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Archives/Research Hours:

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Saturdays, 10 a.m. to noon
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How Oswego's Emily Murdock



became mystery writer Lawrence L. Lynch

Little White School Museum

Box 23, 72 Polk Street

Oswego, IL 60543

www.littlewhiteschoolmuseum.org

Emily Medora Murdock was born in Oswego on Jan. 16, 1853, the daughter of Charles L. and Emily A. (Holland) Murdock. Charles was a justice of the peace in Oswego Township, held other local elective offices, and was an attorney.

Emily—called Emma by family and friends—had one sibling, her older brother, Alfred X. Murdock, who served in the Civil War, a time when 11 year-old Emily was far more interested in reading than writing. In a December 1864 letter to Alfred, who was serving in the Atlanta Campaign with the 127th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, Emily's mother wrote: "Emma sends her love to you...and says she will write to you, but I tell you she had a great deal rather read than write. She is in the bedroom now, covered up with books and papers a-reading."

At the age of 24, Emily Murdock married Lawrence L. Lynch at Lincoln, Nebraska on Valentines Day, Feb. 14, 1877. After their marriage, the couple began traveling immediately. According to a note in the April 19, 1877 *Kendall County Record*: "Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, a recently married couple and late of Cheyenne, Wyo., are now stopping at C.L. Murdock's, the bride's parents, she being the veritable Miss Emma Murdock."

Lawrence Lynch, the same age as Emily, was listed in an 1876 Chicago city directory as a theatrical agent.

According to family tradition, Lynch died, which is why Emily used his name as a pen name. However, she began writing mysteries shortly after they were married. What happened to him is in question. Whether



Dr. Abraham Van Deventer

Lynch died or the couple divorced, by mid 1887 she stopped calling herself Emily Lynch and resumed using her maiden name.

Why she began writing mystery novels is also unknown, but there's little mystery about why she decided to use a male pen name. In the late 1870s and for decades afterwards, it simply wasn't considered proper for women to write sensational literature such as detective and adventure novels. So she apparently decided to write her novels using her husband's name. Although Lynch was a traveling theatrical agent, Emily embellished on his occupation more than a bit, saying her books were written by "Lawrence L. Lynch (of the secret service)."

Emily published her first novel, *Shadowed by Three*, in 1879, two years after she and Lynch were married. She went on to publish five more novels between then and 1887 when the flesh and blood Lawrence Lynch disappears from the scene.

On July 12, 1887 in Oswego, at the age of 33, she married Dr. Abraham Van Deventer, himself a widower. Dr. Van Deventer had previously been married to Melissa Snook for 20 years before her death in March 1885.

After marrying Dr. Van Deventer, Emily took a few years off from publishing, but not from writing. She resumed her career as a novelist with *The Lost Witness*; or, *The Mystery of Leah Paget Laird* in 1890.

From then until her death, she went on to publish 17 additional novels, the last, *A Blind Lead*, in 1912, two years before her death.

In all, 24 titles by Emily Murdock Van Deventer have been discovered. The Little White School Museum in Oswego has copies of five of her novels including her first, *Shadowed by Three*, 1879, and reissued in 1885; along with *Madeline Paine: The Detective's Daughter*, 1883; *The Diamond Coterie*, 1884; *Out of a Labyrinth*, 1886; *A Dead Man's Step*,



Van Deventer House
2001

1893; and *Against Odds: A Romance of The Midway Plaisance*, 1894.

In order of publication date, her books are: *Shadowed by Three*; *The Diamond Coterie*; *Madeline Payne: the Detective's Daughter*; *Dangerous Ground, or The Rival Detectives*; *Out of a Labyrinth*; *A Mountain Mystery, or The Outlaws of the Rockies*; *The Lost Witness*; or *The Mystery of Leah Paget Laird*; *Moina, or Against the Mighty*; *A Slender Clue, or The Mystery of Mardi Gras*; *The Romance of a Bomb Thrower*; *A Dead Man's Step*; *Against Odds: A Romance of The Midway Plaisance*; *No Proof*; *The Last Stroke: A Detective Story*; *The Unseen Hand*; *High Stakes*; *Under Fate's Wheel*; *The Woman Who Dared*; *The Danger Line*; *A Woman's Tragedy, or The Detective's Task*; *The Doverfields' Diamonds*; *Man and Master*; *A Sealed Verdict*; and *A Blind Lead*.

In 1902, the Van Deventers built a new home at the southeast corner of Washington and Madison streets in Oswego. The house was newly renovated and restored in 2002, and is now used as commercial office space. Emily Van Deventer was active in local Oswego civic affairs and was a founder of the 19th Century Club, originally established to promote and educate the community's women about Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. She used

the exposition as the backdrop for her 1894 novel *Against Odds: A Romance of The Midway Plaisance*. The 19th Century Club remains active in the Oswego community to this day.

Interestingly enough, after Emily died at her home on May 3, 1914, her May 6 obituary in the *Kendall County Record* did not mention Lawrence L. Lynch: "Mrs. Emma Murdock Van Deventer, wife of Dr. A.E. Van Deventer, died at her late home Sunday night. Some months ago, Mrs. V. suffered a paralytic stroke, but recovered sufficiently to be about again. About a week ago, she was overcome by another stroke, which after a few days proved fatal. Born in Oswego Jan. 16, 1853, she resided with her parents who were among Oswego's early settlers. Twenty-five years ago, she was married to Dr. A.E. Van Deventer, residing in Oswego till her death. In her girlhood days, a remarkable ability asserted itself and which soon came before the public in her many books sold extensively here and abroad. This she continued until unable to write on account of ill health. A husband is left to mourn her departure. Funeral services from Congregational church Wednesday; interment at Montgomery mausoleum."

Her husband followed Emily in death seven months later. The couple had no children. Emily Murdock Van Deventer is buried with Dr. Abraham Van Deventer at Riverside Cemetery in Montgomery. ♡



The Little White School Museum is a joint project of the Oswegoland Heritage Association, an Illinois not for profit organization, and the Oswegoland Park District.