



Helen Clapesattle: Author of a Best-Selling Book About “The Doctors Mayo”

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For many years, Drs William and Charles Mayo resisted proposals to write a biography of their lives or a comprehensive history of how Mayo Clinic came to exist. The Mayo brothers had endured negative experiences with the media during their careers, often being charged by critics with “unethical advertising” whenever an article about them appeared in a newspaper or a general audience magazine, and they did not want to authorize a potentially superficial, inaccurate story that could draw disparagement from vindictive or jealous colleagues.

But Lotus Delta Coffman (1875-1938), the 5th president of the University of Minnesota, and Guy Stanton Ford (1873-1962), a historian who was then dean of the university’s graduate school — and would later become the university’s 6th president — realized the opportunity such a book would provide for the new University Press that had been founded in 1925, and how much interest there would likely be in the Mayo Clinic story within the broader community. During a summer boat trip with the Mayo brothers on the Mississippi River in 1936, Coffman and Ford finally managed to convince the aging surgeons to agree to an “unprejudiced, historical, and objective” portrayal of their lives and that of their father, William Worrall Mayo (1819-1911). The academics promised the Mayos that the resulting book would be free of “any laudation or whitewashing.”

Dr Richard Olding Beard, emeritus professor of physiology at the University of Minnesota, had conducted a series of interviews from 1932-1935 with Mayo Clinic leaders and staff, and with others involved in the Mayo story. However, Dr Beard was not considered as a potential biographer since

he died in 1936 at the age of 80, and his manuscript — tentatively titled “The Mayo Saga” — was never completed. Mr Thomas Steward (1889-1972), head of the University of Minnesota News Service, conducted additional interviews after Dr Beard’s death, but he either declined or was not offered the chance to write the book.

The University of Minnesota leaders instead chose for this challenging task a promising young editorial assistant at the University Press, Ms Helen Clapesattle, who was at the time finishing a master’s degree in history at the university. She began her work on the project in the summer of 1938, and she interviewed Dr William Mayo in 1939 on what turned out to be his final day in his clinic office, shortly before his death in July of that year. She never met Dr Charles Mayo — he had died 2 months before William. Her interviews, which she later said were initially difficult because she knew little about medicine and medical language, were completed by 1940.

Clapesattle’s book *The Doctors Mayo* was serialized in *The Atlantic* magazine beginning in the October 1941 issue and was released for sale in December 1941. Despite the book’s appearance on bookshelves just 3 days after the Pearl Harbor attacks — a time when Americans had plenty of urgent distractions — *The Doctors Mayo* sold briskly. As was a common publishing practice during that era, the first printing of the book listed the author as “HB Clapesattle” so that biased potential buyers would not immediately know the author was a woman and perhaps view the book less favorably. Her full name was printed on the cover of later editions, after the book achieved success.

Helen Berniece Clapesattle was born on November 11, 1908, in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

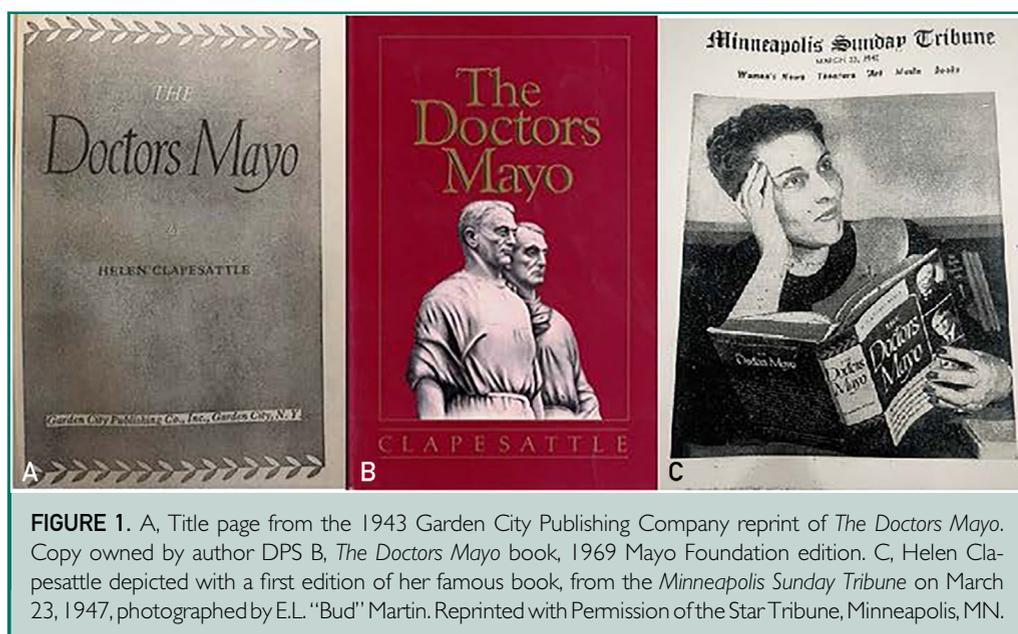


FIGURE 1. A, Title page from the 1943 Garden City Publishing Company reprint of *The Doctors Mayo*. Copy owned by author DPS B, *The Doctors Mayo* book, 1969 Mayo Foundation edition. C, Helen Clapesattle depicted with a first edition of her famous book, from the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* on March 23, 1947, photographed by E.L. "Bud" Martin. Reprinted with Permission of the Star Tribune, Minneapolis, MN.

Her parents were George Adam Clapesattle and Laura Rehrer Clapesattle, both born in 1869. Her father was a pharmacist who had graduated from Purdue University in 1894 and operated his own drug store in Fort Wayne until ill health prohibited him from continuing.

Ms Clapesattle graduated from South Side High School in Fort Wayne in 1925. Although an accomplished student, she was unable to proceed immediately to college because she had been seriously injured by a city streetcar as a high school freshman, resulting in intractable headaches. Her father died 2 months after her accident. When her mother died in 1926, she also helped care for 3 of her siblings. Instead of leaving for college, she worked for the Fort Wayne and Allen County Public Library for 5 years after high school graduation, gaining valuable experience.

After her headaches abated under the compassionate care of a local physician, she applied to Oberlin College in 1930. Her undergraduate degree was obtained from Oberlin in 1934, and she went on to the University of Minnesota that autumn with a teaching fellowship in history. In 1937, she began working as an editorial assistant at the University of Minnesota Press.

The 822-page first edition of *The Doctors Mayo* book sold more than 120,000 copies at \$3.75-\$4.75 each, equivalent to \$75-\$100 per copy today (books were more costly before the advent of mass market paperbacks). The first printing in 1941 ran to 21,782 volumes, followed by a 2nd printing in 1942 of 21,060 copies, and a 3rd printing, also in 1942, of 19,886 copies. After these copies sold out, the University of Minnesota licensed a \$1.98 reprint from Garden City Publishing in New York in 1943, which sold more than 60,000 copies (Figure 1A).

The length of the book was daunting for some readers, and it went out of print in 1951. A condensed 440-page version came out in 1954, and after the 7,500 volumes of this shorter version sold out, the University of Minnesota Press authorized a second printing in 1960. A paperback edition of the condensed version was published by Vintage Pocket Books (founded in 1954, Vintage was a Knopf imprint focused on trade paperbacks), and more than 150,000 copies sold for 35 cents each. Since 1969, the book has been published by Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, and has gone through several additional printings (Figure 1B). Since its initial publication in 1941, the book has been translated

into more than 20 languages and has sold more than 500,000 copies.

Following publication of *The Doctors Mayo*, there were numerous requests to create a film version of the Mayo history, which clinic leaders and Mayo family descendants steadfastly refused. A feature-length documentary of the history of the clinic was finally approved more than 75 years after the book's debut, when Ken Burns, Christopher Loren Ewers, and Erik Ewers directed *The Mayo Clinic — Faith, Hope, Science* for the Public Broadcasting System in 2018.

Over the years, a number of staff at Mayo Clinic have reported they first became interested in working at the clinic after reading *The Doctors Mayo* book, which generated numerous newspaper and magazine stories (Figure 1C).

In 1956, Ms Clapesattle was named one of the “outstanding women of Minnesota.” Two years later she published a pamphlet, “When Minnesota Was Florida’s Rival,” based on a presentation to the Minnesota Historical Society about the 19th century trend of moving to Minnesota where scourges like malaria and tuberculosis were believed to be outmatched by the state’s bitterly cold but pure “hyperborean air.” William Worrall Mayo was one of these climate migrants, having left Clapesattle’s home state of Indiana in 1854 after tiring of treating patients there with malaria and suffering bouts of malaria himself. Clapesattle’s pamphlet helped her obtain a John Simon Guggenheim fellowship for research on climate and health in the United States in 1957. In 1958, she received the University of Minnesota’s Outstanding Achievement Award.

Ms Clapesattle’s second book, *Doctor Webb of Colorado Springs*, was published by the University of Colorado Press in 1984, more than 4 decades after her first book. It did not sell nearly as well as *The Doctors Mayo*, probably in part because tuberculosis specialist Dr Gerald Bertram Webb (1879-1948) was not as well known internationally as the Mayo family, and

also since he did not found a large, thriving medical institution.

After the success of *The Doctors Mayo* book, Ms Clapesattle was promoted to chief editor at the University of Minnesota Press. In 1953 she was appointed director of the press, a position she held until her marriage 3 years later. In November 1956, Ms Clapesattle married Roger W. Shugg, PhD, director of the University of Chicago Press, in Evanston, Illinois. He was a Princeton graduate originally from Newton, Massachusetts. She resigned as director of the University of Minnesota Press shortly before her wedding and moved to Chicago. In 1967, the couple moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, after Dr Shugg was appointed to lead the University of New Mexico Press. Mrs Clapesattle Shugg died in New Mexico on June 15, 1993, at the age of 84; her husband Roger had died in April 1993. They did not have any children.

A “Doctors Mayo” stamp (Scott 1215, Figure 2) was issued by the United States Postal Service in 1964, 25 years after the Mayo brothers’ deaths. The influence of Clapesattle’s book is reflected in the choice of wording of the stamp’s text. The stamp’s image is based on Winona, Minnesota, sculptor James Earle Fraser’s statue of Dr William and Dr Charles Mayo wearing surgical gowns, which was installed in Mayo Park in Rochester in 1952. (Mr Fraser also designed the “Buffalo nickel.”) This image is the same one, in reverse, that has been on the cover of *The Doctors Mayo* biography since the 1970s.

POTENTIAL COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors report no competing interests.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank the staff of the Mayo Clinic Archives in the W. Bruce Fye Center for the History of Medicine, Rochester, Minnesota, for provision in 2002 of background materials related to *The Doctors Mayo* and Ms Clapesattle.

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