

Dr. Meyer: The Baby Doctor

By Barbara Glakas

Dr. William Meyer was a popular doctor in Herndon, from the 1920s to 1960, and was well known for delivering many babies, earning him the moniker: “The Baby Doctor.”

Dr. Meyer was born in c. 1891 in Enfield, North Carolina. He was one of thirteen children. His parents were Simon and Antonia Meyer. Simon was born in Germany and Antonia was born in German-Austria. They came to the United States between 1873 and 1882. They married in 1883 and settled in Enfield, North Carolina. All the children were born in North Carolina. Simon was a mercantile merchant. He was also instrumental in founding a synagogue in nearby Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

According to a book entitled, *Service Record, World War I and II, Herndon, Virginia*, Dr. Meyer graduated from Trinity College in North Carolina (now Duke University) and went to medical school in at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, (now the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine), where he received his degree in 1915. The 1915 Virginia Medical College of Virginia yearbook described Meyer this way:

“After running wild for a few years in his native State [of North Carolina] he eased himself up toward Richmond and slipped into Chemistry Hall and because so infatuated with a lecture on organic chemistry that he immediately cast his lot with the “sawbones.” Willie has an amiable disposition and a bountiful philanthropic streak in his make-up that is seldom found in a medical student. When he walks up Broad Street with one of his conferees, that said confere to facilitate matters, takes his hat off and puts it under his arm, for Willie knows about two-thirds of the maidens of Richmond. With his sheepskin he will probably return to his native State.”

But he did not return to his native state. He met Lottie Mae Roney while in Richmond. In 1918 he married Lottie in a small ceremony in the home of a Rabbi in Richmond. They would make their future homes in Virginia.

The *Service Record* book indicated that he entered the Medical Corps during WWI, as in the Medical Reserve at the rank of Lieutenant, in September of 1917. He was an acting assistant surgeon during the 1918-1919 Influenza Epidemic emergency. He was discharged in April of 1919. A 1920 census document showed that he and Lottie were living in the Clifton area of Alleghany County, Virginia, where he practiced medicine.

In 1924 Meyer moved his medical practice to Herndon. In 1926 he purchased a lot of land in Herndon and built a new home at 810 Monroe Street. A June 1927 issue of the *Fairfax Herald* newspaper said, “Dr. William Meyer has begun the erection of a very handsome home on the lot recent purchased from Mr. Ephrain Yount.” A September 1927 issue of the same newspaper said, “The new residence of Dr. and Mrs. Meyer is ready for occupancy, and they will move into it as

soon as the town water is run into the Yount subdivision.” Meyer operated his family medical practice out of his new home. They had two doors on the front of the house. The right door led into the living room of the home. The left door led into Meyer’s in-home medical office.

Mrs. Lottie Meyer did not have a formal occupation outside the home; however, she was a very active and well-respected citizen. Through the years she served with the Red Cross, was a member of Herndon’s American Legion Auxiliary group, was a drummer in an all-women band, and she volunteered many hours at Fairfax Hospital as part of a hospital auxiliary group.

Dr. Meyer quickly became an important member of the Fairfax County Medical Society. He was elected President of the Society in 1927 and again in 1939. In that capacity he was involved in medical issues across the Northern Virginia area. He held Society meetings at his Herndon home where he and other doctors shared papers and held discussions on topics such as appendicitis, diabetes, and encephalitis. He became a staff member when Arlington Hospital first opened in 1944.

In addition to being very active in his medical profession, Dr. Meyer was also very involved in Herndon civic activities. He was president of the Rotarians. He was a director of the Citizens National Bank of Herndon. He was a charter member of Herndon’s American Legion Auxiliary Unit No. 91. He was an officer in Herndon’s Volunteer Fire Department. He served as a judge for the health contest at a 4-H fair. And he was a proud Mason who attained the highest degree possible, the 33rd degree of the Scottish Rite. In 1953 he was elected potentate (or president) of the Kena Shrine Temple in Alexandria.

He also served on the Herndon Town Council from 1937 through 1942. It was during this time period that the United States was going through the Great Depression. While Meyer sat on the Town Council, two major Works Progress Administration projects were completed in Herndon (as part of one of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs). The Herndon Town Hall was built and the town’s first public water system and sewer treatment plant was constructed.

Meyer’s niece and nephew remember visiting their uncle in Herndon. It was the first time they had ever seen a television set. It was a black and white television, his niece saying, “It was in a wood case and a very small picture in the living room.” The nephew remembers watching the Howdy Doody Show on the 10-to-12-inch TV screen. Both also remembered playing on the rolling hills in front of the house and a small pond on one of the hills. The nephew said, “As a child I would lay down on my side and roll down the hills of the well-manicured lawn.” The nephew was also fascinated by his uncle’s talking parrot, Polly. “I tried to get it to talk to me. No success.” Dr. Meyer was also known amongst some Herndon residents to have a pet fox.

The “baby doctor” moniker was explained in a book entitled, *Fairfax County Medical Society, 1884-1934, Early Years and Early Leaders*.

“It was the title ‘Baby doctor’ in which Dr. Meyer took an inordinate amount of pride. He was known as the champion baby deliverer in the whole county with a total of somewhere around 5,000 deliveries (the figure varies). In their eulogistic editorial upon the occasion of his death, the Herndon *Observer* noted, ‘There is hardly a citizen of Herndon who had not hear of the 30 babies he delivered in one month or the 10 he delivered in a single 24-hour period.’”

Dr. Meyer not only delivered babies, however. Many historic newspaper articles wrote about how Dr. Meyer also conducted many other professional medical services that any small-town doctor would be expected to do. He conducted Selected Service physicals, school physicals for children, and would treat people with general diseases, car accident injuries, and he even once treated a wound from a tear gas bomb.

Dr. Meyer was also practicing medicine during the polio epidemic. Cases of polio – then called infantile paralysis - were being reported in the Herndon area in the mid-1930s. One 1935 Herndon *News-Observer* newspaper article reported that Dr. Meyer had lifted a quarantine on a home of a resident who had previously been suffering with infantile paralysis. No doubt Dr. Meyer would have been involved in the polio vaccine, which started being administered widely in 1955. (Nationwide vaccine trials had begun in Fairfax County in 1954).

Some people assigned another moniker to Dr. Meyer: “The Jewish Doctor.” Again, the *Fairfax Medical Society* book stated:

“He was the first Jewish physician to practice in Fairfax County [and] was invariably referred to as the ‘Jewish doctor.’ Certainly, the phrase was normally descriptive, but traces of antisemitism were present. As Dr. Meyer later expressed it to Dr. Harold Johnson, the county’s first Black physician, ‘We both have an image problem.’”

Dr. Meyer encouraged his Richmond cousin, Sigmund Newman, who also attended the Medical College of Virginia, to come to Northern Virginia to practice. In 1932 Dr. Newman briefly joined Dr. Meyer’s practice in Herndon and then later opened his own medical practice in Vienna. He became the first Jewish doctor in Vienna.

One author who studies the Jewish community in Northern Virginia, described Dr. Meyer as “culturally and socially Jewish, but not strictly religious.” Meyer’s nephew said, “Because travel was not easy in those [early] days, I doubt that William had any formal Jewish training.”

Throughout his life, Dr. Meyer was known for his generosity, diplomacy, kindness, and winning smile. The *Medical Society* book went on to say, “His hours were endless, his smile never waned, his humanitarian efforts were untold, his sincerity unquestioned.”

The Meyers never had any children of their own. However, Dr. Meyer loved children and had a knack for earning their trust, which people attributed to his empathy skills, his sincere affection, and his large supply of lollipops and ice cream that he would share with them.

Dr. Meyer would sometimes make house calls. One luxury he allowed himself was a chauffeur-driven limousine for that purpose. Meyer's niece confirmed this, recalling, "Emma was the cook and housekeeper; her husband was a chauffeur for my uncle. They lived in an apartment behind the main house." On the 1930 census Emma Howard, an African American girl from a local farming family, was listed as a single 16-year-old who was a private servant, living with the Meyers. In 1950 Emma and her husband, Carrol Paige, were living with the Meyers. She was listed as a maid and he was a chauffeur. A small apartment still exists behind a detached garage located behind the Meyer's house.

The 1940 census showed that a widowed aunt was living with the Meyers, as well as 24-year-old man named J. Mack Smith who was an office helper for Dr. Meyer.

Meyer was known to enjoy the game of bridge. There were many instances noted in local newspapers of Dr. Meyer either hosting or attending bridge parties throughout the years. He also hosted fundraisers and parties at his home for the Shrine Club and the Eastern Star. Meyer and his wife also enjoyed taking trips to beaches along the eastern shore, such as Rehoboth, Hampton, Atlantic and Miami beaches. They took trips to North Carolina as well to visit family members.

Meyer's generosity was well-known. He was a regular contributor to the annual Hadassah fundraiser (a Jewish Women's group) in Falls Church to support medical care in Israel. Another example of his generosity in Herndon was recounted by a long-time Herndon resident who said:

"There was a special event, The Firemen's Carnival, every summer where a new car was raffled off and I think the proceeds went to keep the fire house going. We only had volunteers and most of them were dairy farmers. I do remember that Dr. Meyer won about 6 or 7 of those raffles and donated the cars back to them."

Sadly, Dr. Meyer died of a stroke in 1960 at the age about 68. The *Medical Society* book noted, "In view of his lifetime of service to his patients, he was stricken at the bedside of an ill patient when the end came." Scottish and York rite services were held at his home, and a funeral was held at the Green Funeral Home in Herndon. He was buried in the National Memorial Park Cemetery in Falls Church.

About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday

from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.