Our Family History

**Midwives of Early Quebec**

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Excerpted from the book *Hélène’s World: Hélène Desportes of Seventeenth-Century Quebec*

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From earliest days, women have aided other women in giving birth. For most of that time and in most places, training for this role was accomplished by an informal apprenticeship: learning to support women in childbirth through observing another, more experienced woman. In France, this knowledgeable woman was known as a *sage-femme*, or a wise woman.¹

In Quebec as in France, many infants died at birth or did not survive their first few months of life.² Childbirth, particularly the first birth, was dangerous for both mothers and infants. In the south of Paris in the early 1600s, one woman in eight died during or soon after the birth of her first child.³ In the French colony, when women gave birth, they labored and birthed alone or they did so with the assistance of another woman or women, often related or at least from the neighborhood.

Marguerite Langlois was the first midwife to be recognized in the Church records of Quebec. On September 9, 1655, she was listed as a *sage-femme* on the baptism record of Marguerite Blondeau. Four years later, on the September 10, 1659 baptism record of Jean Halay, Hélène Desportes was also given this title. In 1659, Hélène was thirty-nine years old and the mother of fifteen children. In addition to being experienced in birthing, she would also have had many opportunities over the years to observe her aunt (Marguerite Langlois) and other experienced women assist with childbirth. Between 1659 and 1672, Hélène would be listed as the *sage-femme* on a number of baptism records in the Quebec diocesan archives.⁴ Often there is the note "*ondoYE par Hélène Desportes*" (baptized by Hélène). This would have occurred when the infant was near death and baptism could not wait for the services of a priest.⁵ For Hélène and Marguerite to be identified as “*sage femme*” meant that the Church, and the community in general, recognized their skill in assisting women in childbirth and acknowledged their high moral character.

Just as sons learned a trade from their fathers, midwifery skills might be passed from mother to daughter, down through the
generations. Two daughters, a daughter-in-law, and three granddaughters would follow in Hélène’s footsteps. Her daughter Louise is listed as a sage-femme on the death record of the infant of Jean Gagnon in Château-Richer, dated February 20, 1691. Louise’s three daughters (Hélène’s granddaughters), Jeanne, Hélène, and Louise Cloutier would also be identified as sage-femmes practicing in Château-Richer in the early eighteenth century. Another daughter of Hélène, Françoise Hébert, would serve as midwife in Cap-St-Ignace and Montmagny. Although the records don’t specifically state that she is a midwife, Françoise is listed on several baptism and burial records between 1695 and 1714 as having baptized the infant. Marie Charlotte Depoïtiers, the wife of Hélène’s son Joseph, is also listed as a sage-femme on the baptism record of Pierre Peletier, dated July 25, 1705.

The more or less formal recognition of midwifery in the church records of Quebec in the mid-seventeenth century reflected changes in the practice occurring in France at the time. In the sixteenth century, both the Church and the civil authorities of France had moved to control the process of birth and midwifery. In 1556, Henry II decreed that single women who were pregnant should declare their condition publicly or face execution. He made this decree under the assumption that unwed mothers might want to kill their infant and that the dead infant would not have the opportunity for baptism. As early as the sixteenth century some municipalities in France had begun to license midwives. Also in the mid-sixteenth century, following the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church sought to ban Protestant women from the practice of midwifery; to that end, midwives were required to go before the local priest or bishop, who would ascertain their moral fitness to baptize dying infants. Women were required to foreswear "not to use sorcery, not to take advantage of a woman in labor whom one did not like, not to
reveal secrets of the household, not to deliver an unmarried woman without notifying the
authorities, and not to help a woman to abort a fetus.” Eventually, the French woman officially
designated as a *sage-femme* came to be elected for this position by the women of the village. In
addition to approval by the local priest, her selection would be based on her experience and
skills, which included a knowledge of both herbs and amulets which might be useful in a
difficult pregnancy and birth.9

By the seventeenth century, efforts were under way to improve the training and the practice of
midwifery in France. In 1635, midwives petitioned the University of Paris for public courses on
the subject, but to no avail. However, some thirty years later, their efforts would be met with
success. The government established a three-month course in Paris, followed by an examination,
to prepare for midwifery. The first person to teach the course was Marguerite du Tertre de la
Marche, a student of Louyse Bourgeois, the queen's midwife.10 By the end of the century,
women who wanted to practice midwifery needed to be a practicing Catholic and have three
months' hospital experience or have been apprenticed to a midwife. Or, they might receive a
diploma from the school of midwifery in Paris. In the midwifery training programs, there was
some understanding of the importance of hygiene. Before touching a patient, midwives were
instructed to remove their rings and wash their hands.11

Although midwifery was a time-honored and generally respected occupation for women, it was
not without its perils. While childbirth was considered a sacred act, it was also associated with
sex, blood, and evil in the form of abortion and infanticide. Midwives were sometimes the object
of witch-hunts which began with neighbors accusing her of killing a newborn, assisting in an
abortion, or sorcery to induce sterility. There were occasions when the midwife was sought out
for the prescription of medications for conditions other than pregnancy and childbirth. This put
her at risk for being seen as an unsavory or disruptive element in society.12 One particularly
notorious case in France was that of the midwife Catherine Monvoisin. She was arrested in Paris
in 1679 on suspicion of witchcraft: casting spells, providing aphrodisiacs, reading ladies’
horoscopes, and participating in black magic. Known as La Voisin, she had supplied the ladies of
the court of Louis XIV with a variety of potions and powders designed to assist in keeping a
lover or losing a husband. La Voisin implicated a great many others in her craft, including a
number of other midwives. A tribunal, known as the Burning Chamber, was set up to investigate
and judge. Three hundred people were arrested. La Voisin was executed a year later, along with
thirty other individuals. An additional thirty were sent to the galleys or into exile. Their crimes
varied from poisonings to the use of horoscopes.13 Fortunately, there appears to have been no
scandal involving midwives in seventeenth-century Quebec.

The practice of midwifery in Quebec would receive more recognition and regulation as the years
went by. In 1703, Bishop de Saint-Vallier published *Le Rituel du diocèse de Québec*, in which he
recommended the election of midwives by an assembly of the most virtuous and honest women
in the parish.14 In 1714, Simone Buisson was nominated “*sage-femme jurée et approuvée*”
(midwife, sworn and approved) of Quebec and received a salary for her work. At the
recommendation of Michel Sarrazin, the colony’s first physician, Buisson was also allowed to
instruct other women in the office, both in an effort to improve skills and to encourage others to
formally enter the practice. Midwifery had entered a new era in the colony. By 1740, the
infrastructure for midwifery as a distinct profession was in place in New France. Madeleine
Bouchette came to Quebec as an *entretenue* midwife: she had trained at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, which at the time had the best maternity school in Europe. Paid 400 *livres* a year, Madame Bouchette was obliged to remain available to serve the poor of the city. In turn, this specially trained woman could train others in the art of midwifery. Midwifery had evolved as a separate profession; specific rights, privileges, and responsibilities were defined by the French court and the clergy and taught in the schools.15

In France, physicians were beginning to attend some births in the seventeenth century. However, there were no physicians in the French colony until the very last years of that century. There were a number of surgeons in seventeenth-century Quebec, but they were a separate medical profession, trained to perform blood-lettings, operations, amputations, and lancing of boils. They did not concern themselves with childbirth.16 In general, birthing belonged entirely to the realm of women. Families in Quebec were large and the hazards of childbearing were real. Many women died in childbirth. Infant mortality was high. It would have been no small comfort for a woman to be attended by a midwife with some experience and skill!

ENDNOTES

1 No men were allowed to be present for the birth, not the father of the baby, not a priest (Goubert, Pierre. *The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century*. Trans. Ian Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 47). In the case of royalty, childbirth might be attended by men and others in the Royal Court to ensure that there were no substitutions for the royal child (Fraser, Antonia. *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007, 12).

2 *Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH) Online Genealogical Database*, University of Montreal, 2005. Baptism and Burial Records.


4 *Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH) Genealogical Database*.

5 Performing a baptism in an emergency does not automatically indicate the status of midwife. Apparently others, including men, could perform an emergency baptism in the absence of a priest. In the parish records of Château-Richer, on the baptism record of Charles LeTardiff, dated July 9, 1652, François Bellenger is listed as having baptized the infant. He is listed as performing the baptism on other records as well. (*Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH) Genealogical Database)*


7 *Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH) Genealogical Database*, Baptism and Burial Records.


10 Stock-Morton, "Control and Limitation of Midwives in Modern France: The Example of Marseille."


12 Stock-Morton, "Control and Limitation of Midwives in Modern France: The Example of Marseille."


