

# ***All My Babies: A Midwife's Own Story***

By Joshua Glick

In George C. Stoney's expansive oeuvre that includes over eighty films, one of his earliest features, "All My Babies: A Midwife's Own Story" (1953), stands out. A distinct achievement in the field of educational cinema, the award-winning film exemplifies the compassionate, socially conscious approach to documentary that Stoney pursued during his career.

Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1916, Stoney cultivated a passion for engaged observation through his experiences writing articles on the poll tax and the Tennessee Valley Authority for the magazine "Survey Graphic" and conducting fieldwork with Ralph Bunche and Gunnar Myrdal for the sweeping sociological study on black life in the United States, "An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy." After serving as a photo intelligence officer in Europe during World War II, Stoney moved into filmmaking, joining the Southern Educational Film Production Service in 1946. He made a niche for himself in the burgeoning market of educational films, sponsored by private associations, corporations, and government agencies.

"All My Babies" was a project of the Georgia Department of Public Health and the Audio-Visual Division of the Association of American Medical Colleges. They hired Stoney to make a documentary to educate doctors, midwives, schools, and health departments about midwifery in the black community of rural Georgia. Midwives performed a valuable function in the region. The film aimed to share best practices of the profession and Stoney was tasked with communicating 118 points. These points focused on prenatal care and delivery techniques, incorporating fathers and siblings into the birthing process, and managing the relationship between the midwife and public health specialists. Reflecting on the project in the late 1950s, Stoney fondly remembered the freedom he was given to craft the film according to his own sensibility: "[N]o one was telling me *how* I should convey these points, *what* my story line should be, *where* I should shoot, *whom* I should cast."

Stoney shot "All My Babies" in Albany, Georgia at a cost of \$45,000. He was inspired by the recent Italian neorealist films' humanistic approach to working class subjects and was influenced by the National Film Board of Canada's "Mental Mechanism" series and Pare Lorentz's "The Fight for Life" (1940) about



*The face of "All My Babies": midwife Mary Francis Hill Coley better known as Miss Mary. Courtesy DocuFilms.*

innovative techniques in modern obstetrics used by a Chicago maternity center. Stoney also drew from two short films he recently made for the Georgia Department of Public Health. The first, "Palmour Street: A Study of Family Life" (1949), concentrated on mental health and social development within black families in Gainesville. The second, "Concept of Maternal and Neonatal Care" (1951), explored the incorporation of safety precautions of a hospital environment into home pregnancy.

In addition to communicating its teaching objectives, "All My Babies" transcends its pedagogical purpose. The film offers a portrait of the local African American midwife Mary Francis Hill Coley ("Miss Mary"). Stoney establishes the importance of the medical and civic role midwives play in their community. Depicting the protagonist as a professional, respected by her colleagues and the white medical establishment, was bold at a time when the South was highly segregated and unequal.

Stoney partnered with the local African American doctor William Mason to gain the trust of both blacks and whites in the area. Convincing the local newspaper to do a profile on the documentary as well as gaining the support of the progressive black pastor Bishop Noah, whose Church of the Kingdom of God Miss Mary belonged, was important for the PR of the project.

Stoney's closet collaborator was Miss Mary herself.

She helped to plan and structure the film's scenes. The documentary follows Miss Mary as she guides two women and their families through the latter stages of pregnancy and the birth. The former features a couple that is proactive, prepared, and experienced, eager to heed the advice of Miss Mary and medical personnel; the latter concentrates on a poorer household. The couple is initially skeptical about following Miss Mary's advice and they are ill-prepared for the coming of the baby. The idea was to film how a midwife should prepare for ideal scenarios and distressed conditions. "All My Babies" shows Miss Mary as she accompanies each woman through pre-natal care, delivery, and post-natal care. Miss Mary discusses her motivations for her job and logic behind her actions. The documentary portrays a devoted health care professional as well as offers a look into how deeply a community depends on and reveres midwives.

While the film did involve a heavy amount of scripting and staging, it was considered to be a documentary for the scenes were true to real life situations. The events captured on camera happened in peoples' daily lives. "All My Babies" thus followed the social documentary practice pioneered by Pare Lorentz and Robert Flaherty, rather than the more "observational," fly-on-the-wall approach to documentary championed by the group of filmmakers that formed Drew Associates in the early 1960s. Major scenes in "All My Babies," such as an extended birth sequence, are in fact clearly and directly presented, shown in real time. Most of the individuals that appear in the film are people playing themselves rather than actors playing types: thus, doctors play doctors, midwives play midwives, patients play patients. One of the few exceptions is the ill-prepared couple that lives in harsh conditions. The woman was actually a student at Albany State College and her husband was Miss Mary's son.

The music in "All My Babies" gives the film a lyrical quality, endowing the actions of the individuals with an added grace. Louis Applebaum's score, performed by the Musical Art Chorus in Washington, D.C. heightens the sense of jubilation associated with childbirth. The soaring voices of the chorus over the beginning credits captivate viewers in the first couple seconds of the film. Additionally, the soft singing of Miss Mary which she uses to keep time, pass time, and put her patients at ease, foregrounds music's functional place in the birthing process.

Distributed by the Center for Mass Communication at Columbia, "All My Babies" achieved a level of recognition unusual for an educational film. The film was seen widely, accepted as a major resource to learn

about midwifery, while also being acknowledged as an accomplishment of documentary artistry. When "All My Babies" was screened at Cinema 16 in New York, it was advertised as being included among the "outstanding humanist works of the American cinema." The documentary was screened for professional associations all over the U.S. and around the world. Health and medical organizations exhibited the film in Europe, the Middle East, and in South America. "All My Babies" won the Special Flaherty Award in 1953.

"All My Babies" propelled Stoney's career towards social documentary projects within different institutional contexts. Over the next six decades, he worked as a filmmaker, writer, teacher, and activist, always exploring ways to expand the progressive potential of documentary and engage new audiences. In addition to directing features for numerous professional associations, he founded Washington D.C.-based Potomac Films with Nicholas Read in 1954 and the New York-based Alternate Media Center with Red Burns in 1972. Stoney served as the Executive Producer for the Challenge for Change Program with the National Film Board of Canada in 1968 and taught production and history courses at New York University beginning in 1970. He became one of strongest advocates for public access television, working tirelessly to promote community-centered documentary up until his death at the age of 96.

Sources for this entry include:

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