

Midwives of Early Québec

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Excerpted from the book *Hélène's World: Hélène Desportes of Seventeenth-Century Québec*

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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 Québec 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 Québec. 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 Québec diocesan archives.⁴ Often there is the note "*ondoyé 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.



From "*De conceptu et generatione hominis*," a practical book on midwifery published in Frankfurt in 1587 by Jacob Rueff; The image is used courtesy of the University of Iowa, John Martin Rare Book Room.

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.⁶ 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 Depoitiers, the wife of Hélène's son Joseph, is also listed as a *sage-femme* on the baptism record of Pierre Peletier, dated July 25, 1705.⁷

Le dixiesme Jour du mois de Septembre mil
 Cents Cinquante neuf a esté baptizé dans la Paroisse de Notre-Dame de Québec
 Jean Halay mort par helene Desportes femme de Noel Moreau
 Sage femme Jean Halay fils de Jean Baptiste
 Halay et Mathurine Valette sa femme le du
 jour ayant appris par la mesme Sage femme qu'il estoit
 viement baptizé moy Jean Torcapel Prestre et Curé
 En ay supplé administré les sacres Cereammis du
 Baptisme et imposé le nom de Jean en presen
 de Jean Bourdon et de Marie Magdelaine Giffard
 femme de Nicolas Inubreau. Torcapel

Baptism record for Jean Halay, dated September 10, 1659 from the church records of Notre-Dame-de-Québec. Hélène Desportes is listed as the *sage femme*.

The more or less formal recognition of midwifery in the church records of Québec 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."⁸ 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 childbearing 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 Québec.

The practice of midwifery in Québec 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 Québec 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 Québec as a *entretenu* 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 Québec, 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 Québec 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 Montréal, 2005. Baptism and Burial Records.

³ Goubert, *The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century*, 47.

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*)

⁶ Laforce, Hélène. *Histoire de la sage-femme dans la région de Québec*. Québec: Institut Québécois de Recherche Sur la Culture, 1985, 149.

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

⁸ Stock-Morton, Phyllis. "Control and Limitation of Midwives in Modern France: The Example of Marseille." *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 8, 1996. Louyse Bourgeois was the first person in France to publish a book on the practice of midwifery.

⁹ Goubert, *The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century*, 47.

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

¹¹ Lewis, W.H. *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV*. Long Grove, IL: Wave-land Press, 1953, 193.

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

¹³ Fraser, *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King*, 179-80.

¹⁴ Lessard, Renald. "De France à Nouvelle-France: la pratique médicale canadienne aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles." *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*. 1988. 95. 4: 424. Web. 9 May 2012.

¹⁵ LaForce, Hélène. "L'Univers de la sage-femme aux XVIIIe aux XVIIIe siècle," 3-6.

¹⁶ Lewis, W.H. *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV*, 187-89.