

Drs. Nina and Dott: Two sisters, two stories

Williamsport Women



by MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT

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Among the 40 women who graduated from Woman's Medical College in Philadelphia in 1907 were two sisters from the Pine Creek/Woolrich area, Nina and Dorothy Case. Their mother, Harriet Helms Case, was at the graduation ceremony to celebrate their accomplishment. Each sister went on to become highly respected for her contribution to medicine.

Nina was born in 1882 in Ithaca, Michigan, and studied at the Seventh Day Adventist medical school in Battle Creek, Michigan, before transferring to Woman's Medical College. She practiced for more than 50 years, in Boston, Scranton and Stroudsburg, providing services to both mountaineers and townspeople. She was married twice, first to a Seventh Day Adventist minister, Charles Baierle, and then to Arthur Price, of Stroudsburg. After being honored by the Pennsylvania Medical Society for 50 years of service, in 1962 Dr. Nina Price was the Pennsylvania Federation of Women's Clubs' "Woman of the Year." She was remembered for her energy and compassion as she traveled Pennsylvania's back roads in her Lincoln Continental, wearing a big flowered hat, to aid the sick and deliver babies.

Dorothy, known as "Dott," was born in 1885. She married Jules Blechschmidt, and together they established the Mount Carmel Mission in Haifa in Palestine. After their return to the United States in 1914, Dr. Dott held various teaching and administrative positions at Woman's Medical College. She also was a noted surgeon, served as the director of Public Health for the Federation of Women's Clubs in Philadelphia, and established the Dorothy Case-Blechschmidt Cancer Center at Doctor's Hospital. Dr. Dott had a

home on Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square and was known for her many diamonds.

Pine Creek and Woolrich

Nina and Dott were the eighth and ninth children of Marcus and Harriet Helms Case.

Marcus and Harriet both had roots in the Woolrich/Pine Creek/Haneyville area, but each moved "out west" to Michigan, where they met. Harriet Helms taught school in Woolrich in the 1850s before moving in 1862 to Maple Rapids, Michigan, where she also taught

school. Marcus Aurelius Case was a blacksmith. Eventually the Case family decided to return to central Pennsylvania, setting out in June 1889. They shipped their household goods by train, a train that unfortunately was swept away in the Johnstown Flood. So the entire family arrived in the area with nothing. Or at least that is the way Dott and her granddaughter tell the story.

Nina relates the story somewhat differently in "Dr. Nina and the Panther" (Dodd, Mead, 1976), a book written by her daughter Shirley Wheeler. According to Wheeler, only Nina and Dott and their mother came east, to attend a Seventh Day Adventist camp meeting in Lock Haven, leaving their father and the older children behind in Michigan. In Nina's version of the story, once the camp meeting was over, Harriet and her two young children moved into a tent in the mountains above Pine Creek, to wait for the predicted end of the world. Nina kept the family alive by foraging for food, selling chestnuts, and doing odd jobs for neighbors, often barefoot. Meanwhile, Harriet schooled the two girls so effectively that when Nina finally went to live in Williamsport with a Seventh Day Adventist family, she was put in the



NINA CASE

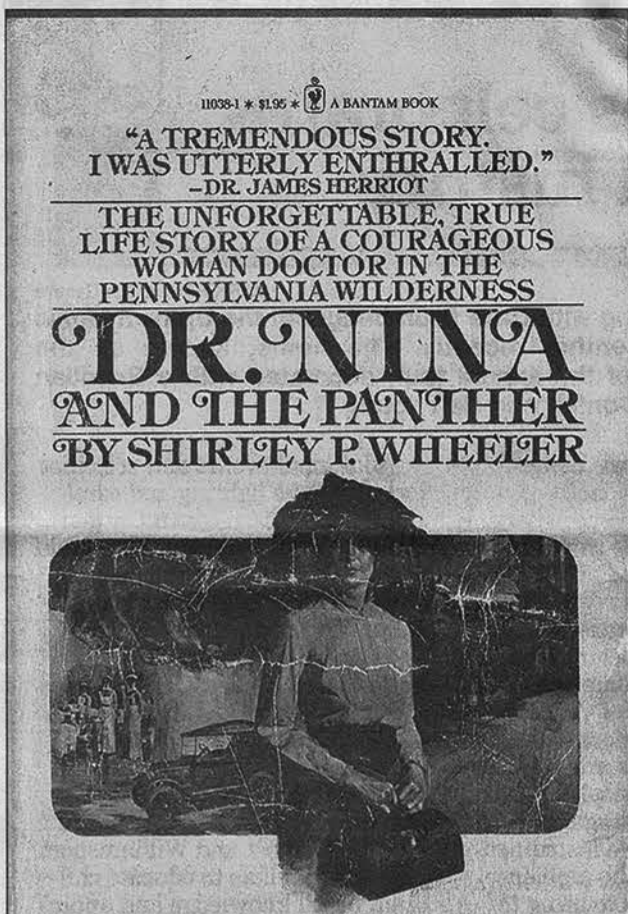


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"Dr. Nina and the Panther" by Shirley P. Weaver. Bantam Edition. 1978.

senior class at Williamsport High School and graduated at the age of 13.

Dott's story

Dott, on the other hand, does not mention living in a tent. She says that both parents came east; that she and her siblings attended Woolrich public schools, where her mother had taught before moving to Michigan; and that her father worked at Chatham Run Mill. In a visit to Woolrich in 1936, Dott was the guest speaker at the Woolrich Community Church, which she identified as her first church. Afterwards, she was a dinner guest of Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Rich, "whose home Dr. Blechschmidt had often visited as a young girl" (Lock Haven Express, May 19, 1936).

"Dr. Nina and the Panther," which is out of print but is available used and in libraries, tells a compelling story. But it is not the only written account. Dott's granddaughter Julia Case Gabell wrote "A Legacy of Dreams: Dorothy Case Blechschmidt, M.D., F.A.C.S." for Notable Women Ancestors: The Journal of Women's

Genealogy and History, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1998 (available online). Dott wrote her own memoirs, available online in the archives of Drexel University.

History detectives

Now a group of local "history detectives," aided by researchers at the Lycoming County Genealogical Society, are trying to unearth the true story. The detectives include Dr. Nina's grandson Townsend Velkoff, a counselor at Lycoming College, as well as current and former Pine Creek residents with an interest in

history, a Facebook page and connections to the Helms and Case families.

Perhaps someday we will know which details in the tales of the exceptional lives of these two sisters are best supported by surviving records.



DOTT CASE

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