover, in large areas of the country, particularly in the Northeast and the Far West, the proportion now exceeds 98 per cent. Each year since 1947, more than 3 million babies have been born in hospitals; in 1955, their number probably reached an all-time high of 3½ million.

Underlying these developments, favorable economic conditions and the spectacular growth of prepaid insurance plans on both an individual and a group basis (2) have enabled an increasing number of families to avail themselves of medical and hospital services.

<sup>1</sup> Statistical Bureau, Metropolitan Life Insurance Co.

Table 1. Midwife and hospital deliveries, registered live births by race, United States, 1935-1953.

YEAR	DELIVERED BY MIDWIFE			DELIVERED IN HOSPITAL		
	All Races	White	Nonwhite	All Races	White	Nonwhite
NUMBER						
1953	131,754	24,538	107,216	3,621,362	3,238,180	383,182
1952	139,280	26,412	112,868	3,529,156	3,181,098	348,058
1951	151,116	29,960	121,156	3,376,996	3,056,516	320,480
1950	161,099	33,161	127,938	3,125,975	2,841,930	284,045
1949	168,166	36,777	131,389	3,087,080	2,825,078	262,002
1948	172,000	39,000	133,000	3,025,206	2,784,865	240,341
1947	175,000	41,000	134,000	3,136,930	2,925,374	211,556
1946	167,048	40,171	126,877	2,708,223	2,538,882	169,341
1945	167,805	41,128	126,677	2,155,594	2,018,929	136,665
1944	178,520	45,975	132,545	2,112,963	1,987,082	125,881
1943	192,715	50,886	141,829	2,115,582	2,002,313	113,269
1942	196,061	54,470	141,591	1,906,833	1,808,121	98,712
1941	203,815	59,751	144,064	1,537,719	1,448,132	89,587
1940	204,968	64,621	140,347	1,316,768	1,238,677	78,091
1939	208,843	68,000	140,843	1,158,528	1,089,708	68,820
1938	217,917	74,296	143,621	1,098,530	1,034,750	63,780
1937	220,344	76,384	143,960	987,032	929,386	57,646
1936	223,577	82,247	141,330	878,222	826,841	51,381
1935	229,977	85,645	144,332	795,629	746,974	48,655
PER CENT OF TOTAL DELIVERIES FOR EACH RACE						
1953	3.4	.7	19.7	92.8	96.5	70.3
1952	3.6	.8	21.5	91.7	95.7	66.4
1951	4.0	.9	23.6	90.0	94.4	62.4
1950	4.5	1.1	26.1	88.0	92.8	57.9
1949	4.7	1.2	27.6	86.7	91.6	55.1
1948	4.9	1.3	29.2	85.6	90.4	52.9
1947	4.7	1.3	31.5	84.8	89.3	49.7
1946	5.1	1.4	33.8	82.4	87.1	45.2
1945	6.1	1.5	37.3	78.8	84.3	40.2
1944	6.4	1.9	39.0	75.6	81.0	37.0
1943	6.6	2.0	41.7	72.1	77.2	33.3
1942	7.0	2.2	44.0	67.9	72.7	30.6
1941	8.1	2.7	46.7	61.2	65.7	29.0
1940	8.7	3.1	48.0	55.8	59.9	26.7
1939	9.2	3.4	49.8	51.1	55.0	24.3
1938	9.5	3.7	51.1	48.0	51.6	22.7
1937	10.0	4.0	52.4	44.8	48.2	21.0
1936	10.4	4.4	53.8	40.9	43.9	19.5
1935	10.7	4.5	54.0	36.9	39.6	18.2

Source: National Office of Vital Statistics, except that deliveries by midwives in 1947 exclude estimated number by other attendants which could not be separated from those by midwives in Georgia and Mississippi, and that the 1948 figures allow for the estimated number by midwives which were grouped with other attendants in Georgia, Kentucky and Mississippi.

Another factor which accounts for the growing popularity of hospitalized confinements is the passing of foreign-born women out of the childbearing ages. Years ago, immigrant women, following the customs and traditions of their homeland, preferred the care of the midwife. She thus played a prominent role in the large cities where the foreign-born population was concentrated. Just after the turn of the century in New York City, for example, midwives attended more than 50,000 maternity cases a year, or 44 per cent of all deliveries. Since then, however, the demand for the midwife's services has declined so rapidly that today midwives attend less than 1/100 of 1 per cent of the total live births registered in that City (3).

The midwife is disappearing from an ever-widening area of the country. As may be seen from Table 2, by 1948 there were sixteen states and the District of Columbia in which midwives either were not practicing at all or had delivered fewer than 0.05 per cent of the live-born. Currently, they have virtually disappeared from four additional states and in ten others attend no more than 1 per cent of the deliveries. All thirty of these states are located in the Northern and Western regions of the country. Midwife deliveries represented only 0.09 per cent of the live births in these areas in 1953; as recently as 1935, the proportion was sixteen times as great.

As a result of the decreased demand for midwives, in many areas of the country she now does not attend a sufficient number of confinements a year to retain her proficiency. To cope with this problem, New York City has been steadily tightening its regulations and, among other things, now requires the midwife to deliver at least three cases a year to qualify for annual relicensure. Currently, only four midwives remain in New York City; prior to 1910, there were more than 3,000.

The institution of midwifery has actually been declining ever since the 17th Century, following the invention of the obstetric forceps. For many generations thereafter, however, the employment of a physician at birth was limited to the upper classes and the well-to-do. Indeed it was not until the turn of

Table 2. Number of midwives in 1948; and per cent of registered live births delivered by midwives in 1953, 1948, and 1935.

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION AND STATE	PER CENT OF BIRTHS DELIVERED BY MIDWIVES									NUMBER OF MIDWIVES, 1948
	Total			White			Nonwhite			
	1953	1948	1935	1953	1948	1935	1953	1948	1935	
United States	3.4	4.9	10.7	.7	1.3	4.5	19.7	29.2	54.0	20,700 <sup>a</sup>
New England	.00	.01	.4	.00	.01	.4	—	.05	1.0	38 <sup>a</sup>
Maine	.01	.03	—	.01	.03	—	—	—	—	<sup>b</sup>
New Hampshire	—	—	.06	—	—	.06	—	—	—	1
Vermont	—	—	.09	—	—	.09	—	—	—	0
Massachusetts	—	.00	.00	—	.00	.00	—	—	—	0
Rhode Island	.01	.05	1.7	.01	.05	1.6	—	—	3.8	6
Connecticut	.01	.01	1.6	.01	.00	1.7	—	.1	1.4	21
Middle Atlantic	.09	.1	2.4	.08	.1	2.4	.2	.4	1.9	477
New York	.08	.1	2.5	.07	.07	2.5	.2	.5	2.9	48
New Jersey	.1	.4	6.6	.1	.4	7.0	.1	.4	2.3	161
Pennsylvania	.08	.08	.8	.06	.06	.8	.3	.3	.7	268
East North Central	.04	.05	1.0	.03	.04	1.0	.2	.1	.9	600 <sup>a</sup>
Ohio	.02	.03	.3	.02	.02	.3	.07	.09	.2	450
Indiana	.06	.05	.7	.06	.06	.7	.03	.02	.8	3
Illinois	.06	.06	1.7	.03	.05	1.7	.3	.1	.5	<sup>b</sup>
Michigan	.03	.05	1.1	.02	.03	1.0	.2	.3	3.1	<sup>b</sup>
Wisconsin	.04	.05	.9	.03	.05	.9	.4	.4	1.3	<sup>b</sup>
West North Central	.3	.3	1.2	.2	.2	1.1	3.0	4.0	4.5	100 <sup>a</sup>
Minnesota	.1	.07	1.4	.1	.07	1.4	.2	.5	2.8	27
Iowa	.03	.02	.07	.02	.01	.06	.3	1.6	1.6	0
Missouri	.8	1.1	3.0	.4	.6	2.7	4.2	6.3	7.0	46
North Dakota	.2	.05	1.4	.1	.04	1.4	2.3	.3	1.6	<sup>b</sup>
South Dakota	.7	.2	.4	.5	.2	.3	5.6	1.4	1.9	<sup>b</sup>
Nebraska	.02	.00	.1	.01	—	.1	.4	.1	—	0
Kansas	.02	.02	.3	.02	.02	.3	.08	.2	1.9	<sup>b</sup>

South Atlantic	9.8	13.5	28.0	1.0	2.0	10.3	30.7	41.6	67.0	6,782
Delaware	3.4	4.1	15.6	.7	.4	8.1	16.4	23.2	54.3	31
Maryland	1.7	4.0	9.2	.3	1.0	4.0	7.1	15.1	27.6	160
District of Columbia	.06	.02	.06	.04	—	.04	.08	.06	.08	0
Virginia	9.1	12.8	28.2	1.4	2.6	13.1	31.8	42.3	65.3	2,000
West Virginia	1.5	2.0	6.8	1.4	2.0	7.1	3.2	1.8	2.0	194
North Carolina	10.3	12.6	28.6	1.0	2.4	11.4	28.8	34.6	65.3	869
South Carolina	19.9	29.1	49.4	.6	2.0	12.0	44.5	62.1	84.2	1,513
Georgia	15.5	20.6*	40.7	1.1	2.3*	14.8	40.6	53.0*	78.0	1,560
Florida	9.6	14.3	28.6	.9	2.1	9.4	32.6	46.7	73.1	455
East South Central	13.3	17.2	29.4	2.2	4.5	13.7	39.3	50.2	70.5	6,440
Kentucky	3.9	6.7*	19.5	3.9	6.9*	20.0	3.6	4.7*	10.8	1,200
Tennessee	4.0	6.0	12.9	1.6	3.4	9.3	13.3	18.3	32.6	1,278
Alabama	18.1	22.0	36.4	1.6	3.0	12.6	44.5	54.4	74.8	1,701
Mississippi	30.1	37.4*	50.4	1.0	3.7*	9.2	53.0	65.8*	84.9	2,261
West South Central	7.1	10.9	19.0	3.8	5.5	9.2	20.3	33.5	62.2	5,813
Arkansas	13.5	15.1	25.2	1.0	1.9	8.3	43.3	55.6	79.2	1,137
Louisiana	6.9	15.0	40.1	.9	2.6	19.1	16.4	34.3	68.9	1,229
Oklahoma	1.7	2.0	4.0	.4	.4	2.2	11.0	14.6	25.5	185
Texas	7.2	10.7	15.1	5.7	8.3	9.9	17.1	26.5	52.0	3,262
Mountain	1.4	2.4	5.8	1.3	2.3	5.9	3.8	4.3	4.3	400*
Montana	.3	.2	2.8	.2	.08	2.2	2.0	2.9	10.9	0
Idaho	.04	.03	.6	.04	.03	.6	—	.5	.8	2
Wyoming	.09	—	.3	.02	—	.3	2.6	—	—	0
Colorado	.4	.7	1.2	.4	.7	1.2	—	—	.8	12
New Mexico	5.7	11.9	23.0	5.8	12.1	24.0	4.0	9.3	1.0	268
Arizona	2.6	2.9	8.4	1.9	2.7	9.2	6.3	4.4	4.1	b
Utah	.03	.02	1.6	.03	.02	1.6	.4	.3	.9	11
Nevada	.1	.05	1.0	.04	—	.7	.8	.8	5.1	0
Pacific	.02	.1	1.4	.02	.1	.8	.03	.2	14.1	50
Washington	.04	.03	.8	.02	.02	.4	.3	.2	14.5	0
Oregon	.02	.01	.5	.02	.01	.3	—	.2	11.6	2
California	.02	.2	1.7	.02	.2	1.0	.01	.2	14.2	48

\* Estimated.    b Not available.    c Allows for estimated number of deliveries by midwives which were grouped with those by other attendants.

Note: Dash (—) indicates no midwife deliveries.  
 Source: Statistics on registered live births, from the National Office of Vital Statistics; number of midwives, from the health departments in New York City, District of Columbia, and the forty-eight states.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of registered live births by race and attendant according to age of mother and birth order, United States, 1950.

AGE OF MOTHER BIRTH ORDER	ALL RACES				WHITE				NONWHITE			
	Physician in Hospital	Physician Not in Hospital	Midwife	Other and Not Specified	Physician in Hospital	Physician Not in Hospital	Midwife	Other and Not Specified	Physician in Hospital	Physician Not in Hospital	Midwife	Other and Not Specified
TOTAL	88.0	7.1	4.5	0.4	92.8	5.9	1.1	0.2	57.9	14.3	26.1	1.7
<i>Age of Mother (Years)</i>												
Under 15	64.8	15.4	17.6	2.2	83.5	11.7	2.6	2.2	55.5	17.3	25.0	2.2
15-19	83.9	8.2	7.2	.7	92.0	6.5	1.2	.3	58.4	13.6	26.4	1.6
20-24	89.0	6.3	4.3	.4	93.8	5.1	.9	.2	59.5	13.6	25.1	1.8
25-29	89.7	6.3	3.7	.3	93.5	5.3	1.0	.2	58.7	14.2	25.3	1.8
30-34	88.9	6.7	4.0	.4	92.9	5.7	1.1	.3	55.9	15.2	27.4	1.5
35-39	84.1	10.4	5.1	.4	88.5	9.4	1.8	.3	53.1	17.0	28.6	1.3
40-44	81.2	12.6	5.6	.6	85.8	11.8	2.0	.4	50.4	18.3	29.7	1.6
45 and Over	75.9	14.3	8.9	.9	84.3	13.2	2.5	.0	41.0	19.2	35.2	4.6
<i>Birth Order<sup>1</sup></i>												
First	93.1	4.4	2.3	.2	96.1	3.4	.4	.1	68.1	12.6	18.1	1.2
Second	91.6	5.2	2.9	.3	95.1	4.1	.6	.2	60.3	14.4	23.7	1.6
Third	87.8	7.2	4.6	.4	92.6	6.1	1.1	.2	56.3	14.8	27.3	1.6
Fourth	83.0	9.8	6.5	.7	89.1	8.8	1.7	.4	54.5	14.4	29.0	2.1
Fifth	77.1	12.6	9.4	.9	84.5	12.3	2.7	.5	52.1	13.8	32.0	2.1
Sixth	71.0	16.2	11.6	1.2	78.9	16.5	3.8	.8	50.1	15.5	32.1	2.3
Seventh and Over	60.9	20.8	16.7	1.6	69.3	22.9	6.4	1.4	44.8	16.8	36.4	2.0

<sup>1</sup>Number of children born alive to mother

Source: Estimated from reports by the National Office of Vital Statistics showing births in the United States classified by attendant, age of mother, and birth order; and data supplied by state registrars showing births by attendant according to age of mother in Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, and Mississippi and by attendant according to birth order in Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Maryland, Minnesota, and New Mexico.

the 20th Century that physicians became the usual attendant at birth and even then this was the case primarily among native white families.

The available data on midwives indicate that the number practicing in the United States has been declining since at least the early 1920's. Compared with about 62,000 at that time (4), there were 47,000 a decade later (5) and less than 21,000 in 1948. Although a later nationwide estimate is not available, there are indications that even fewer midwives are now in practice.

Although the midwife is steadily passing from the American scene, she has not yet vanished. Her work is being increasingly concentrated in the rural areas of the South, and especially among the Negro population. Currently, more than 98 per cent of all midwife deliveries in the country occur in the eighteen states of the South and Southwest (including New Mexico and Arizona, which are grouped with the Mountain states).<sup>2</sup> In 1953, midwives delivered 129,480 live births, or 9.7 per cent of the total in these states, the proportion varying from 1.5 per cent in West Virginia to as much as 30 per cent in Mississippi. In only two states—Texas and New Mexico—do midwives now deliver more than 5 per cent of the white babies. Among the nonwhite population, however, there still are eleven Southern states in which from one sixth to one half of the mothers are delivered by midwives. Thus, of the 131,754 babies delivered by midwives in the United States during 1953, about 77 per cent of the total were among nonwhite mothers in these eleven states.

The midwife's services are also used more frequently by older women and by those with larger families, as is evident from the data for 1950 shown in Table 3. Among nonwhite women, for example, the proportion delivered by midwives increases from about 25 per cent at ages under 30 years to almost 30 per cent at 40-44 years, and to 35 per cent at ages beyond 45. The

<sup>2</sup> In 1948, there were approximately 19,410 midwives—93.8 per cent of the country's total—practicing in these states.



upswing in relation to birth order is even more pronounced, the proportion rising from about 18 per cent for confinement of a first child to more than 36 per cent for orders after the sixth. The patterns are fairly similar for white women, but the frequencies are much lower; the proportion is less than 3 per cent at every age period, and no higher than 6.4 per cent for mothers having their seventh or subsequent birth.

Hospital deliveries are at a maximum for mothers in their early twenties—almost 94 per cent for white women and 60 per cent for the nonwhite. The proportions are even higher for women having their first or second child.

The increasing utilization of medical and hospital services is an important factor in saving lives. As recently as 1935, the maternal mortality rate in the United States was 58 per 10,000 live births; currently, it is less than 6 per 10,000 nationally, and in large sections of the country it is appreciably lower. Infants have also benefited; during these two decades, their mortality rate dropped from 56 per 1,000 live births to less than 27 per 1,000.

Although great strides have already been made in safeguarding mothers and infants, opportunities still exist for further progress, particularly in the rural areas of the South. Fortunately, the prospects are that the situation will continue to improve as the public health and hospital building programs go forward. In the meantime, the midwife remains indispensable in areas where medical services are lacking.

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