

# Marie

They called her a hag. And a witch. Sometimes battle-ax, crone, or old biddy. They didn't know words like harridan and slattern. Or they would have used them. But to her face, she was always Marie. Or Mrs. Giese.

Most of the community showed up for the funeral. Many apprehensive. Some timorous. Or from a sense of duty. Most had a bit of morbid curiosity. How was this going to turn out? Up until recently, Marie was the local undertaker. Or at least the woman who prepared the bodies for burial. Now what?

Marie and her husband homesteaded in the area in the 1920s. She always knew things. More importantly, she did things. She midwived every baby in the neighborhood for years. Most of them lived. She collected weird plants and mixed medicine. That worked—mostly—to cure whatever illness was going around. Always after consulting “her book”. She kept the book in her apron pocket. And she always wore an apron. Even to church, weddings, and funerals.

Marie was short and plump—dumpy, really. Not an appealing sight. But her hands were special. They went from wringing chickens' necks to gently bringing a stubborn baby into the world—alive, kicking, and screaming. The hands were the tactile extension of a brain that forgot nothing and used intuition, common sense, and maybe a little witchcraft.

“Get the hag,” or “witch,” or “old bag” were common phrases used to summon Marie to bedsides. Out of the voluminous apron pocket appeared a potion that could have been herbs and spices, pure medicinal brandy, or mashed eye of toad mixed with pot scrapings. No one knew. No one asked. And Marie never told.

The medicine almost always worked. And if it didn't, the patient often lied because Marie always had another option—likely tasting worse. Made of something even more godawful. Imagination is a wonderful thing.

Marie turned the local minister into a drunk. A hayrack crushed his knee. Doctors were 50 miles away. Hospitals further. She consulted the book, then put the knee back together as best she could. Every Sunday, she brought the minister two quarts of one of her homemade cures, concocted from rye grain. Seemed to work. He was a very happy minister—even with a gimpy leg.

The book foretold the future. “Cover your tomatoes. It's going to freeze,” Marie would say. “But it's 65 degrees,” came the answer. Nobody did. It froze. “It's going to freeze on August 27th,” Marie said. It was inevitable. The book never lied. Often, Marie arrived ready to help birth a baby—before getting called. It was always the right time. The book?

The book couldn't predict gender. "I'm not God. I won't even get to sit beside him," she said. But somehow she always knew when twins were coming—human, cow, or horse. And birthed them all—mostly successfully.

Marie did have some strange cures. She once held a chicken down and peed on it to stop it from eating eggs. And encouraged other farm women to try it. She always opened the book before doing anything, so . . .

Marie did not trust progress. Later in her life, more babies were being born in hospitals. "What can those places do that I can't?" she asked. Waving the book at people. "They make mothers weak and children sickly."

"We don't need a phone. They know where I am."

"What do you need a tractor for? It breaks, and you still need the horses."

"Electric light will ruin your eyes. And burn the house down."

The locals listened to her. Out of respect. Maybe a little fear. And the book had always seemed to be right. But slowly, the calls for a midwife and home remedies quit coming. Young people grew up and left. Old ways and beliefs were abandoned.

Even Marie's 7 daughters left; most moving to the city. Married. Had children in hospitals. Ran to doctors for store-bought drugs to cure her grandchildren's ear infections, of all things. They argued with her. Laughed at her. Ridiculed her old beliefs.

Marie was lonely. She felt useless and unneeded. But she still had the book and her hands. If anyone ever wanted help. The older people left in the community respected her knowledge. They remembered all of the births, deaths, and cures she helped them with. They were still dying. Not giving birth. And getting sick. But their children were hauling them off to funeral homes, doctors, and hospitals.

During over half a century of living, Marie had helped generations come to life, kept them alive, and sometimes buried them. The changes were not for her. She was sad and scared for her children and grandchildren. No one cared.

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My grandmother lived with us for the last couple of years of her life in the 1950s. My sister and I laughed at her because she insisted that the people on TV could see us. We had to turn it off when she walked through the living room. She loved watching wrestling, but put on a dress, a clean apron, and make-up so she would look her best for them.

I still have "the book". I took it to church once. Everyone wanted to know its secrets. The first page says "Marie Giese 1896 -". The last page says "Good Luck."