

## DOC and DOCKIE



**Nyack Hospital staff in 1929**  
**Dr. George "Doc" Leitner seated, first on left**  
**Dr. Virginia "Dockie" Davies, standing, 2nd from right**

Two long time Rockland County physicians who followed unorthodox routes to begin their medical careers were George Leitner (1865-1937) and Virginia Davies (1862-1949), respectively nicknamed "Doc" and "Dockie."



**LUCY VIRGINIA MERIWEATHER DAVIES** 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 she smuggled morphine from the Union side into the Confederacy, taking two-year-old Virginia along in order to dissuade Union troops from searching her buggy.

Virginia had limited education and at age 18, she eloped with a rascal who was addicted to opium and alcohol and was a gambler. When he refused to reform, she left him in 1882 and when he threatened to shoot her if she didn't return, she wrested the gun from him in self-defense and in the struggle it went off. A local newspaper described the event as "the most remarkable killing of the age." It was deemed to be justifiable homicide and now, freed from marital obligations but unable to return home because of the scandal Virginia left the South for good.

Virginia travelled to New York City where she enrolled in the Blackwell sisters school. Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell had opened their Woman's Medical College of the New York Infirmary in 1868 and Dr. Emily was Virginia's professor of general medicine. At night the student doctor 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, Virginia continued post-graduate studies in the city and in 1890, while working as chief resident at the New York Infant Asylum at 61st Street and Tenth Avenue, the attractive Southern belle met a dashing young artist, Arthur B. Davies while on the Staten Island ferry. She was adventurous and an independent-minded free spirit and he was a romantic idealist who later would become one of America's most famous painters. Arthur Davies fell head over heels in love and would write long letters to her about art and music and nature, life and beauty. The couple spent evenings at the opera and enjoyed picnicking along the Palisades and decided to settle in the country where they would support themselves — by farming! No matter that neither had any experience in country life or work. Marriage plans for the two 29 year olds accelerated when she 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 learned that a company was promoting real estate in Rockland County by 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. They discovered that a 38 acre property there was for sale and, with financial support from her well-to-do family, the site was purchased for \$6,500. They prepared to settle into an idyllic life — he would abandon his career in art, Virginia hers in medicine — but, unfortunately, there weren't any books written yet called "Farming for Dummies."

To be sure, Dockie (as she later was nicknamed) flourished in the dual life of farmer and country doctor, but Arthur didn't take easily to agriculture. If he 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. At one point, Arthur asked Virginia to return with him to the city, but she'd found her comfort zone 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. They never divorced,

but became estranged and he moved back to the big city where he became a world renowned artist and secretly took up residence in Greenwich Village with one of his models - and led a double life.

Arthur became one of an avant grade group of painters, usually referred to as “The Eight”, and, in addition to his own work, was instrumental in organizing the famous Armory Show of 2013 that helped establish a modern art movement in America. Among his wealthy patrons were Lilly Bliss and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to whom he’d often spoken of the need to establish a permanent collection of modern art and after his sudden death in 1928, these friends made his dream a reality. In effect, founding of the Museum of Modern Art would be a memorial to Arthur B. Davies.

In the early years Dockie made her rounds in buggies and sleighs. She often used old-fashioned remedies from plants and herbs that she gathered in the woods. Over time she gained a local reputation, not only as a doctor and farmer, but as a botanist, suffragist, civil libertarian, philosopher and devotee of music and art. During the 57 years that she practiced in Congers, Dockie Davies delivered more than 6,000 babies, the last just two months before she died on the farm at age 87. The farm stand still flourishes. So does the Museum of Modern Art.



Virginia’s grandchildren gave her the nickname Dockie

**GEORGE LEITNER's** parents immigrated from Bavaria and settled in Rockland County where they raised four children to adulthood. In 1866 his father placed this advertisement in a local newspaper:

*The undersigned informs the inhabitants of Piermont and vicinity, that he has opened a Boot and Shoe Store, where he will keep constantly on hand a large assortment of Boots and Shoes, Gaiters of all kinds, Children's Shoes and Gaiters, Slippers, etc. Come one, come all, and give me a call, as I will sell cheaper than any other store in town. Store between the Barber shop and Bakery. JOHN LEITNER, Proprietor."*

Unfortunately, the store was destroyed, along with half of Piermont, in a fire in 1868.

George Leitner was born along the Hudson River shore in 1865 and educated locally. The area was a hotbed of amateur baseball and he became a star pitcher on local teams. While studying at Fordham, he played college baseball and in 1886 he pitched for Nyack's championship club team.(see below, GL is standing, third from left.)



Unable to afford medical school tuition after graduating from Fordham, during the summer of 1887 George signed a professional baseball contract with the Indianapolis Hoosiers of the fledgling National League. He won his first game in the major leagues when he pitched against the New York Giants at the Polo Grounds and the New York *Times* reported the event:

August 11, 1887. Headline: *Lost by the New-Yorks. Outplayed by the Indianapolis Team. Two New Players help home team to turn the tables on the Giants from New York.*

“Indianapolis turned the tables on New-York today and won a game by better batting, fielding and pitching. Two new players, Leitner and Moffat, materially strengthened the home team. Particularly Leitner who pitched one of the best games seen here this year and held the Giants down to five hits, one a home run drive by Conner which was given him by a close foul-line decision.”

Three weeks later the Giants got even, beating the Hoosiers 2-0:

August 31, 1887. Headline: *Bad luck of the Indianapolis ball players. Retired nine times without scoring a run. Good work by the local players.*

“The Giants administered that which proves distasteful to all ball players, a coat of ‘whitewash.’ . . . Leitner, the Nyack youth who made his debut a few days ago occupied the box for Indianapolis but his wildness and inability to put the ball over the plate at times, were taken advantage of by the local players [Giants] and six of them went to first base on called balls.”

Things went down hill from there. George Leitner’s record for the year was 2 and 6, his ERA 5.68, in 65 innings he struck out 27 but walked 41. The Hoosiers finished last in the eight team National League and went out of business two years later. The other teams hung in, but some of their names would change. They included the Chicago White Stockings, Detroit Wolverines, Philadelphia Quakers, Boston Beaneaters, Pittsburgh Alleghenys, Washington Nationals and the New York Giants.

On March 31, 1888 the *Times* reported in an article, *Baseball Up the River*:

“Several of the active members of the Nyack Baseball Club of last year have gone to various portions of the country to engage in the game with other clubs. . . . George Leitner, who pitched a part of the season with the Nyack club and the other part with the Indianapolis team, was graduated and became a full-fledged physician last month and has been appointed as assistant surgeon in St. Francis Hospital [NYC]. He will probably not indulge in ball playing this year.”

George Leitner earned \$3,000 for that partial season which was sufficient to pay for his training at Bellevue Hospital Medical College and St. Francis Hospital. His medical school graduation ceremony on March 12, 1888 took place on the first day of the “Great White Hurricane” - the famous Blizzard of '88 that inundated the northeastern United States, resulting in some 400 deaths and dumping as much as 40-50 inches of snow. After he returned to Piermont, he practiced for a half century until his death on May 18, 1937. Dr. Leitner was one of the founders of Nyack Hospital where he served on the Board and headed the Department of Surgery. He also held many important positions as a medical and civic leader and was an active member of the Democratic party.

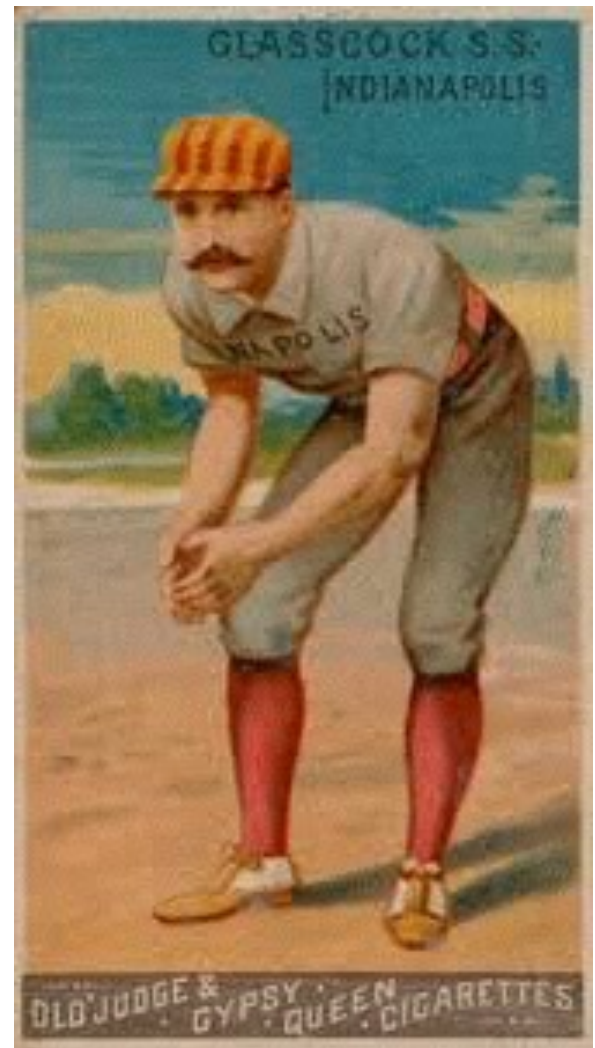
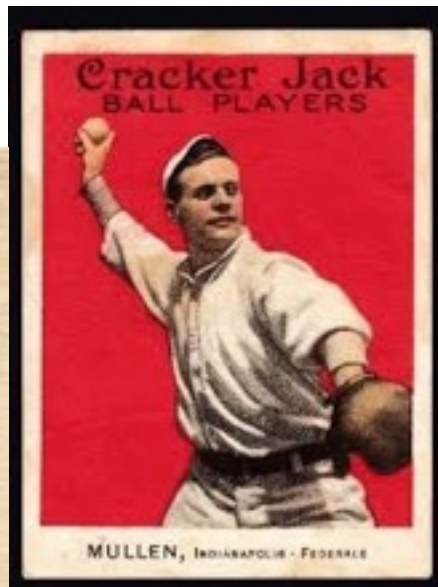
After Doc Leitner’s death, Nyack Hospital’s annual report noted that he had been a “really great surgeon, blessed with a profound humaneness, generous, intense, likable and lovable, he gave always lavishly of his skill and his sympathy.” A former patient recalled that Leitner had “the touch of an angel.” An obituary in the New York *Evening Journal* reported that “when he finished his medical training...he started practicing medicine in his native town, refusing to continue his ball playing despite attractive offers from the New York Yankees and other teams.”

But there was a baseball postscript. In 1904, seventeen years after his brief fling in the National League and four years after the opening of Nyack Hospital, a benefit game was played between the local doctors and clergymen. Naturally, Doc Leitner pitched for the medics and the game raised \$400 for the cash-strapped facility. As reported by the *Rockland County Times*: “The doctors were so heavy in avoirdupois and so light at the bat that the dominies won by a score of 18 to 6.” After that, Doc Leitner presumably stuck to his doctoring, but a team photograph taken in 1920 showed him still in uniform and looking fit at age 55.

Shortly after I moved to Piermont in 2012, I met Ann Hickey who was born in 1927 and whose family lived just a few houses from Leitner’s home-office on River Road. When I asked whether she remembered the doctor, she held up her hand to show me a long scar. She described how when she was about six, she badly cut that hand and her father rushed her over to Leitner’s office. Little Annie needed stitches and Dr. Leitner told her that if she was a very good girl and didn’t cry, he’d fix her up and then reward her with a lollipop. Well she was — and he did. When I asked whether she knew how much her father paid, she said that he couldn’t afford to pay anything because it was the time of The Great Depression. Instead her father went into the back yard, killed and dressed a chicken, and I imagine that the doctor must have been pleased to receive anything at all — not just chicken feed, but the whole chicken!



BASEBALL CARDS OF DOC LEITNER'S TEAMMATES ON THE HOOSIERS







Indianapolis Hoosiers in 1886 - the year before Leitner arrived

