



# Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

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## *The Clarkstown Country Club: A Memoir*

*by Julie Winslett*

MANY OF US OWE what we become in our lives to the influence of early encounters. When I review my own remembered events, I see that one of the most powerful encounters in my life was not with an event or a person, but with a place. For a few years in the 1950s, I lived at what had once been a fabulous estate run by Dr. Pierre Bernard, an enigmatic cult leader and tantric yogi.

In Bernard's heyday, the rich and talented flocked to study yoga and spirituality under him. His tremendous charisma helped him accumulate great wealth and power. When World War II broke out, however, Bernard's fortunes began to change. Over the succeeding years, his holdings gradually shrank, and he ended up living alone

on his one remaining estate, the Clarkstown Country Club. By the time we arrived on the scene, years of neglect had worn the gloss off the place, but its spirit remained intact, at least for me. Like great art or great scenery, the Clarkstown Country Club made a deep impression on me. Sometimes I wonder what my interior world would be like had I not met the Clarkstown Country Club.

The CCC, as it was called, sat on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. I don't know why it was called country club exactly, because it had never really been one in the traditional sense, and it certainly wasn't one during the time my family rented a house there. My parents had never heard of it when they answered the ad for a house rental in the local newspaper, but its name promised something pleasant and they, my brother, and I went off to look at it full of high hopes. Our hopes began to fade, however, as we turned into the property. Up the drive,



Left: The Music Box Cottage, with the bell tower to the rear

Right: The Family, Christmas 1955





Mother and Trigger at the door to the studio

a half-timbered mansion, large and blank, occupied a weedy hillside. There were no signs of habitation—no flowerbeds, no potted plants, no chairs on the terrace, no people. The house seemed quite ordinary, except that part of it was built over the driveway. There was also no front door. I remember feeling a slight thrill when I saw the little driveway tunnel. Its quirkiness suggested the possibility of other oddities lurking on the far side.

My parents paused. It seemed intrusive to drive right through someone's house, but, then, there was the problem of no door to inquire at. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, we proceeded through.

Behind the mansion, a row of vacant buildings sagged along the drive. They overlooked an abandoned park whose fallen trees lay like sunken hulks. To the right, the rusting frame of an erstwhile solarium stood ankle deep in shattered glass. A stupendous copper beech nearby shaded overgrown lawns and a swimming pool filled with debris. In the park, choking vines made a mock topiary of a barbecue chimney, while rhododendron run amok hid a grotto at the far end. In the middle of a field between the grotto and the chimney, a headless concrete dinosaur sat quietly crumbling toward its feet.

We had stumbled into a death scene, a forlorn collection of decaying buildings and unkempt grounds. And yet it was not without its charm. Like castle ruins and sections of ancient cities, there was something romantic, almost seductive, about it.

We had never lived in conventional places, no doubt because my parents were not conventional people. Both were cultivated and well-informed and their unusual

backgrounds gave them an odd mix of gentility and Bohemianism that the seedy elegance of the Clarkstown Country Club suited perfectly. They decided to rent the house.

Known as the Music Box Cottage, the house stood between the skeletal remains of the solarium and a clock tower that housed a huge bell. I think it was the living room that drew my parents to the place. The entire house seemed to be built around some obscure mystical idea that came together in this room. For one thing, the niche in the wall resembled the niches that display statues of saints in Catholic churches. It clearly wanted some object of worship to occupy it, but the closest we would come was to put our television set there. It was the fireplace, though, that gave the most overt expression to the mystical feel of the place. Above a large firebox, an oak beam reached across the chimney, which was completely faced from floor to ceiling in tiles. The area below the mantel was tiled in a glittering cobalt blue, while the area above was matte green and yellow with an orange border. The lower tiles were gorgeous, but it was the upper tiles that drew one's attention, for in their center sat a large orange ankh.

"Good Lord," my startled parents exclaimed when they first saw the ankh. "What on earth is that doing there?"

While tolerant and, at times, delighted by quirky things, my parents were also wary of the strange. They took a dim view of what they regarded as phony mysticism, the ankh or Egyptian cross, which now dominated our living room. They slew the ankh with witty comments and derision, but it continued to live for me. It gazed down on the room, silent, enigmatic, impossible to ignore, a pagan presence suggesting forbidden mysteries.

My parents hid the ankh behind an enormous and handsome world map whose blue oceans reflected perfectly the deeper blue of the lower tiles so that it was no longer visible. But its exotic atmosphere persisted and this atmosphere permeated the whole estate, which exuded melancholy and ghostliness, with a whiff of the occult.

My father was never one to allow neglect to hold sway and, though we were only renting, he nonetheless made repairs and improved the property by clearing the gardens and painting and repairing the house. This had quite an effect on our semi-invalid landlord. As my father brought some dignity back to the place, Dr. Pierre Bernard seemed to gain a new lease on life. Over the next few months, he had the park cleared of all the fallen trees. In gratitude for my father's work, he let us use the swimming pool and allowed my father access to a large, bright room in the bell tower to use as a studio. He began to

emerge from the mansion to sit under the elms and from time to time would engage my parents in conversation. They began hearing strange tales from Nyack locals about him and his former life.

“I heard from the guy at the hardware store that this place used to be some kind of love cult,” my father told us at dinner one evening. We were all ears. “The old man was some sort of guru to the rich and famous. That dinosaur statue out in the field was in the middle of a big pool where they took a dip. There were all sorts of shenanigans going on—circuses, rituals, orgies, abortions, police raids, even murder.”

We were electrified. This information conjured up all sorts of lurid scenes set amid the seedy buildings and grounds, which our imaginations now refurbished to their former splendor. It was hard, though, to picture Dr. Bernard as the founder of such a splendid establishment.

Over the next months, we heard more about Dr. Bernard and his many enterprises. We heard more about the circus, which he had housed and showcased on the estate grounds. He had been an avid sports fan, built a baseball stadium, and owned a baseball team. He also built a dog track and had promoted a famous prize fight. He was best known, however, as a teacher and lecturer on yoga and Vedic principles, a Svengali who pried money from his rich female devotees, all of whom were besotted by him.

I remember my parents howling with laughter when they heard that he was called Oom, the Omnipotent. But my elderly piano teacher, who had lived in the mansion for several years during its heyday, claimed that the Clarkstown Country Club had been a wonderful place where artists came to work, play, and find spiritual meaning.

He gave my parents a book called *Life at the Clarkstown Country Club*, which described in detail the CCC's philosophy on Vedic yoga, of which Dr. Bernard was supposed to be a leading expert. In addition to *Life*, Dr. Bernard showed my parents many testimonials from well-respected international figures, such as Francis Yeats Brown, Dr. Charles Francis Potter, and Sir Paul Dukes, who wrote that “Bernard's insight into the true meaning of the ancient Sanskrit texts is that of a master.”

My parents were astonished by these accolades. By this time, they'd had several conversations with Dr. Bernard and found him to be an unprepossessing sort who used bad grammar to deliver crude observations. How were they to reconcile all those testimonials with their perception of Bernard as a vulgar man with no obvious intellectual or spiritual gifts whatsoever? In the end, they sided with their instincts and regarded Dr. Bernard



Father next to the fireplace (note the world map that covers the ankh in this photo and also appears on page 1)

as a complete charlatan. The only mystery for them was how Oom, the Omnipotent, had managed to bamboozle so many sophisticated people!

Yet, it is possible that in their assessment of Oom and the Clarkstown Country Club, my parents missed something nonetheless valid and deep, the evidence for which lay within the old buildings. Although moribund, the Clarkstown Country Club was still an enchanted place when I lived there, and I fell under its influence. In my spellbound wanderings, I felt unseen presences, most notably that of Dr. Bernard, whose spirit was palpable everywhere. The silent, locked buildings held a special fascination for me. Despite their eeriness, I wanted to know them and would try in vain to see through windows but was always thwarted by the interior gloom. Our house had old-fashioned door locks and I got the idea that a skeleton key might work on them. I bought a key at a local hardware store and tried it on my bedroom door. It worked. I decided to try it on other locks on the estate and chose the building adjoining my father's studio first, because I could gain entry through the studio without being seen from the grounds.

Apprehensive and exhilarated, I let myself in to my father's studio and went to the door that led into the rest of the building. I put the key into the lock and turned it—there was an answering click. I took a deep breath, pushed the door open, and stepped into a large room whose walls were completely lined with books. The light from a row of dingy windows fell on deep couches and easy chairs. A woman's fur wrap hung over the arm of one

of the chairs. An open gazetteer lay on a table. A player piano, covered with music rolls, stood in a corner. There was a stage and a projection room—a projector sat with a reel of film on it. The atmosphere was alive, expectant. It was as though someone had just a moment before risen from his seat and stepped out. I wandered about for some time in a trancelike state, unaware that I was in the presence of one of the world's greatest collections of Sanskrit, rare books, and literature on eastern mysticism. I came across a staircase and went upstairs to see what was there. Unlike the main floor, it was all in ruin—an expanse of waterlogged flooring surrounded by small cubicles, and I quickly returned to the enchantment of the library, where I pondered my next move. Exploring the mansion would be the ultimate experience and though, unlike the library, people actually lived in it, I decided to try it.

There were only three people living in the mansion at the time: Dr. Bernard, his secretary, and a very old lady. I had encountered the old lady a few times as she sat on the ground like an old doll, fretfully pursuing the hopeless task of weeding miles of overgrown brick walkways. She had lived at the CCC for decades she told me and her conversation was filled with regret for the lost old days when everything had been meticulously manicured. A few weeks later we realized that we hadn't seen the old lady for some time and learned from the secretary that she was now bedridden.

Dr. Bernard's secretary, Doris Nelson, was of Scandinavian descent, an elegant blond in her thirties, tall and very good looking, yet odd and silent. It was a mystery why such an attractive woman would lead so sequestered a life.

I had no idea which rooms the trio occupied, but the idea of encountering them inside the house did not worry me much. On a quiet afternoon, I let myself in through a side door and proceeded to creep around the house—down stairs, up stairs, along halls, and in and out of rooms. The atmosphere was hushed, like a museum after closing time. This was a house of greatness, an art deco masterpiece, filled with elegant *objets* and furniture.

Oriental carpets covered floors of Spanish tile. Huge windows opened onto terraces overlooking sweeping lawns. A marvelous staircase and banister offset by lovely wall lamps graced a lobby where murals with mystical themes covered the walls. Unusual fountains were built into corners. In the basement, I recognized the Rathskeller, a lively gathering spot featured in *Life*. Its tables were set with crystal and silver flatware, making it appear ready to come alive at an instant's notice. Upstairs, charming bedrooms awaited guests. Unlike the estate's exterior, all was

perfection inside. It seemed impossible that the house had not been occupied by more than three people for many years. I had managed to tour most of the place before approaching footsteps sent me running in panic through the house looking for an exit. I fled undetected out an unlocked terrace door.

Having successfully committed two acts of trespass, I boldly continued my career in breaking and entering. One of my favorite spots was a garage that housed a fabulous limousine from the 20s or 30s. I'd take my friends there and we'd

play for hours in the limo, snuggling under a dusty fur rug while pretending to sip gin from the silver flasks we found secured behind satin elastic bands.

My tours left me with the certainty that whatever the truth was about Dr. Bernard either he or those close to him must have been people of substance and taste. The Clarkstown Country Club was a testament to someone's genius and I believe that genius probably belonged to Bernard's ex-wife, Blanche DeVries. Conversations I've had over the years with people who were not part of the Clarkstown Country Club, but who knew DeVries, have convinced me that she was the genuine article when it came to mastery of and commitment to yoga. Certainly, her extraordinary agility and youthfulness in extreme old age as compared to Bernard's decrepitude strongly supports the idea that she practiced what he preached.

I met DeVries only twice during the time we lived at the Clarkstown Country Club, but I saw her several times in town, and she left an indelible impression on me. She was stunning, a woman with a radiant physical and



The clubhouse drive from the archway

spiritual presence. Her aura ballooned out in all directions, filling the street. She eclipsed everyone.

Our sojourn at the Clarkstown Country Club lasted three years. I remember the sadness I felt whenever I allowed myself to think about leaving this wonderful place.

Dr. Bernard stopped coming out to the park and a few weeks later we learned that he had died. He was given an impressive funeral, at which respected and well-known public figures reaffirmed the notion that he had, indeed, been a towering intellectual and great spiritual guide who had had a major impact on many lives. A well-attended auction was held in the main salon of the mansion, where I watched with dismay as strangers walked away with items I remembered from my clandestine tour.

The Missionary Institute (now Nyack College), the new landlords, gave us a year in which to find another place to live. One day, while we were still there, my mother and I were going to town in the car. As we approached the driveway tunnel, I glanced at the windows of Dr. Bernard's office and saw him at his old station on the far side of the room looking out the front windows across the lawns toward the river. As we drove through the mansion, I told my mother what I had seen. A third of the way down the drive by now, she stopped the car and we turned to look. The familiar figure was

standing motionless at the window, his gaze fixed on the river. He was not there when we returned.

When I lived at the CCC, I was too young to comprehend the club's original mission, but the magnificence and haunting magic of the place left an impression that has remained with me throughout my life. Although I cannot physically return to the Clarkstown Country Club I knew, I still go there in my mind. I tour the grounds and linger at the old haunts. It is summer, and the fireflies are thick in the park. In the deep twilight, I stand on the drive, facing my house. The lights are on and through the open French doors I see a flash of blue. It is the blue of the fireplace tiles, the blue of the map. And behind the map lies a field of green and yellow. And in its center lives an orange ankh. May it be so forever.

*Julie Winslett is a former college English instructor and the author, most recently, of Love and Murder Off the Grid, a mystery novel set in Taos, New Mexico. She has always considered Nyack her hometown.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: To read Winslett's full account of her childhood at the Clarkstown Country Club, please visit our website and find it as an addendum to the Winter 2018–19 newsletter: [www.nyackhistory.org/news](http://www.nyackhistory.org/news).

All photos courtesy of the author, except the postcard, below



Postcard showing the "North Side View of New Club House, C. C. C Properties," circa 1931  
Historical Society of the Nyacks, Robert Courtwright Collection

# Message from the President

by Win Perry, Society President

WHILE PREPARING for our current exhibit, *Mapping Nyack*, I came across some interesting facts about the prior history of the Nyack College campus, including the north parcel where our author, Julie Winslett, had the adventures she writes about in this issue.

At the time of the American Revolution, the part of South Nyack that included the campus and everything south to near where the New York State Thruway comes ashore belonged

to Michael Cornelison, whose fine stone house stood on Salisbury Point, facing south.

In 1801, a Cornelison heir sold the future Nyack College campus and the land down to Hillside Avenue to Captain John Green, a river boatman who used Hudson River sloops to transport lumber and stone up and

down the river. Green played a leading role in building Nyack's first church, its first steamboat, and the Nyack Turnpike. He is the same John Green whose stone house on lower Main Street is now being restored in a community-wide effort.

A map of Nyack in 1876, which is included in the *Mapping Nyack* exhibit, shows what is now the north campus of Nyack College being occupied by the Palmer House Hotel, which was owned by H.C. vanVorst. By the time our 1891 map was published, the main campus and the hillside below belonged to Commodore William Voorhis, a yachting enthusiast and building materials dealer. Voorhis owned a large part of South Nyack and was responsible for laying out the streets and subdividing it into lots (this map is also on display).

The Palmer House Hotel had become the Prospect House, famed for a visit by President Grover Cleveland. Its immense front porch, lined with rocking chairs,

appeared on popular post cards. In 1898, when the Prospect House burned, its wooden construction caused a blaze that could be seen for miles and could not be extinguished because of a lack of water pressure and firefighting equipment on the hill.

In 1920, "Dr." Pierre Bernard and his wife, Blanche DeVries, bought the former hotel property and the S.R. Bradley estate adjacent to its north side as the main

campus of their phenomenally successful Clarkstown Country Club, a resort where people came to engage in cultural activities, learn yoga, and study the Vedic philosophy of India. The resort offered farm work to teach personal discipline and a menagerie of elephants and other animals to add to the fun.



Prospect House, circa 1880  
Photo courtesy of Nyack Library Local History Room

A clubhouse and an array of other buildings were erected. As our author tells it, this was all in the past when she and her family lived in the Music Box Cottage. The enduring contribution of Dr. Bernard and Ms. DeVries was the introduction and popularization of yoga in the United States.

After the demise of the Clarkstown Country Club in the 1950s, the former Bradley parcel was sold to the Nyack Public Schools and the hotel site became the north campus of Nyack College. The clubhouse became a men's dormitory. A dormitory addition, a gymnasium, an air-supported athletic facility, and a library were added, and college-related uses were housed in the surviving accessory buildings. Now that the college is moving out of the Nyacks and consolidating its programs at its Manhattan campus, the wheel of history is turning again and the next use of these storied properties is of great interest to the community.

# Mapping Nyack: A History of Maps and Mapping Techniques

On view through February 23, 2019, at the HSN Museum

THE CURRENT exhibition on view at our museum, *Mapping Nyack: A History of Maps and Mapping Techniques*, features maps of Nyack of different periods and styles dating from the 18th to the 21st centuries. The oldest example is a detailed section from a map of the area made by Robert Erskine for General George Washington, circa 1779.

Maps from the early 1800s include surveys by Tunis Smith, then owner of much of what was to become downtown Nyack, showing the future village divided into lots, as well as his survey for the Nyack Turnpike (now NYS Route 59), which opened circa 1830 and was responsible for much of Nyack's growth. In conjunction with the Turnpike map, an original Turnpike toll sign recently acquired by the Society is also featured.

Wall maps and atlases from the late-19th century are represented by a recently restored 1859 Map of Nyack published by M. Dripps.

The Sanborn Company maps, published every few years from 1887 to 1966 for the insurance business, are also displayed, as well as the 1950 Rockland County Photogrammetric Maps, which show conditions just

before the mid-century explosion in population. The 1950 maps were used to plan and plot the county's growth.

The 21st century's great leap in technology brings us to interactive digital maps based on satellite imagery, which are represented by examples from the Rockland County Planning Department's Geographical

Information System and by viewers' own smart phones.

The exhibition is open on Saturdays from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. through February 23, 2019, at the Historical Society of the Nyacks Museum, located in the historic Depew House at 50 Piermont Avenue, Nyack, NY 10960, across from Memorial



Detail from an 1891 *Atlas of the Hudson River Valley*

Park. Enter under the front porch.

Visits to the Museum at other hours can be arranged by emailing [info@nyackhistory.org](mailto:info@nyackhistory.org) or by contacting us through our website, [www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org).

A companion exhibition is featured in the glass display cases at the Nyack Library Carnegie-Farian Room during the library's open hours, located at 59 South Broadway, Nyack, NY 10960.

For more information and to join the Historical Society of the Nyacks visit [www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org)

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## 💎 Attention Members 💎

Save the date for the ever-popular Historical Society of the Nyacks House Tour: May 11, 2019. Tickets will be available soon.

Forthcoming exhibition: Liberty Street School: March 2–June 8, 2019. See the outside back cover of this newsletter for more information.

## Newsletter



### HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE NYACKS

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OR CURRENT RESIDENT

## *Forthcoming Exhibition: Liberty Street School*

*Curated by Leontine Temsky and Brenda Ross, HSN trustees*

We are collecting historic records, photos, recollections, and artifacts concerning the Liberty Street School for our next exhibit. Liberty Street held enormous significance for the greater Nyack Community. We hope to capture its complicated impact on our multi-cultural population and on the future direction of the Nyack School District.

We are interested in locating items that go beyond

the Society's permanent collection and beyond what is available in the archives of the Nyack Library Local History Room. We hope you will kindly lend your artifacts and photos for display, as well as share any recollections you may have of your Liberty Street School days, by February 8 for this exhibit (March 2–June 8). Please contact us by email at: [Libertystsch@gmail.com](mailto:Libertystsch@gmail.com)

## *🐾 Upcoming Walking Tours 🐾*

The Historical Society of the Nyacks Walking Tours take place on Sundays and begin at 2 p.m.  
To RSVP, or for more information, contact [ashapaulose15@gmail.com](mailto:ashapaulose15@gmail.com)

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|-----------------|--|
| <b>April 28</b> | Oak Hill Cemetery (meet at the entrance gate of the cemetery on Route 9W, between Sickles Avenue and Fifth Avenue)         |
| <b>May 26</b>   | Edward Hopper's Nyack (meet in front of the Edward Hopper House, 82 North Broadway)  |
| <b>June 9</b>   | South Nyack (meet at the southwest corner of South Broadway and Cedar Hill Avenue)   |
| <b>June 23</b>  | Upper Nyack (meet at the northwest corner of North Broadway and Sixth Avenue, across the street from <i>Pretty Penny</i> ) |