

The Doctor's Wife: My Life in Arthurdale

By Svea Sauer (the former Virginia Lehman)

Edited by Amanda Griffith Penix

The following article has been edited from an interview conducted with Svea Sauer in April of 2007. Ms. Sauer was the wife of one of Arthurdale's first physicians, John Lehman. When the couple moved to Arthurdale in 1935, Ms. Sauer went by her first name Virginia.

Dr. John Foster Lehman was born and grew up in Madera, Pennsylvania. He completed his undergraduate work at Bucknell University and received his medical degree with honors from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and met John in Philadelphia while working for the American Friends Service Committee. I worked as a secretary to the head of the Youth Section of the Emergency Peace Campaign. We organized Peace Caravans, comprised of college students who volunteered to live in various communities during the summers to work for peace prior to World War II. At the time, although the Friends had programs all over the world of great significance, it was still a small organization located in a Friends Meeting House on Twelfth Street in downtown Philadelphia.

Clarence Pickett, who was the Executive Secretary [of the American Friends Service Committee] knew all of us. He heard that I had married a doctor and called me in to find out if my husband would consider going to Arthurdale. Clarence Pickett was a close friend and confidant of Eleanor Roosevelt, who gave the money she made advertising Ponds Cold Cream to him to use for the medical program in Arthurdale. When Dr. Lehman and I met with him, Pickett explained that there had been other doctors in Arthurdale who had left after staying only a short time and that one stipulation of working there would be a promise to stay. We were young and inexperienced and saw no difficulty in making this promise. It was the middle of the Great Depression and my husband would have not had the funds to start a general practice. At the time, the idea of living in Arthurdale appealed to me because I was somewhat of a Socialist and eager to be a part of Mrs. Roosevelt's dreams. I was 21 years old with no

real appreciation of what this decision might mean in our lives.

Dr. Lehman accepted a salary of \$150 a month with no sick leave or vacation, and with the provision that he would not practice medicine outside the Arthurdale community. We later learned that the doctor in Arthurdale was assigned to work under the supervision of the school principal and that the project nurse worked directly for the manager of the homestead. Conflicts were inevitable because the lines of authority were not clear.

Dr. Lehman arrived in Arthurdale first and stayed with a family in Reedsville until I arrived after finishing my job in Philadelphia. Being from the east coast, I considered anything to the west savage country. I had imagined West Virginia as a place where people still lived in log cabins, isolated in the mountains. I had no concept at all of coal mine towns except the horror stories I heard about poverty. Thus, I did not know what to expect, but was pleased when we moved immediately into our new home in Arthurdale.

I loved the house, which was my first home as a married woman. It was a very nice two-level house for \$15.00 per month. The bi-level house had stairs at the front door going down to the first floor and the other stairs went up to the four large bedrooms. The floors downstairs were hardwood parquet and the windows in the rear looked down the hill onto a large lot where we had a root cellar. The furnace and coal storage room were off the hall which led to a nice-sized kitchen.

At the time Arthurdale still had a rather undeveloped look. There was no Inn [later built in 1936] and the roads were very bad and very muddy when it rained. There were also no established social norms. I assumed

that past relations in Scotts Run continued in Arthurdale, but to me it seemed like a rather closed community.

¹ The first doctor in Arthurdale was Dr. Harry Timbres, who later went with his wife to Russia to work in the Communist system. Both later died from typhus.



Dr. John Foster Lehman



Virginia Svea Lehman Sauer

Soon after moving to Arthurdale, I became conscious to the fact that no one greeted me or offered me friendship, including the project manager, who always seemed distant. No one guided me on a tour of the community or offered help, which made me begin to feel isolated from the rest of the community. I soon realized that circumstances prevented the doctor, and subsequently his wife, from having close relationships with the homesteaders. We had many opportunities to know people in a professional relationship and casual conversation but few opportunities to be together socially. One social opportunity I took advantage of was a course in needlework being taught by a Swedish expert. I enjoyed this experience very much and had a good time with the women who attended. Still, I continued to feel separated from the homesteaders but luckily was diverted from my isolation by the chores of getting settled in my new home and assisting Dr. Lehman.

My husband drafted me to work in his office immediately after arriving in Arthurdale. I was happy to comply. I was not expected to assist the doctor with patients, but merely act as a receptionist and complete desk work. Each month I sent a report to Washington about what was happening at our facility, which were personal stories of occurrences, not medical records. I later became aware that my presence displeased the nurse, who was very popular with the homesteaders.

Another source of community discontent directed toward me was in regard to the doctor's car. When we moved to Arthurdale, Dr. Lehman and I had no car. The community manager did not tell us that the American Friends Service Committee had provided a car to be used by the project doctor. Instead, the project manager had appropriated it for his employee, the nurse, who used it to travel from Arthurdale to her home in Reedsville. We had no money to buy a car, so the doctor went without the use of one at night until we later took possession of it. Dr. Lehman disliked driving and I soon became his driver. I would drive him to his calls after hours and soon rumors spread that I was trying to take the nurse's job. I made a concerted effort to stay in the car and wait for him during these home visits in order to dispel the rumors.

The incident that brought matters to a climax was

an accident to one of the homesteaders who had severed a finger. He arrived at our home after office hours, bleeding profusely. Dr. Lehman told me to accompany him to the office at the school where he had supplies to treat the patient. When we arrived, he instructed me to give an anesthetic injection. I had never given an injection before, but I did as I was told in such an emergency. This story soon spread rapidly and within a short time, no one would speak to me because of the rumors that I was trying to take the nurse's job. I was shunned for at least thirty days. It was around Christmas time and the doctor and I had purchased presents for every child on the homestead. When we delivered them, the presents were accepted, but no one spoke, even to the doctor. One day I was in the post office and the man whom we had treated stood beside me without speaking. I became very angry and forced him to turn toward me and speak.

My husband and I also cut down a tree for a family who had never had a Christmas tree. We trimmed it the best we could with a few ornaments, took it to the family, and left without words being spoken. On Christmas Day, the father showed up at our door and handed me a bouquet of crepe paper flowers which his children had made for me. I was so touched, I cried like a baby.

After all of these events occurred, the Quakers on the homestead organized a public meeting about which the doctor and I knew nothing. The meeting was held in

order to get at the truth regarding the medical program, but I do not know exactly what happened except that in a few days, Clarence Pickett arrived in Arthurdale with the Surgeon General of the United States and transferred Dr. Lehman from the school's payroll to the federal's payroll. The terms of employment remained the same. The office nurse did not return to work.

While all of this was going on, we discovered that there were all kinds of medical and hospital equipment in the empty house next door to our home. We found this out by peering in the windows of this house which had always stood empty. No one had ever informed the doctor that this home was to be a community health clinic. We immediately demanded and took possession of the house and opened an infirmary with three hospital beds for overnight patients.

My duties did not change when we moved from the



Dr. Lehman's Home at Arthurdale

office in the school to the infirmary next door. We were very busy because we had more services to offer. Dr. Lehman had to take care of all medical problems without help during this period. I was not trained as a nurse and was only called on in an emergency, such as the night we were presented with the problem of what to do about a sweet woman who had dreamed all of her married life about delivering her ninth baby in a "real" hospital.

Fortunately, in the previous two days I had assisted Dr. Lehman in two deliveries outside Arthurdale, which was an infraction of the rules, but also prepared me somewhat. Our patient gave birth without effort and with a huge smile on her face. Afterwards, I was faced with an infant to care for. I had no children and no experience whatsoever with nursing any patient, let alone an infant. In those days, women stayed in the hospital ten days after delivery. Although we had a coal furnace to heat the building, it was still cold in the mornings. We had a kitchen downstairs on which I could prepare food, but bathing the patient and the baby was a problem. I was not afraid to tackle the mother but would get in a panic about the baby. So, even though we had a bassinet in the mother's room, I would remove it to another room to attempt bathing. One morning, because it was so cold, I had to stay in the room with the mother who saw my awkwardness. She started to laugh and said, "You know, that baby won't break. Give her here." I was so relieved.

In a few days, we found a young woman on the homestead who would stay at the clinic in the daytime to relieve me and after about five or six days, the new nurse, Carolyn Hogan, arrived. I first met her when I walked from the infirmary to my house, smelled ham

frying and biscuits baking and there was Carolyn taking charge. From then on, we had a real nurse, a wonderful warm person who took one look at me and held out her arms. Carolyn became dear to me and I soon had her two young daughters to love. A new relationship began to develop with the homesteaders as well, who were so pleased with the infirmary they apparently forgot their initial bad feelings toward us.

The biggest excitement in Arthurdale was the occasional visit by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She usually wore tweed suits, looking rather British. The community always turned out to welcome her, with a luncheon or a square dance. I will never forget the first time she visited after my arrival. I was not told that I was invited to the customary lunch given by the community. At the time the luncheon was to start, I was at home confused about why I was not included. Suddenly, a man came to the door and wanted to know why I was not at the luncheon, which was being held up because Mrs. Roosevelt would not start without me. He was, frankly, annoyed and only left with my promise to proceed to the Center immediately. I was a pitiful site with my shabby clothes and my unfixed hair. The road was thick with mud as I walked up to the Center, arriving with mud-caked shoes and no change in apparel. Mrs. Roosevelt greeted me kindly, but I was so humiliated I could not speak.

In 1938, President Roosevelt visited Arthurdale to give the graduating address at the high school. By today's standards, the preparations for his visit were amateurish. No one worried extensively about his safety, although certain precautions were taken in advance. I attended the graduation service and heard one of his most important speeches on taxation. The

President's extreme handicap was hardly noticeable as his son, James, supported his entire weight in such a way that he seemed to be walking. President Roosevelt stood behind a podium which concealed his legs, while his braces kept him upright. It must have been excruciating, yet he made no sign of pain and spoke in his deep, rich voice. Later, he visited the infirmary and we stood beside his car talking to him.

On another visit, Mrs. Roosevelt brought the wife of the Secretary of Treasury, Mrs. Elinor Morgenthau, to the infirmary. Another time she brought Doris Duke, the tobacco heiress. We impressed them both with our medical program and hoped for a



Front Row: Carolyn Hogan (Nurse), Maxine McLane, Dr. Lehman, Virginia Lehman Sauer. Dr. McLane is looking over Dr. Lehman's shoulder. President Roosevelt sits in the car surrounded by politicians, secret service, aides, and journalists.

donation. Mrs. Roosevelt even wrote about the infirmiry once in her "My Day" column.

The First Lady was usually accompanied by Jennings Randolph, our popular Democratic Representative in Congress. Years later I lived in Austin, Texas, and attended Mrs. Lyndon Johnson's annual panel discussion of international affairs. Much to my delight, Jennings Randolph was one of the panel members. Afterwards, when everyone was going up to the platform to talk to various speakers, he was standing alone. It seemed no one remembered him. But I did. I talked to him about Arthurdale and he was so pleased and happy to reminisce.

While we lived in Arthurdale, Mrs. Roosevelt invited Dr. Lehman to the White House for lunch. He would not go unless I was invited too. The formidable Mrs. Sarah Delano Roosevelt, the President's mother, was also there along with Ethel Dupont, a daughter-in-law. The First Lady was loaded with rings on her fingers, which astonished me because I had been taught that anything but pearls was improper, especially more than one ring (wedding ring not counted). I then watched Mrs. Roosevelt crumble crackers into her soup, which according to my plebeian notions was not done. After that visit to the White House, I crumbled my crackers in soup whenever I felt like it and draped myself in chunky jewelry, never giving a thought to whether I was vulgar or not. If Mrs. Roosevelt could do it, so could I.

Dr. Lehman and I lived in Arthurdale for about three years. During that tenure, the pressure in Preston County for a practicing physician was tremendous. Dr. Randolph in Kingwood was close to retiring. Increasingly, we had calls for home deliveries and there were many emergencies outside of Arthurdale that required a physician's care. The demands to work outside of Arthurdale became so great that one night a small group of men awakened us and ordered the doctor come with them. They had a gun and made clear they would not hesitate to use it. No doctor can turn down the call of a gun, even if he was not idealistic. Dr. Lehman was devoted to medicine and had been from the time he was a young boy. To have people in trouble who had nowhere to turn but him was unbearable. Thus, despite his agreement not to go outside the homestead, he could not refuse the needs of the community at large.

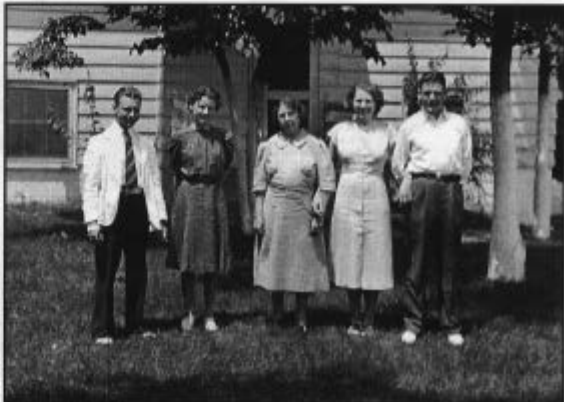
One day, a dentist from Kingwood, Dr. Kercheval, called and begged Dr. Lehman to examine his daughter, who it turned out had leukemia and later died. Later, Dr. Kercheval offered Dr. Lehman a large house in Kingwood to use as a hospital. In the meantime, my husband brought in another doctor to Arthurdale, Dr. Robert McLane, who had been a classmate of his at Jefferson Medical College and by coincidence, had been my brother's best friend. He and his wife moved into a house in Arthurdale.

After Dr. McLane came to Arthurdale, my husband

made plans to open the Kercheval Memorial Clinic, a five-room hospital with one private room and two or three patients in other rooms. The doctor's office, laboratory, x-ray room, kitchen, waiting room, examining room, and dentist office would be downstairs. It was wonderful at the time, but truly archaic from today's standards. Doctors in private practice were given endless credit, so we had no trouble furnishing it with the most modern equipment of that day. When our plans became known, the government ordered Dr. Lehman to leave Arthurdale. Dr. McLane remained there. After we settled in Kingwood, many former Arthurdale patients came to Kingwood for treatment.

The entire time we were in Arthurdale, Dr. Lehman was shunned by the medical professionals in Morgantown and Clarksburg, who considered our work Socialistic. Even the retail men would not call on us, except for one man from a hospital supply company who stayed with us whenever he was in the area. Later, we rewarded him by buying all our equipment for the Kercheval Memorial Hospital from him.

When I look back on it, my time in Arthurdale was unique. When I was there, the community was literally being born and had no genetic ancestors. It was an experiment, not a scientific, controlled experiment, but a kind of happening. The homesteaders were required to create a new way of life and a new culture based on the conviction that the future of the children was the important consideration. It was a great time of psychological turmoil because the people had been promised the moon by politicians and their failure to understand some of the limitations of the project was not the homesteaders' fault. None of us understood the strange relationship of authority caused by the combination of government money and private contributions, but it was not long before I was no longer a Socialist! I did a lot of growing up in Arthurdale. There were many experiences, once painful, which I can now understand in hindsight. It was also a happy time because I was enthusiastic, young, and learning something new every day.



John, Svea and Friends