

The sub-title of Hugh Eakin's newly published book *Picasso's War* is *How Modern Art Came to America*. Although the book makes fascinating reading, of much greater personal interest for me is something that's hardly mentioned — how modern art came to Rockland County, N.Y. where I currently reside. That narrative involved two remarkable individuals, Arthur and Lucy Davies, and their life in rural New York State during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is their story.

FARMING FOR DUMMIES

By Michael Nevins



LUCY VIRGINIA MERIWEATHER



ARTHUR BOWEN DAVIES

One summer day in 1890, two romantic young people — she a physician, he an artist — met on the Staten Island Ferry. Soon they fell in love and impulsively decided to abandon their professions and move to the country where they could lead simple lives as farmers. Neither had any experience with agriculture, but believed they could easily learn how to provide for themselves. However, things did not go exactly according to plan.

LUCY VIRGINIA MERIWEATHER was born in Huntsville, Alabama in 1862 during the chaos of the Civil War. She was descended on her mother Lide's side from Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark team. Lide was quite an individualist in her own right. At age 17 she'd set out for the Southwest to earn her living as a teacher and during the Civil War smuggled morphine from the Union side into the Confederacy, taking two-year-old Lucy along in order to dissuade Union troops from searching her buggy. Her children called her "the Tiger." The daughter turned out to be no less intrepid.

Lucy had limited education and at age 18, she eloped with a rascal who was addicted to opium and alcohol — he also was a gambler. When her husband refused to reform, Lucy left and returned to her family home in Memphis. Although initially he agreed to let her alone, one drunken day the rogue visited her with a gun. Lucy's mother persuaded him to relinquish it and he left, but returned later with another gun and again threatened Lucy. But now she had the first gun in her pocket and shot him in the abdomen. Before he died a few days later, her husband admitted that she'd shot him in self-defense and that he deserved it. It was deemed to be justifiable homicide and a local newspaper described the event as "the most remarkable killing of the age." Now freed from marital obligations but unable to return home because of the scandal, Lucy left the South for good and moved to New York City in order to study medicine.

She enrolled in the Woman's Medical College of the New York Infirmary that had been opened in 1868 by Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, America's first woman physicians. At night Lucy lived in a private sanitarium in Brooklyn where she earned her keep by being on-call for emergencies. Years later, she recalled, "Most of the city's population was so hostile to the thought of women doctors that they shouted and jeered at us as we walked along the street...However, I had little time to fret over such intolerance." Upon completing the three year curriculum in 1890, Lucy continued post-graduate studies in the city while working as chief resident at the New York Infant Asylum at 61st Street and Tenth Avenue. One day, the free-spirited Southern belle met a handsome young man while both were aboard the Staten Island ferry on the way to attend a summer concert.

ARTHUR BOWEN DAVIES (ABD) was born in Utica, NY, also in 1862, the son of a Methodist minister. As a young age he was interested in drawing and, at fifteen, attended a large touring exhibition in his hometown of American landscape art, featuring works by George Inness and members of the Hudson River School. Arthur was a romantic idealist and, smitten by the angelic looking young doctor, he'd write long letters to her about art, music and nature, life and beauty; the couple spent evenings at the opera and enjoyed Sunday picnics along the Palisades.

Lucy and Arthur decided to marry and settle in the nearby countryside where they would support themselves — by farming! No matter that neither had any experience in agriculture, their heads were in the clouds, not the soil. Marriage plans accelerated when Lucy became pregnant and although Arthur knew that his bride previously had been married, she prudently didn't reveal the reason for the dissolution until *after* they were safely wed.

During the summer of 1891 the young marrieds, both 29 years old, learned that a company promoting real estate in Rockland County was providing free transportation to the hamlet of Congers. They took the trip, then separated from the group and traipsed through woods and fields bordering the northern edge of Rockland Lake and down to the Hudson River. They discovered that a 38 acre property there was for sale for \$6,500. The site was purchased for them by her parents but the lease was in Lucy's name. Suspecting that their daughter might end by being the sole breadwinner of the family if she was to marry an impoverished artist, Her parents also insisted that Arthur sign a prenuptial agreement renouncing any claim on his wife's money in the event of divorce. So the young couple prepared to settle into an idyllic country life — unfortunately, there weren't any books written yet called "Farming for Dummies."

Arthur arranged for a crash course visiting relatives who owned a farm near Utica, his home town, and regularly reported back to Lucy:

Have been making a great many inquiries about farm work and products & realize more daily that a practical work is the thing I need to learn...the grape vines at Rockland must be pruned this fall. I also got a course of instruction in grafting apple trees—planting vegetables, raising chickens, &c. Apple trees should be grafted in the spring before they bud...If I can remember all the instructions I have had this morning, we shall have good fruit I can assure you. His apples are the finest I ever ate...[We should] buy the manure but not the horses — the cows are high price for fall, they say here — a cow should be at least \$15 less in fall than spring. (B. Perlman, p. 43.)

Lucy opted for on-the-job training and readily took to country life. For long periods, she would manage the farm virtually on her own. Years later she recalled, "At the start we raised forage and grain crops, some vegetables and some small fruits....We had some 20 to 30 crates of strawberries each day during the season. I sold them to local stores and to wholesalers....I learned to do, and did do, most farm work except plowing, cultivating and heavy team work." Her usual charge for a house call to deliver a baby

was three dollars; sometimes an expectant mother would ask her to bring along several dozen apples — perhaps she'd would more willingly pay for the fruit, than for the baby's delivery. (B. Perlman, p. 339-40.) However, word got out that the young farmer was a fully-trained doctor and local quarry workers often required emergency treatment for injuries; moreover, their wives were fertile. Increasingly, Doctor Davies was called out at all hours and sometimes returned home exhausted and filthy.

Although Dockie" (as she later was nicknamed by grandchildren) flourished in the dual life of farmer and doctor, ABD didn't take easily to country life. Farming proved more demanding than he'd reckoned. He was impatient with practical details and left most decisions to Lucy. She'd assign him chores, such as where to plant gooseberries or she'd say, "finish the chicken house floor so that I can set about hen gathering as soon as I come back..." If Arthur went to the barn to milk a cow, like as not, he'd return with a sketch of the animal rather than a bucket of milk. He was clumsy with horses and slow in making repairs. Worst of all, every summer when his wife's large family arrived from the sweltering South for long visits, he'd grow impatient with the ruckus, grab his paints and escape to the forest and fields where he'd make quick sketches.

Arthur rented a small shed near Rockland Lake where he could paint, but he craved exposure to like-minded people and the company of other artists. He asked Lucy to return with him to the city, but she'd found her comfort zone in Congers and wouldn't leave. Sometimes she'd deliver calves in the morning and babies at night, up to her elbows either in manure or blood. Arthur decided to take a studio in Manhattan and return to Congers by train on weekends. He had trained at several schools, but it was at the Art Students League in New York where he began his journey painting landscapes, initially in the conventional style of the Hudson River School.

During this period Arthur was romantically involved with several women but he wasn't yet ready for marriage — this was a year or two before he met Lucie Davies. Eighteen year old Mary Horgan left Nyack and enrolled in the League in 1892 where she became a friend of ABD. She married sculptor John Mowbray-Clarke in 1907 and they remained close friends of ABD. John was co-founder with him of the Armory Show. At Arthur's urging, in 1916 Mary and Madge Jenison opened a bookstore and literary salon on Fifth Avenue at 31st Street. It was called The Sunwise Turn — ABD designed the shop's garish interior — and it became an intellectual oasis for soon-to-be famous writers and artists including socialists, anarchists and free-thinkers — the likes of F.Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, Robert Frost, Havelock Ellis and Ernest Hemingway.

In 1908 the Mowbray-Clarkes purchased a house on South Mountain Road that was located just six miles from the Davies farm. Other Bohemians joined the art colony and their nearby neighbor ABD was a frequent visitor. The place that they called The Brocken contained several lean-tos and tents outfitted with mattresses and it was rumored to be a hotbed of free-love. (B.Pearlman, p.205.) Use your imagination.

While studying at the Art Student's League, ABD became associated with an avant grade group of painters popularly referred to as the Ashcan School, or "The Eight." But while other members of this group chose to present the rawness of modern urban life, Arthur and several other so-called "Symbolists" tried to escape reality by creating their own dream worlds within each piece. Indeed works of still unknown modernist painters. ABD's ethereal style featured unicorns and nude nymphs often posed in pastoral Greek and Roman-style settings.



Rites of Spring showcases a typical Symbolist approach to landscape painting. The woman depicted in the center has a very delicate pose and appears to be floating; she seems to have wings and could easily be interpreted as an angel. This differs from the previous movement of American landscape artists, who were more focused on a realistic portrayal of nature.

When in 1905 ABD was lauded by art historian Samuel Isham, his description was unwittingly ironic: “The romantic painter par excellence is Davies, and his work is as personal and as interesting as any done in the country to-day. Never does he wander from his dream, his vision. His enchanted garden is not visited at rare intervals; it is not one of many resorts, it is his home, his retreat from which he never departs.” (B.Pearlman, p. 150)

In 1895 Arthur hired Edna Potter, a tall, slim, red-haired dancer to be his model and the contrast with his wife, previously neat but now frequently unkempt, was evident. Before long the immaculate model, seventeen years younger, became Arthur’s muse and then his mistress. Years later Edna recalled, ‘I never sought him, but he pursued me for a full five years.’ Dockie remained totally unaware that she had a weekday rival — for more than a quarter century!

ABD rented a studio at the Chelsea Hotel on 23rd Street where Edna would sing opera while modeling for him.(The building had been erected in 1885 and for decades was home to art world and literary celebrities, e.g. Mark Twain, Andy Warhol, Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Stanley Kubrick, Jack Kerouac, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen.) In 1905 Arthur rented a tiny apartment on East 57th Street where he lived as Edna’s husband under the assumed name David Owen. Not a shy, retiring type, Edna complained that this apartment was a hovel, far less grand than his studio in the Chelsea, but Arthur had other things on his mind — especially in 1911 when Edna announced that she was pregnant.

As soon as Arthur would sell his own works, he’d purchase, for ridiculously low prices, works by other modernists. His dealer arranged a solo show but there were no buyers. But he’d befriended had a group of wealthy art-loving women, e.g. Lizzie (Lilly) Bliss, Mary Quinn Sullivan and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (John D’s wife.) With their patronage, ABD played a central role in organizing the famous Armory Show of 1913 that helped establish a modern art movement in America. At the same time, he appealed to his wealthy new friends for their support in establishing a permanent collection of modern art in the United States. It was forthcoming, but not in the way any of them expected.

Beginning in 1923, for six months most years, Arthur would take Edna and their daughter Ronnie to Europe which, no doubt, made his double life less stressful. But the tenuous arrangement came to a crashing halt on October 23, 1928 when ABD had a sudden fatal heart attack while vacationing in Florence, Italy. Edna was distraught; Arthur had left her with no resources and their now 12 year old daughter Ronnie still

didn't know the true identity of "David Owen." Edna consulted Lizzie Bliss who said, "You'll have to tell his wife." Lizzie, herself unmarried, was a confidant of ABD and one of only two friends who knew of his illicit affair. (Lizzie stipulated that when she would die, a box of her correspondence with Arthur should be burned unopened — perhaps too hot to handle?)

One morning in October 1928 there was a knock at the farmhouse door in Congers. There stood a fiftyish woman and a young girl. Edna Potter Owen explained that she'd just arrived from Italy where she'd been with Arthur when he suffered a fatal heart attack. She had him cremated and confessed to Dockie that she'd been living with Arthur for 25 years under an assumed name and that the girl was Arthur's daughter. Dockie was shocked but felt compassion for Ronnie. Both women wished to avoid a scandal, so they concocted a story and the three returned to Italy to retrieve Arthur's ashes. They were reinterred at the farm in a small, private ceremony with no grave marker. Although there were suspicions and gossip, the ruse worked.

After ABD's death, several exhibitions and auctions were held to preserve his memory and to raise money. Lillie Bliss and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller were among the buyers. Since the venerable Metropolitan Museum of Art refused to purchase art of the late 19th century or works by contemporary artists, the women developed a plan to form an institution devoted to exhibitions of modern art in New York. In May 1929, Mrs. Rockefeller invited her friends to lunch at her palatial home where they discussed establishing a permanent museum of modern art. They would make ABD's dream a reality — in effect, the founding of MOMA would be a memorial to their friend.

Art authority Forbes Watson wrote, "Had it not been for Arthur B. Davies, modern art in America might not yet be the official art of the schools and museums....He beat his own path, and it led up the mountain." (*Magazine of Art*, Dec. 1952.) Brooks Wright, a long-time friend of the Davies family, concluded his highly speculative biography with a question: "In the last analysis, who was Arthur Davies? He was, it seems, a basically kind and decent man who nevertheless caused great suffering to those he loved most; a sensitive, even passionate person who wore a mask for twenty-five years; an idealist and a romantic whose labors on behalf of modern art gave the deathblow to the tradition that had nourished him; an intelligent and discerning student of art and its dedicated student; a man who continued to develop artistically up to the very end, yet one who might have achieved still more if his energies had not been sapped by conflicting personal loyalties..."

Dockie had always been interested in Arthur's painting; conversely, he was proud of her achievements both as farmer and physician. In the early years she made her medical rounds over rough country roads in buggies and sleighs. Later she raced along in her car, delivering corn and apples, along with the medications. Dockie often used old-fashioned remedies from plants and herbs that she collected in the woods. She kept a journal that described her daily routine amidst cackling hens and mooing cattle — "an eternal spring of life in the daily recurring needs of the beasts." Over time she gained a local reputation, not only as a doctor and farmer, also as a botanist, suffragist, civil libertarian, philosopher and devotee of music and art. During the 57 years that Dockie practiced in Congers, she delivered more than 6,000 babies, the last just two months before she died three days after her 87th birthday.

Dockie Davies died on April 21, 1949. As the family drove home at dusk after the simple service at Nyack's Grace Episcopal Church, there was a rain storm followed by a double rainbow. Mary Mowbray-Clarke provided perspective on her friend's return to nature: (SOM, 1985. Vol. 29, No. 2):

"Saturday evening after Dockie's funeral, it is hard to realize as I stand on my old doorstep looking to the east at the spectacle growing out of the violent rain to the west, that Dockie is not seeing it from her old doorstep.

"The plum-colored sky has outlined against it, in soft, silver-pink, the young masses of white oak twigs, with dark red, wet maple blossoms. Near and against them are the budding apple and dogwood, with emerald in the honeysuckle vine at the end of the house....

"Dockie was always aware of such things. She knew that a moment must be seized or it would pass forever, but that, seized, it could be integrated into every day of life and could give it measure and meaning. She was of that select body of human beings who are happy to be in partnership with all the beasts and things of the fields and woods. Each was worthy of attention and could contribute to fuller living — more so than many humans, perhaps, though her ministrations to those brought them also into the partnership.

"Once a few of us got together to try to learn something from Maxwell Anderson's son, Quentin, of what young philosophers were thinking — he fresh from Columbia and Harvard. Dockie took it all in, rather silently, but with her eyes sparkling...an irrefutable comment out of her own philosophy, built on more than one Rock of Ages. *"The country will not be the same without her, but she herself had everything in a setting perfect for her fulfillment, and so she remains with us forever, completed."*

Today the Davies farm still flourishes in Congers. So does the Museum of Modern Art in NYC.



PRINCIPAL SOURCES

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SPECIAL THANKS

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