

Arthur E. Guedel Memorial Anesthesia Center

Virginia Apgar, M.D., Musical Instrument Woodcrafter

By Selma Harrison Calmes, M.D.

Virginia Apgar, M.D., (1909-1974) the extraordinary anesthesiologist who developed the Apgar Score, was the first Director of the Division of Anesthesiology at Columbia University Medical School (1938-1949). She was the first woman officer of the ASA, serving as Treasurer (1941-1945), and also the first woman recipient of the ASA's Distinguished Service Award (1961). Appropriately and deservedly, Dr. Apgar was honored by the United States Government with a commemorative postage stamp in 1994, and she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1995.

What is not generally known about Dr. Apgar is that she was a dedicated musician since her childhood. She even handcrafted four stringed instruments, all of which have been donated as a collection to Columbia University by a group of pediatricians led by Joe Butterfield, M.D. The story that follows, "The Phone Booth Caper," is a piece of entertaining history about Virginia Apgar, the "musical instrument woodcrafter."

A preoperative visit to a patient in 1956 led to Dr. Apgar's interest in constructing stringed instruments. This patient was Carleen Hutchings, a high school science teacher and musician. Her interest in how stringed instruments produce sound prompted Mrs. Hutchings to do studies in a home laboratory and, eventually, to construct fine stringed instruments based on her scientific studies. She also published scientific articles on sound production. She had one of her self-made violins with her when she was in the hospital for surgery, and she invited Dr. Apgar to play it during the preoperative visit.



Dr. Virginia Apgar

Enchanted by the excellent sound quality of the instrument, Dr. Apgar joined Mrs. Hutchings in her studies and later learned instrument construction from her. Working from midnight to 2 a.m. (much to the chagrin of her neighbors who were trying to sleep), Dr. Apgar produced four stringed instruments—a violin, mezzo violin, cello, and viola—in her small apartment's bedroom filled with woodworking tools and a workbench. Dr. Apgar usually carried the cello or viola with her on her frequent travels and often joined chamber music groups in cities she visited for a night of playing.

Dr. Apgar's career as a musical instrument maker led to one of the most well-known stories about her, sometimes referred to as the famous "phone booth caper." As her instrument-making career developed, she was always looking for suitable fine wood to use. In 1957, Mrs. Hutchings spotted an excellent piece of curly maple, which was perfect for the back of the viola that Dr. Apgar wanted to make. The wood, however, happened to be the shelf in a pay telephone booth in the lobby of the Harkness Pavilion of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. Because it was not possible to get the shelf through channels of the hospital's bureaucracy, the two began to plan carefully to take another approach.

First, Dr. Apgar had to make a replacement shelf, but the stain would have to be an exact match to the one in the phone booth. Incredibly, a chance conversation at a hardware store near the hospital led them to the correct stain: the store owner had supplied the original stain to the hospital 27 years earlier. Tools were taken to the hospital in a suitcase. Mrs. Hutchings began her work in the phone booth late at night, with Dr. Apgar standing guard in the hall, dressed in her hospital uniform. When the night watchman came by on his rounds, Dr. Apgar would tap on the door of the booth, and Mrs. Hutchings would put a dime in the phone, pretending to make a call.

The shelf-napping plan almost hit a snag when, to Mrs. Hutchings' dismay, the substitute shelf was a quarter inch too long. So she went off to the women's restroom with her saw while Dr. Apgar stood guard. A passing nurse was very surprised to hear sawing noises coming from the women's restroom. Dr. Apgar stated firmly, "It's the only time repairmen can work in there." Apparently, the nurse was satisfied with that explanation, and the plan was a success. The removed shelf went on to a new life as the back of an Apgar viola, and the "phone booth caper" eventually made *The New York Times*.¹

The four instruments now at Columbia were played by a string quartet, the "Apgar String Quartet," in October 1994 when the stamp honoring Dr. Apgar was released at the American Academy of Pediatrics annual meeting in Dallas, Texas. The quartet was made up of four pediatricians: Nick Cunningham, M.D.

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(cello); Mary Howell, M.D. (mezzo violin); Yeou-Cheng Ma, M.D. (first violin; she is cellist Yo-Yo Ma's sister); and Bob Levine, M.D. (viola). They played Dr. Apgar's favorite chamber music at two events: at a lunch to award the 20th annual Virginia Apgar Award in Perinatal Medicine and at the stamp's unveiling ceremony.

Music was a vital part of Dr. Apgar's life, so music from her own instruments was an appropriate addition to the events. May the instruments enjoy a long life at their new home at Columbia and remind us of this vibrant, creative part of Dr. Apgar's life.



Virginia Apgar's anesthesia career was on the East Coast, but one part of her career shows us what California anesthesia was like in the 1930s.

Apgar began to seek anesthesia training in August 1934, while a surgical intern at Columbia. It was the time before standardized anesthesia training and the Match. She wrote to many people around the country to find out what training was available. Two of those she wrote to were in California: Drs. Arthur Guedel in Los Angeles and Mary Botsford in San Francisco. Both wrote back that no anesthesia training was available. (See Dr. Guedel's letter.)²

The "General Hospital" that Guedel referred to is now Los Angeles County/USC Medical Center. It alone, of all Los Angeles's hospitals,

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would have had an educational program, but Guedel recorded that, "It is not sufficiently well developed to be attractive." This was still The Depression, and L.A.'s anesthesiologists probably were busy trying to make a living, too busy to devote time to teaching.

Apgar noted only nine places in the United States to receive anesthesia training in 1934, and they were extremely variable in length and topics covered. All were on the East Coast or in the Mid-West. The West Coast had nothing! What a difference from today, with our many excellent training programs throughout the country.

Apgar finally was able to get a training position at the University of Wisconsin (UW) under Dr. Ralph Waters, who is considered "the father of modern anesthesiology," starting in January 1938. Most of the early leaders of modern anesthesia also were there at the time. One of these was Dr. Bill Neff, who came as chair to Stanford in 1937. Apgar was active in the UW alumni organization, the Aqualumni, and thus would have seen Neff at least once a year during their reunions. Other Aqualumni came to Los Angeles to work with Guedel, so Apgar would have learned of the tremendous improvement in anesthesia training here, as modern anesthesia developed after WW II.

For more on Dr. Apgar's anesthesia career, see Calmes SH. And what about the baby? Virginia Apgar and the Apgar Score. *ASA Newsletter* 1997; 61:20-22. http://www.asahq.org/Newsletters/1997/09_97/WhatAbout_0997.html.

Reference

1. Sullivan W. Confessions of a musical shelf-robber. *NY Times*. Feb. 2, 1975. There are several versions of this story: this reference is Mrs. Hutchings' statement.
2. Virginia Apgar Collection. Mount Holyoke College, Archives and Special Collections, South Hadley, MA.

The section starting on page 87 with the paragraph beginning "A preoperative visit..." through the paragraph that begins with "Music was a vital part of Dr. Apgar's life..." was excerpted from "Virginia Apgar, M.D., Inducted Into National Women's Hall of Fame" by Selma Harrison Calmes, M.D., and is reprinted with permission of the American Society of Anesthesiologists. It was originally published in the ASA Newsletter, December 1995, Volume 59, Number 12. A full copy of the text can be obtained from the ASA, 520 N. Northwest Highway, Park Ridge, Illinois 60068-2573.

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