

History of midwifery



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Before time, Mothers delivered their own babies into their own hands.

Before institutions, Sisters, friends and midwives helped mothers deliver their babies.

Before they were outlawed, Thousands of Granny Midwives helped mothers deliver their babies. This is the story of one of them, grand Midwife, Margaret Charles Smith of Eutaw Alabama.” (Paul, 2008)

Margaret Charles Smith was born in impoverished Green County Eutaw Alabama in 1906, “ that’s what they told me,” she says. Her mother Bueha Sanders died only three weeks after giving birth to her. She was raised by her wise and protective maternal grandmother Margaret Smith who had been a slave purchased for less than four dollars. Green County had been a hotbed for slavery and progress there was slow and met with much white resistance. A very active chapter of the Ku Klux Klan played a role in Miss Margaret’s life experience in a part of Alabama that is still almost completely segregated by choice. (Mothering, 2003)(Smith, 1996)

While Margaret tended to her studies in a one room school house for *coloreds* she met and fell in love with a fellow student Randolph Smith. Against the blessing of her grandmother, whom she called mama, they were married. Mr. Smith became a hog farmer, and according to Margaret’s own accounts, he was a good tempered man. In interviews, Miss Margaret describes Randolph as “ understanding and unquarrelsome.” With Randolph she had three sons.

By today's standards considered a DEM, she apprenticed with an older midwife. Though she only was able to progress to the fifth grade she attended numerous midwifery and health-related training courses. A very busy midwife, Margaret Charles Smith was known locally as ' Miss Margaret.' She attended the births of mostly black women. She delivered 3500 babies in her own Green County, attending the last one in 1981. " Sometimes four babies in one night," she says as she shakes her head with a reminiscing smile. Despite the fact that the majority of mothers she attended were deeply impoverished and lacked basic nutrition, Miss Margaret didn't loose a mother once and very rarely ever lost a child. (Paul, 2008)

(AlabamaMidwives. com, 2002)

By the mid 1940s laws regulating midwives took a formal stance regarding Granny midwives in that they were *lawfully tolerated* , and Miss Margaret obtained her permit to practice midwifery. Margaret recounts her relationships with doctors as a mix of " collaboration and of conflict". Her relationships with doctors, nurses and health officials were complicated by race and class issues. (Commonwealth Midwives Alliance, 2009)

Many of Miss Margaret's mothers in the early days of her practice were extremely poor and lived in homes with dirt floors, and no electricity or running water. She attended the births of numerous sets of twins and breech babies. She reports that at one birth the baby came out so premature that it weighed only 1½ pounds. She constructed a make-shift apparatus, an incubator of sorts with cardboard and bottles full of hot water, she child survived. (Smith, 1996) (Paul, 2008)

Inside her birth bag Miss Margaret carried clarified pig grease to lubricate the vagina, for massage and to oil the newborn. She carried a wide range of herbs. She carried a baby scale, razors, towels, smelling salts, castor oil, ginger tea, black tea and rose water. A deeply religious woman she reportedly carried a bible as well even though the state forbade it. She would also place a sharp object such as a fork under the bed of the birthing mother, a ritual that had its roots in African birth tradition. (Lee, 1996) (Smith, 1996)

She encouraged women to birth upright and encouraged numerous birthing positions. This was considered normal, due to the fact that black mothers were not permitted in white hospitals, and therefore not exposed to birthing on their backs. If one was not already lit, she would button up the house and light a fire to warm the room. In addition to providing birth services, she would see mothers pre and postnatally and would offer help with children, house work and food preparation if the mother needed it. Until the 1960s she was most often paid by barter and would come to mothers even if they had no way to pay. Speaking of the good work of midwifery she once said, “ You could count on midwives. They took care of everybody, no matter what.”

In 1976 an Alabama Law was passed explicitly prohibiting traditional lay midwives from attending births. But persevering woman that she was, she continued serving the women in her community until well in 1981 when her license was legally revoked along side over 150 other black granny midwives in Alabama. It was at this point that Miss Margaret focused teaching and sharing her valuable life experience and story. She actively participated and encouraged the preservation of homebirthing midwives at traditional midwifery conferences including at The Farm in Tennessee. Miss Margaret

Charles Smith has left a significant impression of the history of birth , culture and midwives. (Smith, 1996) (Mothering, 2003)

Certainly remembered for her perseverance and genuine big heart, some people recall Miss Margaret as being something of an activist. She participated in civil rights marches in Alabama. She championed breast feeding with black mothers as it became less and less popular. She was the first Black woman to be gifted with the “ keys to the town” in a ceremony honoring her contribution to society, mothers and children. In her last years, Miss Margaret had received numerous recognition awards for her honorable services to the community. This included Alabama’s National Health Service Award 2000. (Mothering, 2003)

With the assistance of Linda Janet Holmes, Margaret published a 1996 book recalling the history of black midwives and her own experience titled *Listen To Me Good: The Life Story of an Alabama Midwife* . In 2008 the story of Margaret Charles Smith was featured in a documentary called “ Miss Margaret.”

“ When calming nervous mothers, Alabama midwife Miss Margaret Smith was known to whisper her motherwit, ‘ Listen to me good.’ Her words should be mandatory hearing for health-care professionals everywhere.” (Zook, 2005)