

# **The Prairie Midwife**

by Sarah Jane Thorne Hibbert

*During her career as a midwife whilst operating a small hospital out of her home, she delivered over one thousand babies.*

A new beginning. That's exactly what Mary Annie Cole was looking forward to as she stared out the train window at the never-ending plains of Manitoba. Having sent her husband ahead of her to prepare a house and get a job, she was alone with her three children and their few belongings, travelling all the way from England.

When she stepped off the train, her excitement was soon deflated, for as she looked around the tiny station in the blistering August heat, her husband was nowhere to be seen. He had not collected her letter from the post office. She was soon to overcome this, and many other challenges, and become one of the most respected and admired women in her town of Miami and surrounding communities. Mary Annie Cole would become known for her selflessness in caring for others as a midwife who delivered over one thousand babies into the world.

Mary had spent seven years training hard to become a nurse in England, and yet when she arrived in Canada, her talents went unnoticed. She worked tirelessly as a caretaker for the local schoolhouse without complaining. She and her family lived in a small pioneer house on the school property for two years without electricity or any of the other luxuries that we take for granted today.

In 1910, after Mary and her husband had saved enough money, they seized an opportunity and had a house moved, by oxen, to a small plot of land in Miami, Manitoba. As

soon as her family had settled, Mary Annie Cole started to tend to those in need of medical care, opening up her family home. She treated everyone with the same respect and warmth no matter how wealthy they were or from what background they came. Mary soon gained quite a reputation in the small town of Miami for being not only a wonderful nurse but also a remarkable human being. If ever a local child fell down and skinned a knee or forgot their lunch at home, they would go visit Mrs. Cole, for Mary always made time for others, no matter how big or small their requests.

Seeing Mary's talent in the medical field and recognizing the need for a safe facility for the women of Miami and the surrounding area to deliver their babies, the local doctor, S.E. Holmes, began canvassing the neighbourhood for funds to build a maternity hospital. In 1921, the small hospital was built and connected to the Cole house. It consisted of two wards and a basement, but it was perfect in Mary's eyes. She made every woman who came to her hospital feel at home no matter where they came from. Mary would have to accommodate many unexpected arrivals and would often have to make meals for over ten people. At times there were more than four babies who would have to share two cradles in the Coles' living room so that their cries would not wake the resting mothers.

Over the course of her career, Mary would deliver over one thousand babies in her small hospital, sharing one of the most emotional times in a person's life while offering safety and comfort. She shared the overwhelming joy with every mother, never failing to agree with the mother that hers was definitely the most beautiful baby she had ever seen.

After giving birth, the mother would spend ten days recovering at the hospital, eight of which were spent in bed. Every single hour of the day Mary would be busy. She would cook meals outside on the wood stove in the searing summer heat, tend to her vegetable garden, care

for the newborn babies, and look after her own children. One can only imagine the spirit and heart of gold this woman had, for she blessed everyone in her presence with her kind and compassionate nature.

The average charge for all her services was thirty dollars, but she was known never to refuse anyone in need and would often accept a half-pig or a load of firewood for payment. Even though money was scarce in those times she never complained about her finances. Her determination and her drive to succeed in this new land, despite all the challenges and hardships that were thrown at her along the way, were an inspiration a hundred years ago and continue to be to those who knew her or have heard her story.

On March 29 2947, at the age of sixty-one, Mary Annie Cole retired, and a ceremony was held at the Miami Sunday School. Over 250 women showed up at the service to honour Mrs. Cole, filling the small school to capacity. Mary Annie Cole lived a life of sacrifice and devotion that shone through the night.

After Mary died in 1967 her memory lived on in the small town of Miami. On June 21, 2003, a street was renamed “Cole Street” in Miami, Manitoba, in her honour. Mary is a classic example of the hardships borne and accomplishments achieved by the pioneer women of that era. Working against all odds to create and establish a life in a new country, Mary Annie Cole’s story is definitely worth telling.

Quote:

“I wish to thank you all from the very bottom of my heart. ... All I can say now is Good-bye and God bless you.”

— Mary Annie Cole on the eve of her retirement as matron of the Miami Cottage Hospital at a ceremony in her honour. (*Duffrin Leader*, 1947)

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