

Midwife on job here 32 years

By STACY MOORE

If walls could talk, the rambling two-story house with the tarnished beauty parlor sign on the corner of Sixth Street and Hickory Avenue would have dozens of stories to tell.

It was in this house that a Sanford legacy began in 1947 and continues today. The legacy of a midwife, Mrs. Marie Francis.

Seventy-three-year-old Marie Francis is as much a household word in Sanford as is the word baby.

And no one seems to care more about babies than Mrs. Francis, who claims to have delivered more than 40,000 of them in her 32-year career.

Because the area needed midwives, Mrs. Francis left a successful business as owner and manager of a Sarasota hotel and restaurant in 1942 and moved to Sanford.

The state Children's Bureau sent her to Florida A & M in 1945 for a practical nurse license because World War II was causing a shortage of doctors and nurses. She returned a specialist in premature babies.

Two years later the petite, soft-spoken woman



"I believe parents are too irresponsible now," Mrs. Francis said. "I think the trouble is that parents are neglecting their children. They just don't have time to spend with them.

"Some people think I'm from the old school, but I'm not. Parents should do their homework and explain



Bob Frey/the little sentinel

Midwife Marie Francis, left, prepares for another new arrival at her house, above, in Sanford.

While midwifery may be proclaimed a dying art by some health department officials, Mrs. Francis believes the time is coming when mothers will want their babies delivered at home.

"It's very costly going to a doctor and going in the hospital so I think more mothers will go back to the midwife," Mrs. Francis said.

opened a five-bed maternity ward in her family home on Sixth Street so patients could come to her and have privacy and sanitary conditions for childbirth.

And thousands of babies later Mrs. Francis has yet to lose a single mother, although she has delivered several stillborns.

Even with modern hospital equipment, such as an incubator, the maternity home has a touch of the old-fashioned. Wicker cribs are at the foot of every bed, and stuffed animals rest on pillows.

Mrs. Francis, the only midwife in Seminole County, said her mother influenced her.

"She was a nurse midwife at the old Fernald Laughton Memorial Hospital in Sanford, and I used to work as her assistant and go with her to people's homes to deliver babies," Mrs. Francis said. "When her health started failing, I took over."

The matronly midwife, who has delivered twins and triplets as well as babies to mothers as young as 13 and as old as 50, also does other chores.

She promotes natural childbirth, lectures on proper eating habits, cooks and takes care of the other duties of running a maternity home.

Her only assistant is her sister, Annie Walker, who runs a beauty parlor in another part of the house.

A supporter of natural childbirth, Mrs. Francis does not recommend sedation and will not use it unless the mother asks for it.

"Most women are too chicken to bear the pain of having a baby," Mrs. Francis said. "They want sedation, but to me tender loving care is as good as any sedation."

Mrs. Francis believes unwed mothers should support their babies.

"Society does too much for them. They pay for the delivery of the baby, they pay for prenatal care and they offer to pay for the mother to go to school," Mrs. Francis said. "One baby can be excused but if they continue to have babies, they should pay the price."

Mrs. Francis has several other beliefs which she voices strongly.

She believes children should go to a community college until they get the "taste of mother's biscuits and milk out of their mouth" and believes a husband should not be in on a delivery because she had one faint. She also believes sex education doesn't belong in the schools.

now. Take me where I can be a pal to them."

Mrs. Francis has three daughters of her own — and one which she adopted from a patient.

"I delivered the baby of a mother who was in college and didn't want her, so I adopted her," Mrs. Francis said.

Two of her daughters are school teachers, Cassandra Clayton and Daphne Humphrey, and the third daughter, Barbara Torre, is a purchaser at Seminole Memorial Hospital.

A widow since 1942, Mrs. Francis said she refused to remarry because she didn't believe in "stepfathers."

"But I do believe in telling children who their natural parents are because who knows, they may meet their half-brother and fall in love without knowing it," Mrs. Francis said.

At one time Mrs. Francis said she was delivering as many as 20 babies a month, mostly from Geneva, Oviedo and Sanford. Today she occasionally delivers a baby.

Lay-midwives, which are more commonly called "granny" midwives, must be licensed by both the county and state health departments, Mrs. Francis said. Patients of midwives must also be under a doctor's care.

In the early 1920s, there were about 4,000 granny midwives in Florida. Today there are only 36, according to a spokesman from the state Public Health Department of the Health and Rehabilitative Services.

"Every year they go down in numbers," said Sadie Reading, state public health nurse consultant. "I think people are trying to insure a safer delivery of a baby by wanting to be in a hospital in case something goes wrong."

But there are about 54 certified nurse midwives — registered nurses with training in obstetrics — in the state, according to Orange County's only certified nurse midwife.

"Last year the first school for nurse midwives opened at Miami Jackson Memorial Hospital," Marjorie Carrier said. "The difference between what is called the 'granny' midwife and the nurse midwife is that the nurse midwife has to be sponsored by a doctor, a health department or some other organization. She can't just hang a sign out on her door saying she delivers babies."

For a four-day stay, which includes delivery, three meals a day and care for the baby, Mrs. Francis charges \$300, a fee she sometimes never collects.

"There's a lot of charity here but I wouldn't feel good taking money and knowing the mother can't eat when she leaves here," Mrs. Francis said.

Mrs. Francis's home not only is the place where many Seminole County residents have been born but also is where student nurses from Seminole and Valencia Community colleges and doctors and nurses from many foreign countries visit to observe her methods.

"I've had doctors from Africa and South America come in to see my operation," Mrs. Francis said proudly.

Sanford Attorney Douglas Stenstrom calls Marie Francis "one of the finest citizens in Seminole County."

"Marie probably has delivered more children than anyone in the history of Seminole County," Stenstrom said. "Before there were emergency rooms, before there was a county hospital, before there was a county health department — Marie Francis was there filling needs. And she always did it quietly, humbly and without any fanfare."

Dr. Vann Parker, a Sanford pediatrician who has worked closely with Mrs. Francis for the last 10 years, said she is a real public servant.

"She has tried to help the community in many ways to upgrade it," Parker said. "She is dedicated to helping people and the many things she does is not for any monetary gain."

Margaret McGill, director of nursing at the Seminole County Health Department, who is responsible for supervising Mrs. Francis, said the midwife has a real love for mothers and babies.

"She has a very neat, clean and adequately equipped facility," Mrs. McGill said. "She is a wonderful, warm person."

Marie Francis's service has not gone unrecognized. In 1977, the Sertoma International Club presented her with the "Service to Mankind Award" and the Pilot Club of Sanford awarded her a certificate for public service.

"I have no plans to quit just yet," Mrs. Francis said with a smile. "I love what I'm doing."