

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRY DOCTORS by Lynette Karp

Max Klein arrived in South Africa at the tender age of 17 in 1878 having escaped the army in Russia 4 years earlier. Those 4 years were spent in Liverpool, together with his cousin of similar circumstance and age. The boys saved enough money from selling sponges and chamois leather on the streets to buy a steerage bunk on a semi troopship coming to South Africa. After a stint in Oudtshoorn they headed for Johannesburg when news of the gold rush reached them.

At 34 years old Max felt sufficiently affluent to afford a wife and he returned to Europe to claim Anna Sack from Neustadt, initially settling in Johannesburg with her. The First World War arrived, and the Klein family were 'uitlanders' so Anna, Max and their young family were deported to a Port Elizabeth detention camp by covered wagon where all Anna's European treasured jewelry was stolen. The atrocious situation they found themselves in, claimed through illness, poverty and deprivation, the lives of three young daughters over those early difficult years. Leopold (Lockie) Klein was the only survivor of those turbulent times (born 1901) and it is snippets of his story that I relate here as shared with me many years later in the last months of his life by this wonderful man, my paternal uncle.

When the times allowed it, the Klein family made their way to Calvinia, a small village servicing a farming community where Anna's two bachelor brothers had settled earlier, having escaped Russia together. Lockie recalled as a young chappie being 'employed' by the manager of the local commercial hotel where the first 'electric bioscope' was introduced to the village. And the job he was employed to do, together with two other youngsters was to run the programs and then later produce realistic noises to supplement the 'silent movie' being shown. They had great fun using sandpaper to mimic the sound of running water and toy pistols to satisfy even the deaf when the show called for it.

Calvinia's School, an unsophisticated block of a building, was built a few years before the Boer War and during the war served as a hospital. All teaching at that time was done in English while Nederlands was an ill taught foreign language. And that was the school that all four Klein boys attended.

There was a small Jewish community in Calvinia as evident today in the Jewish graveyard which records the history of this community quite effectively.. Rabbi Berelowitz, taught cheder to the Jewish children from Monday to Friday for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour preceding the school programme at the local primary school. Bennie Klein - the second of the four boys was the only one to remain in Calvinia for his lifetime. He owned the general dealers' store in the village A wonderful camaraderie and mutual respect existed amongst the different religions. The local farmers' committee undertook the responsibility of looking after the old shul, which was converted into a Jewish Museum, honoring a pledge they had made to the last of the Jewish community to leave the village.

Max and Anna worked hard and saved hard, determined to give their offspring the opportunity to study at university. Lockie eventually completed his schooling in Calvinia and moved on first to Cape Town University and later to Wits where he joined three other medical students (Kuny, Slade and Thompson,) to be the very first graduates of the new medical school of the Witwatersrand University.(Fifty years later, Lockie and his wife together with the only other surviving doctor, Dr Kuny and his wife were honored guests at a banquet honoring the founding of Wits medical school which culminated in the two couples at the head of the parade through the streets of Johannesburg on a horse drawn carriage!)

Lockie hankered for the country and bought a practice for two hundred and fifty pounds in Clocolan, Orange Free State. He also bought a Dodge car, which cost him three hundred and fifty pounds. He did well to be free of debt by the end of his second year in practice.

Lockie was the eldest of the four Klein brothers, then came Bennie, Zalo and the youngest my beloved father, Percy. Percy too qualified as a doctor- at UCT c. 1934. He was sponsored by Lockie on the understanding that he would join his brother in practice and the loan for his tuition would be deducted from his monthly earnings. And so it was. After qualifying and marrying his wife Mary Goldberg of Worcester in October 1935, the couple made their way to Clocolan to join his brother and that was the start of a lifetime of medicine, shared between the two.

The task of a country doctor in those days was not only to practice medicine, surgery and midwifery - he was expected too, to prescribe and dispense medicine. He was often called on to substitute for the vet, sometimes for the undertaker, often for the dentist. It is difficult to describe the intimacy of country practice as experienced then. It was a long vigil and intimate involvement with the drama of life and death and illness. It required constant care, day in and day out often for months on end.

I am sure there is a movie in there somewhere waiting to be produced. I put together a book for the family made up of the stories that Uncle Lockie shared with me and I have referred back to that little book to write this memoir. Anecdotes can best convey the full flavor of a country doctor's life early in the 1900's so I offer a few for your perusal, in my uncle's own words.

Lockie had trained a unique Basuto man to assist him in his country surgery- 'Old Bill' was secretary, assistant, translator, general major-domo and friend as illustrated by the following example.

While Percy was relaxing on a couch in a room adjacent to the surgery and Lockie was out on a country call, Percy heard old Bill answer the phone as follows:

'Nee, ek is jammer, die Dokter is uit- hy werk. Net die seun is hier -hy slaap!' (No, I am sorry, the Doctor is out, he is working. Only the son is here- he is sleeping) So originated the father/son phase between these two

brothers with a mere 9 years separating them in age. Inevitably, many years later, came the inevitable request-

"Dr Percy, to settle a dispute, please tell us honestly, who is the older of you two?"

The reality of the situation was that Percy and Lockie attended the same patients in tandem over a period of 50 years, living and working in peace and harmony all that time, and from them radiated the same circumstances, to their wives, and to their families. And it all started in the country.....

` When called out on a viciously stormy night to an outlying farm on unknown terrain, he politely requested that the farmer meet him with a lantern at the gate to the farm. The farmer was horrified and explained that it would be quite impossible - he wouldn't even expect his dog to be out on such a bitter night!

It is interesting to note a few financial facts relative to the years in which Lockie and Percy practiced together in the country.

The district surgeon's salary was fifteen pounds a month with a drug allowance of ten pounds a year at a time when every farm in the Clocolan district served as a small location. Mileage was paid at one shilling a mile. The following authenticated figures are interesting. For railway personnel the medical cost was five and nine pence a year. The following year it was raised to five and nine pence halfpenny. When a year thereafter the costs had gone up yet another two pennies a suggestion was made that there should be an investigation into the rising costs of dispensing.

In paging through an Annual of the South African Medical Journal of 1913, a country Doctor enquiring for information about motor cars and their running costs, the following were some of the replies received.

"A 15 HP four-seater car with embellishments cost six hundred pounds. Petrol- coastal price was fourteen and six for eight gallons that arrived in a case of two four-gallon tins. Petrol could also be obtained in eight-gallon drums. The cost was slightly higher, but the spillage was less. The life of a tire at 20-30 miles an hour could be estimated between three to four thousand miles. A careful fifteen miles an hour could give a life of 6000 miles. The owner of such a car estimated running costs at one shilling per mile." Another correspondent considered one shilling per mile preposterous and assumed that the author of that statement was running his practice for the sole purpose of owning a motorcar! He himself owned a two-seater Ford costing him one hundred and eighty-five pounds. He estimated his total all over costs at 4 and a half pence per mile and expected his car to give seven years service.

WW2 intervened and circumstances changed. Lockie married Marion Blumgart and moved to Pretoria where he joined Dr Bella Shawsin in practice with Percy still in Clocolan. In 1940 I was born with Lockie's daughter, Anita, two months later. Both Lockie and Percy enlisted in the Medical Corps up North and served together for the duration of the war. Percy left his practice under a locum's care to go to active service, but a few years later in 1947 packed up his family - he , his wife, myself and my baby sister - Maureen (5 mths old- in a carrycot), plus our treasured Dalmatian dog in the car and a pile of suitcases on a luggage carrier of the old Pontiac, to join his brother in Pretoria. Anita and I grew up, close cousins, and the years remain enriched by our loyal friendship - to this very day!

In the course of their careers as doctors, the brothers had ten partners, of whom seven later specialized, Percy was amongst them. He became an anaesthetist. As for Lockie, he was proud of saying that specialists were his specialty!

Many years after leaving Clocolan Lockie and Percy were invited back at the opening of a new hospital as guests of honor in the village. While there, they

were approached by a young woman who said she was too young to remember either of them, but she felt she knew them well, as she had grown up with their names which were household words on their farm. She explained that they had two mongrel dogs in their home, and they had been named `Lockie' and Percy.'

I personally recall in 1973 driving into Clocolan with my Dad- to introduce my husband to my birth town. We stopped outside the well-remembered and hardly changed general store to enquire directions from the present owners. Next to our car was a pickup truck and as my dad got out of our car, so an elderly lady stepped down from the truck adjacent to us. She put her hand out and said:

"Ek ken jou Dokter- Kan ek vir jou hulp?"(I know you Doctor - can I help you?)

And there - in one sentence you have the essence of country living.

Although officially retired Lockie continued to practice medicine from his home. Marion predeceased him and after being viciously attacked one night by a burglar in their home he moved into an apartment adjacent to Percy and Mary and lived there until his final days which was in hospital where he died in 1987. Percy died a year later, still in practice as an anesthetist till very near his end. Their memory however lives on in Calvinia, Clocolan and Pretoria and with the mass emigration of so many of the South African population, there is no doubt that they are remembered in much of the rest of the world as well.

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**Written by Lynette Karp in September, 2024**

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