

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

DR. ALICE IVA CONKLIN  
& WOMEN IN EARLY MEDICINE

Alice Iva Conklin was born and raised in Cass County, Michigan and she had a dream. Her ambition was to become a medical doctor. As the grand-daughter of local original pioneers, she possessed a fortitude and drive which was required to overcome gender bias, stereotyping, and educational roadblocks. Her own community's general mistrust of females in this profession, added to the struggle for a career of her own choice.

Born in 1868 to Gilbert Conklin and wife Maria (Mariah) Bedford in Silver Creek Township, Alice spent her early years surrounded by a large extended family. This was only 31 years after Michigan became a state in 1837. Her paternal grandparents were Abram Conklin and wife Belinda Gilbert. Maternal grandparents were George Bedford, Sr. and wife Ann Smith. As a child, Alice attended the one room school on School Street, not to far from Indian Lake Road, with her brother William and sister Belinda. She was known for her high intelligence and accelerated reading ability.

Alice Conklin, like her father and sisters, was tall, slender and fair, resembling their Dutch ancestors. Conklins were descended from colonial glass makers, who migrated from the Netherlands (Holland) to Italy. Then they were welcomed in England due to their expertise in early glass making, and finally lured to America. It should be noted that, before glass making technology reached America, buildings either had no window openings, or the gaping apertures had only shutters, and oiled paper to let in light. Very early colonial American suffered with extremely drafty houses. When Southwestern Michigan was first settled, most log cabins did not have glass windows, because they were expensive, fragile, and hard to transport on covered wagons. Windows were included in building construction, by the time framed houses replaced log cabins..

Alice's father was prosperous, and decided to give his daughter the higher education she so richly deserved. During this era, there existed a great deal of gender bias, stereotyping of women, negative assumptions about their intelligence, and the attitude had been "keep them barefoot and pregnant." Social mores were slowly changing, but old prejudices existed rigidly in the general population. Alice Iva Conklin would not accept the role society tried to force upon her. With the help of her parents, she searched for institutions of higher learning that would accept her. Albion college (with its Wesleyan Seminary classes first held in 1843) was willing to take females for undergraduate work. Detroit College of Medicine (founded in 1868) was open to females interested in the medical profession. Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago, Illinois (found in 1851) admitted women for "medical residency" starting in 1869. So, Alice Iva Conklin, daughter of Cass County, Michigan pioneers, and a medical pioneer herself, became a surgeon.

Unfortunately, no hospital in Southwestern Michigan would hire her, because she was a woman. The local all male medical community, into which she applied for work, were firm in their convictions that a female should not be a doctor, and especially not a surgeon. Therefore, Alice searched elsewhere for employment.

Alice found her life's calling in Chicago. She was hired, and eventually, served as a resident physician at the Chicago Women's and Children's Hospital of Cook County, Illinois. In 1832, that medical facility had started out as a group of women nursing cholera, small pox, and scarlet fever victims. In 1835, it served as an "alms house" for the indigent, homeless, insane, permanently disabled, and needy ill travelers. It was on the corner of Clark and Randolph Streets. In 1843, "fear of epidemics prompted city officials to build the first fully equipped permanent structure located on North Avenue by Lincoln Park. The official Women's and Children

Hospital, that it became, was founded in 1865 by Mary Harris Thompson to serve the widows and orphans of Civil War victims. The need for surgeons was so great in this hospital, and their history so liberated, no one cared about Alice's gender. The only thing that mattered was her skill as a surgeon and doctor. Dr. Alice began working there somewhere around 1886, and quickly advanced her position, due to her surgical and medical talents. Her career there spanned forty years, and "at one time she (even) had an office in Logan Square."

Alice arranged her life, so her ties to home (Cass County) were never severed. She worked in Chicago, and kept her permanent residence in Silver Creek Township, maintaining an ancestral home. Alice's sister, Belinda, was an intelligent and skilled fine arts major and successful Chicago artist. Belinda A. Conklin (1865-1937) was a painter and sculpturer, who produced a number of impressive oil paintings, portraits, and statues that now reside in private collections. Neither woman ever married, and they lived in an apartment together in Chicago, each pursuing her own career. Holidays, vacations, some weekends, and other special occasions were spent in Silver Creek Township. It did not take long, after she was hired at the Chicago hospital, for her career choice to become, not a liability, but a great local social advantage. Local biases about women doctors and surgeons began to fade, as her prestige grew. Family had always been loyal to Alice, but local residents had been distant. Now, whenever Dr. Alice would come home it became a major event. She was sought out to give speeches, invited to church socials, and included in literary events.

Alice and Belinda were devoted to their extensive family, who by this time, were scattered about Southwestern Michigan. Trips home almost always involved many visits to local relatives. Alice's career kept her busy and limited shopping time. She always gave the same gifts at Christmas - a pair of leather gloves. Every time a new baby was born into the family, she would give the child a small silver spoon. Those later became known as the "Conklin Silver Spoons," and some have been kept as heirlooms. Three are still known to exist.

Although, Alice and Belinda never married and had children, William (their brother) and his wife Julia Griswold, did have two little girls, Hope and Louise. William died at age thirty years. The children were raised by their mother, with a lot of love and support from Alice, Belinda and the family. In her "Will and Last Testament," Alice left "some of her interests in the (Indian Lake) lake shore property to them." Hope Conklin (1887-2/1959) was an teacher and then "headmistress of (several) exclusive women's schools in the East." Her most prominent position being that of headmistress for "Cambridge School for Girls" from 1921-1929, near Boston, Massachusetts. She, finally, married Douglas McIntosh (1909-1938), a Canadian, who was a professor "in the Theology Department at Yale University, and 22 years her junior. Hope's husband "became the subject of a famous U.S. Supreme Court Case (1931), when he applied for naturalization" (citizenship) in the U.S. and was denied it in a 5 to 4 vote. Julia Griswold (the girl's mother) lived with Hope for 40 years, the last eleven as an invalid until her death at age 85 years. During World War II (1939-1945), when England was being bombed by the Germans, Hope "sent food (packages) to the famous Sitwell family of writers" in London, to give aid to her friends. Hope died at age 72 years, and left all of her property to Yale University. Yale published a twelve page booklet about her career. A copy of the book can be found at the Dowagiac Library, Dowagiac, Michigan. Hope and her mother are buried in the Indian Lake Cemetery, and her husband is interned in Canada.

Alice's second niece, Louise Conklin had a very distinguished teaching career. Louise graduated from the University of Michigan with a Bachelors (A.B.) degree in 1914 and stayed there to earn her Masters degree (M.A.) in 1917. Her major focus was music education. Louise became a professor at the Detroit Junior College, which was renamed Wayne State University. She stayed at that educational institution during her entire career. In 1943, she was made Chairman of the Music Department and remained so, until her retirement. From 1952-1959, she was listed in the "Who's Who" Edition Book published to honor distinguished persons in America. When Louise retired the "Detroit Free Press" newspaper published a long article on her (4/1/1964). Alice's nieces "were at odds with one another," with the unfriendly atmosphere coming from a dispute over the care of their mother. Hope ended up taking on the full responsibility of her mother. Paul Conklin was executor of Alice's estate, and tried to bring about a consensus between the two sisters.

Dr. Alice Conklin had one great indulgence. In 1908, Ford Motor Company in Detroit started selling Model T Ford cars. She was forty years old at the time. This event began her "love affair" with the American auto, which lasted the rest of her life. On Sundays, when she was home in Silver Creek Township, Alice loved to take long drives on the dirt and gravel roads through Cass and surrounding counties. She would coax several family members to accompany her, sometimes packing a picnic basket, so they could stop for lunch on a peaceful beach or a road side park. As the years passed, she stopped taking the train to Chicago, and drove herself, and Belinda, between Chicago and Silver Creek Township. She owned a series of "fancy automobiles" through the years. The last car she bought was a Kaiser-Frazer Automobile, which were only made between 1947-1950. She was approximately seventy-nine years old at the time. One of the younger men of the family used to chauffeur her around in that car. Today, Kaiser-Frazer Automobiles are considered classics. When she passed away, Everett Claspy (local author), bought the car.

Alice's home in Silver Creek Township is on Section Eighteen, bordered by Indian Lake Road. The farm was her father's property originally. Still standing today, it is a classic Carpenter Gothic Style, of wood construction. The house was labeled Number 6 on a tour of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan's historical homes. As an Architectural Historical Site, it is a prime example of early frame buildings.

When Dr. Alice Conklin was seventy years old in 1938, she retired from her position at the Chicago Women's and Children Hospital. Belinda (1865-1937), her sister, had passed away the year before, and she did not like living alone in Chicago. She returned to her Silver Creek Township home. Over the years, she had purchased substantial property, which she then managed. She lived on the family homestead until age 76. Facing frailty, she "sold the farm and moved to Dowagiac." She lived in Dowagiac for three years after that, and enjoyed "giving talks before the Business and Professional Women's Club of Dowagiac." Dr. Alice Conklin was always ready to tell a story about her life, the rigors of becoming a woman doctor, or her pioneer ancestors.

In 1959, Dr. Alice Iva Conklin passed away at age 88 years. Her funeral was held at the Lyons Funeral Home in Dowagiac, Michigan. Alice is buried beside her sister, Belinda A. Conklin at the Indian Lake Cemetery, Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan.

In conclusion, without a doubt, Doctor Alice Iva Conklin lived a productive, full life. She did not let society or gender bias define her. Instead, Alice set her own course in life and saved many other lives in the process with her medical skills. Her success slowly helped bring acceptance of women doctors into the local medical community. Her actions contributed to women's liberation, equal rights, and the enfranchisement of females everywhere. Alice has truly earned her place, as an outstanding woman, in the history of Cass County, Michigan.

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## RESEARCH

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