

THE DAWN OF PAIN-FREE CHILDBIRTH

by Kristina Gaddy // October 30, 2015

A German nurse led Charlotte Carmody to the “dearest room imaginable,” with blue and white walls and white frilled curtains. She was expecting a baby boy, and the beauty of the room — with its dainty white bassinet — overcame her. It didn’t feel like a hospital delivery room, because there were no shiny instruments or operating tables, just comfortable surroundings.

It was the summer of 1914, and Carmody had traveled from her native Brooklyn to the Frauenklinik in Freiburg, Germany, for what seemed like a miracle: childbirth without pain. German doctors were offering something called Dammerschlaf, or Twilight Sleep, the name alone evoking a fairytale-like promise of an ideal delivery. Pregnant women were told they’d never remember the horrible pain of childbirth, and be less at risk of death or injury.

Carmody lay down on the bed to receive her first injection, a cocktail of scopolamine — a painkiller that causes delirium and hallucinations — and morphine, which caused her brain to become less excited so that she could enter a sleep-like state. She would still be able to feel the baby and push, doctors said, but would wake up without any recollection of the pain and suffering she had endured. And that’s exactly what happened. Afterward, she awoke in her room and felt so well she thought “I must be dead,” Carmody recounted months later, to an auditorium filled with women curious about the procedure.

She didn’t remember what had happened during her labor, but doctors and reporters chronicled the not-so-peaceful experiences they observed. Women still felt the full force of contractions; some became violent and thrashed in their beds, their faces flushed red — sometimes even blue — as they screamed.