



# Victor G. Heiser

1873-1972

Founder of the Heiser Gift  
in

The New York Community Trust  
909 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022

*In 1972, the will of Victor G. Heiser  
established the Heiser Gift, to be administered by  
the New York Community Trust for  
charitable purposes.*

The young man stretched out on the polo field had been struck by a ball. Blood spurted from a deep cut in his forehead. Still conscious, he looked up at the tall, slender man who had rushed to his side and implored, "Won't you look after me, Doctor, and have my surgeon help you?"

The patient was Edward, Prince of Wales. He was visiting the Philippines, and the year was 1922. The doctor, who realized that he had a future king in his care, was Victor Heiser, at that time a member of the International Board of the Rockefeller Foundation. The prince recovered and continued his tour; in time, he became King Edward VIII of England and then the Duke of Windsor. The doctor, too, resumed his duties, which took him ultimately to more than sixty countries in the interest of public health.

Victor George Heiser was born on February 5, 1873, the son of a Johnstown, Pennsylvania, merchant. An only child, Victor was very bright, and his parents were determined that he should receive the best possible education. During the day he attended public schools, and in the evenings he was tutored in French and German. In the summer he was sent to private classes. As a result of this intensive early education, Victor wrote later, he found himself at the age of sixteen, "ready for college, but ill-equipped for life."

However, tragic events dramatically altered Victor's destiny. The year was 1889, and during the month of May a cold rain had fallen so steadily that the small city of Johnstown was knee-deep in water. During the afternoon of the 31st, the water continued to inch higher. Victor's father was concerned with the safety of his horses, tied in their stalls on somewhat higher ground. He sent Victor to unhitch them. Before the boy could return to the house, a tremendous roar, followed by a series of crashes, signalled the collapse of the dam north of the town. Victor scrambled to the stable roof. Seconds later he saw his home and

his parents swept away. Miraculously, the boy was able to hang onto his precarious perch as it, too, was carried away by the raging torrent. Eventually he reached safety.

Friends offered Victor temporary shelter and food, and he set about redirecting the course of his life. All of his family's assets, with the exception of some real estate, were gone. For a time he worked as a plumber. Next he learned carpentry and cabinet-making. But, once he had acquired skills and proficiency in these trades, he found that the challenge was gone.

Using the proceeds of the sale of his family's property, Victor was able to enter engineering school. Within a year he decided instead to become a doctor. Mostly through independent study, he acquired credits equivalent to an A.B. degree, and three years later he completed the four-year course at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. It was during his internship at Lankenau Hospital that he made another important decision: "I knew I was not going to be either a general practitioner or a specialist. The prevention of disease on a wholesale basis appealed to me far more."

Victor Heiser was not a man who ever allowed himself to become discouraged by unfavorable odds. He had, after all, survived a disaster that had taken 3000 lives in a matter of minutes. And so, while he was vacationing in Washington, D.C., and spied an announcement of the examination for the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, he decided to sit for it. Only three of the 42 candidates would be accepted by the Service. Although he had had no special preparation for the grueling two-week examination, Heiser was again among the survivors.

One of Dr. Heiser's first assignments was with the Immigration Service, which put him in charge of inspecting entire boatloads of new arrivals, many of whom came with debilitating or contagious diseases and had to be turned back.

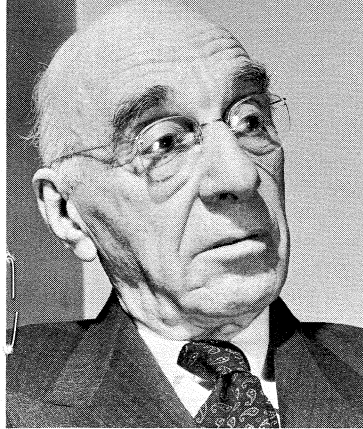
It was during his tour of duty with the Immigration Service that the young doctor began his international expeditions, in which he functioned not only as doctor but also as diplomat. He was sent first to Italy, where his job was to persuade the authorities to help prevent the ailing from attempting to emigrate. His next stop was Egypt, where bubonic plague had broken out and it was

feared that contaminated goods were being exported to the United States. Then to Canada, where many aliens who would have been turned away at regular points of entry were permitted by lax immigration laws to slip into the United States. As a result of Heiser's persuasiveness, the Italians, the Egyptians, and the Canadians all responded to his efforts and cooperated with him and with his mission.

In 1903, after five years of experience, Dr. Heiser was named Chief Quarantine Officer of the Philippine Islands. When he arrived in exotic Manila Bay, he was struck by the beauty of the Islands. But he soon discovered that, mostly due to ignorance, dreadful health conditions prevailed. Many of his contemporaries believed that these lovely, gentle people simply could not be taught the rules of sanitation that would lengthen their lives. But Dr. Heiser insisted that it could be done, and he set as his goal the saving of 50,000 lives per year.

His biggest task was convincing uneducated people to follow rules that seemed meaningless to them. Although he often lived surrounded by disease — cholera, typhus, smallpox, leprosy — Heiser was sick only once. He lived by firm rules, believing that if one drank boiled water, ate proper food, and had adequate exercise, one would always enjoy good health. Only once did he break his own rule: He drank unsterilized water and promptly fell ill with amoebic dysentery.

Among the problems he confronted and solved during his stay was the desperate need for nurses. He asked one of the few American nurses to produce a play that would present nurses as romantic and useful heroines. The presentation of the play was made into a social occasion, with invitations sent to the most influential people. So convincing was it that fifteen young girls signed up. But they had not been in training long when their parents tried to take them home, claiming their daughters had been "dishonored" by having to care for male patients. Heiser, who had quickly learned practical psychology in dealing with the Filipinos, agreed that they should leave at once — in fact, he said, he insisted upon it. His ruse worked. Now the parents wanted them to stay. So Heiser allowed himself to be "convinced" that the girls might stay. When a hundred more than he could accommodate also came for the training program, he



*Dr. Victor G. Heiser, 1948*

had no choice but to turn them away. Heiser responded by citing a law that a public officer could be fined and punished for an unauthorized expenditure of funds. The Legislature immediately appropriated enough money for the inclusion of the extra students. Heiser's student nurse recruitment program was a resounding success.

There were technical problems to be solved, too. Two years after his arrival in the Islands, the 32-year-old doctor was appointed Director of Health in the Philippines, a position which he held until 1915. Soon after he was appointed, he made vaccination compulsory in the Philippines. Heiser was determined to vaccinate every inhabitant of the Archipelago and to keep them vaccinated. In addition to carrying out massive education programs to overcome superstition and fear, a way had to be found to keep the vaccine cold in order to preserve its effectiveness. And since many of the inhabitants lived in remote areas, many days of foot-travel far from refrigeration facilities, Heiser attempted to contrive various cooling devices. None worked efficiently over prolonged periods. He even consulted Thomas Edison on the problem, but Edison was unable to offer any solution. Finally, the Dutch in Java developed a vaccine that could withstand the high temperatures, and in the course of a few years, twelve million vaccinations were performed. When Dr. Heiser left the Philippines in 1914, smallpox had been virtually eradicated.

One of the most severe problems was financial. A tremendously difficult challenge facing Heiser was the isolation and care of the thousands of lepers who lived in the Philippines. Some 1200 new cases developed annually, and nothing was

being done for them. Heiser established a colony on the isolated island of Culion, but his work there was continually hampered by lack of funds. Leonard Wood, Governor General of the Philippines at the time, took particular interest in the fate of the lepers. He was horrified to find that only one out of six of the patients at Culion was receiving the proper treatment. Wood finally agreed to lend his name to a fund-raising program. Two million dollars were secured and the Leonard Wood Memorial for the Eradication of Leprosy was founded. Half the money was ear-marked for the care of the lepers, the other half for research.

By 1914, Dr. Heiser believed that his work in the Philippines had been accomplished. That summer he left the islands and joined the Rockefeller Foundation's International Health Board as Director for the East. For the next twenty years, Victor Heiser continued his travels, concentrating on the Orient. "My mission," he wrote, "was to 'open the golden window of the East' to the gospel of health, to let in knowledge, so that the teeming millions who had no voice in demanding what we consider inalienable rights should also benefit by the discoveries of science, that in the end they, too, could have health."

An early assignment with the Rockefeller Foundation was in Ceylon. There the task was to convince the British tea growers to let him work against hookworm, which was debilitating thousands of workers in the labor force. An adept administrator as well as a humanitarian, he was invited by the government of Japan to analyze the deficiencies of their health services and to recommend improvements. He introduced health services in Java, helped to improve the medical schools of the country then called Siam, and visited Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in an attempt to eradicate yellow fever.

In 1921, Dr. Heiser returned to the Philippines under the aegis of the Rockefeller Foundation. He discovered that health services had deteriorated badly in the seven years since his departure. Smallpox was again rampant, for few of the young children had been vaccinated. Investigation proved that official records had been falsified to show that they had been vaccinated. He faced the discouraging prospect of repeating work that he had considered finished. During the next half dozen years, the doctor and his staff painfully mended the

broken threads of their earlier work, until at last they had raised health services to the level attained earlier.

In 1927, Dr. Heiser was named Associate Director of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation. For the next seven years he continued his wide travels and his varied duties, tracking down and stamping out many of the diseases that afflict mankind. Then, on October 31, 1934, Victor Heiser wrote to the President of the Rockefeller Foundation, requesting him to "have the necessary steps taken to place my name on the retired list." He was sixty-one years old, and he felt that he had, after sixteen trips around the world, seen enough of it.

His resignation accepted, Dr. Heiser sat down to write the story of his life and work. *An American Doctor's Odyssey* was published in 1936 and, to Heiser's immense surprise, became a best seller that was translated into fourteen languages. "Mine has been an extraordinarily happy and satisfactory life," he concluded, sounding for all the world like a man content to live in peaceful retirement for the remainder of his days.

But an active person like Victor Heiser does not long find satisfaction in retirement. In 1938, at the age of 65, he accepted a position with the National Association of Manufacturers, as consultant to the Committee on Health and Working Conditions. He continued in his new career in industrial medicine for another quarter of a century. Then he retired for a second time in 1963 at the age of 90.

There were other changes as the doctor embarked on his "second life." He had been a bachelor, explaining in his book, "Such a career as mine has necessarily deprived me of close family ties, and many other experiences which enrich our lives." However, in Dr. Heiser's new life, such sacrifices in the name of a career were no longer necessary. On April 20, 1940, Victor Heiser married Marion Peterson Phinny, a 44-year-old widow. Mrs. Heiser, who was 23 years younger than her husband, was from a family prominent in the tobacco business. The Heisers had a country home in the beautiful hills of Litchfield, Connecticut, and they divided their time between there and New York, where Dr. Heiser continued his professional activity. In 1939 and 1941 he wrote two more books for a popular audience, setting forth

his beliefs in the importance of hygiene, proper food, and exercise. He was active as a member of the Board of Directors of the New York Post-Graduate Hospital until 1949, and in 1948 he was elected president of the New York Society of Tropical Medicine.

Marion Heiser died in 1965 at the age of 69. Dr. Heiser continued his active life alone, arising each morning at 6:30 for his daily regimen of exercise — knee-bends, push-ups, and, later in the day, a two-mile walk. Then he got on with his work of compiling a history of the Rockefeller Foundation and writing his memoirs.

But inevitably, Victor Heiser's long and immensely useful life drew to an end. The tall, vigorous man suddenly found that he no longer had the strength for his daily walks from his Manhattan apartment. On February 27, 1972, twenty-two days after he began his one hundredth year, Victor G. Heiser died peacefully.

The good doctor's fight against mankind's most cruelly afflicting diseases did not end with his death. Of all the diseases he had treated, leprosy was the most difficult and puzzling. During his lifetime, causes, preventions, and treatments had been found for many diseases, but leprosy remained a terrible enigma. By his will, Victor Heiser provided for research in the prevention and control of this disease, with the hope that some day one of the world's most dreadful scourges might be eradicated.

*Cover photo from An American Doctor's Odyssey, published by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.*



**The New York Community Trust is a publicly-supported community foundation which provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the Heiser Gift is The Chase Manhattan Bank.**