

Wonderful Women of Wawarsing

by **Marion M. Dumond**

*Former Town of Wawarsing Historian
and Ellenville Public Library Director (Retired)*

Many of these columns in earlier issues this year have related the accomplishments of various different men in the Town of Wawarsing. It's long past time to talk about some of the wonderful women who have shared their intelligence, caring, talents, and funds in order to make the Town of Wawarsing a better place to live.

Singling out one or more individuals from the multitude of strong, resourceful women who have left their mark on this township borders on being hazardous, but there should be support for the four ladies about whom this column is written.

Miss Nellie Newkirk (photo at right, courtesy **Ellenville Public Library & Museum**), born December 1, 1875, in Greenfield Park, was a teacher for 52 years, almost all of them in the Town of Wawarsing. She attended the one-room school in Greenfield Park and was a graduate of the *Ellenville High School* and its teacher training class in 1896.

Her first teaching assignment was a one-room schoolhouse in Soccannissing for which she was paid \$7 a week and spent \$2.50 of it for room and board. After Soccannissing, she moved on to teach in Cragmoor, Tillson, Dairyland, and Beacon (nine years). She returned to Ellenville in 1913 and taught third and fourth grades at the *Pine Grove Elementary School* for thirty-five years. She retired in 1948, having taught three and four generations of Ellenville area residents.

In a 1969 interview, Miss Newkirk talked about having 50 pupils in her first assignment, with one student older than she was. One year she taught 70 pupils at Tillson, but never had difficulty with discipline.

When she taught away from Ellenville, Miss Nellie always spent her weekends at home in the house on **Main Street** which she shared with her mother and sister for many years, living there alone after their deaths, mowing her own lawn, "widening the walk" after a snow storm, and tending her garden.

She was a member of the WSCS of the *Ellenville Methodist Church*, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Methodist Church's Hunt Memorial Bible Class, and the Ellenville area chapter of the Daughters of the Union.

When Miss Newkirk died at age 99, she was remembered as the "dean of Ellenville teachers." Her philosophy of life was summarized in a November 1972 interview when she said, "I always tried to teach more than the three 'R's. I tried to teach love and kindness to others. Those are lessons you have to carry with you all your life."

Miss Nellie's membership in the Daughters of the Union connects her with our second Wonderful Woman, **Dr. Alice Divine**.

Dr. Divine, a pioneer woman physician in this area for more than 40 years, was born January 20, 1868, to Major Dwight Divine and Millicent J. Hatch Divine. The Divine family name was a prominent one in the Ellenville area and beyond, tied to knifemaking, *Clayton's Military Band*, and various commercial enterprises. Divines were leaders in financial, civic, social, and charitable projects and organizations. Dr. Divine's father, Dwight Divine, was one of the principal founders in 1871 of the *Ulster Knife*



Company, assuming full ownership and control about five years later after the business, which had been established as the Cooperative Knife Company, ran into financial difficulties. *Ellenville Knife Company* and *Dwight Divine & Sons* were other names used by this extremely important commercial enterprise.

With that kind of background, Alice Divine's choice of medicine after her graduation from the *Ellenville Academy* was no surprise, although women had difficulty in acquiring a medical education in the late 19th century. Professional women, particularly in medicine, were few and none too quickly or generously accepted.

Alice began her study of medicine at the Women's Medical College in New York, but completed her last year at the Cornell Medical College in New York after the Women's College disbanded. She graduated from the Cornell Medical College in 1900 and interned at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children.

During her long career as an Ellenville physician, Dr. Divine was noted for the keen interest she took in the welfare of her patients and for her many unobtrusive benefactions. Bills were quietly paid, medications were provided, but few people knew of Dr. Divine's continuing generosity.

Professionally, she was a member of the Ulster County Medical Society, the New York State Medical Association, and the American Medical Association.

A staunch Republican, Dr. Divine was for some years vice-chairman of the Ulster County Republican Central Committee.

Dr. Divine was one of the leading organizers and a charter member of the *Major Dwight Divine Chapter of the Daughters of the Union*, serving as its regent until her retirement in 1947, and honorary regent thereafter.

She was also a member of the *Reformed Church* and the *Wawarsing Eastern Star Chapter*.

At her death, funeral services were held at Dr. Divine's home on **Canal Street**, and the list of participants read like a veritable "Who's Who in Ulster County." ➔