

MAHANOHY CITY CHRONICLES (Special Edition)
July, 29th, 1988

NOTE: The following biography of Mahanoy City's illustrious physician-congressman, Dr. Ivor D. Fenton, was prepared by his daughters, Mary Kernan, Betty Lewis and Peggy Brewer.
Transcribed by: Barbara Ward, January 22, 2020

DR. FENTON SERVED HUMANITY WELL

DR. FENTON was born at Buck Mountain on Aug. 3, 1889, son of the late state mine inspector, P.C. and Elizabeth (Thomas) Fenton, who had immigrated from Wales.

In his younger days he worked about the mines when his father was fire boss and mine foreman at Packer No. 3 Colliery at Brownsville, just west of Shenandoah.

He received his early education in the public schools of Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, and later attended Bucknell University. He then attended Jefferson Medical College, graduating in 1912, and served his internship at Ashland State Hospital. Shortly thereafter he began his practice of general medicine in Mahanoy City.

In 1925 he married Margaret Theresa Lewis, daughter of the late Isaac P. and Mary (Davies) Lewis. Mrs. Fenton was a school teacher in the elementary schools of Mahanoy City.

MILITARY SERVICE beckoned Dr. Fenton in World War I. He enlisted in the U.S. Army Medical Corps and was commissioned a lieutenant on Aug. 8, 1917. He rose to the rank of captain and served 20 months with the 315th Infantry of the 79th Division.

During his 11 months overseas he was decorated for valor and distinguished service. He refused to leave the area of heavy shell fire, electing to remain to take care of the wounded. For gallantry in action and meritorious service he was awarded the Silver Star and the World War I Victory Medal with two bronze battle clasps.

Upon discharge on June 6, 1919, he returned to Mahanoy city to resume medical practice.

In civilian life he maintained his close ties with veterans. He was a life member of the American Legion Post 74, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1420, and the Disabled American Veterans. He served as commander of the Legion Post in 1925 and was VFW post surgeon for many years.

A PHYSICIAN true to his calling, Dr. Fenton never turned away a patient for lack of money. During the Depression years when employment was rampant, he respected the dignity of the poor by accepting their offers of chickens, eggs, potatoes and vegetables in lieu of the cash they didn't have to pay for his services. He further assisted the needy by serving as president of the United Charities Association which collected food and clothing for distribution to those who couldn't afford to buy the necessities of life.

Mineworkers in countless numbers knew Dr. Fenton not only as the physician who mended their broken bones and healed their lacerated bodies, but also as the friend who testified in their behalf in Workmen's Compensation cases.

In a building at the rear of his home he established a hospital for minor surgery and removal of tonsils and adenoids. He also had one of the first privately owned x-ray machines in the county.

He also kept an office in Delano for the convenience of people in that vicinity, and many were the times he traveled by train in a snowstorm to care for a seriously ill patient or to deliver a baby. During his years of practice he brought 2,560 children into the world.

His concern for safe childbirth was manifested in the influential role he played in the establishment of an obstetrical department at Locust Mountain State Hospital. He was also instrumental, during the administration of Governor Clifford Pinchot (1923-27), in organizing a semi-open staff at Locust Mountain, which therefore had a completely closed staff policy.

Dr. Fenton served as president of the Schuylkill County Medical Society in 1934, and belonged to the state and national medical organizations.

POLITICAL office beckoned him in 1938 when he was elected to the 76th Congress, and for the next 11 congressional elections he returned to office. For 24 years, from Jan. 3, 1939, to Jan. 3, 1963 he served in Washington as the representative of Schuylkill and Northumberland counties.

His tenure in Congress, as with all his other endeavors, was characterized by concern and love for fellow humans. His persistent efforts in behalf of the anthracite region earned him the title of "The Hard Coal Doctor" in Washington circles. He pioneered the proposal for an anthracite research laboratory to benefit the economy of his home region. It took a heated battle which attracted national news media attention but the Fenton project was approved by Congress and became a reality with the construction of a laboratory building at Schuylkill Haven.

He also pioneered laws to combat mine fires and drainage programs, which preserved millions of tons of precious coal reserves and protected miners' lives and jobs.

It was Congressman Fenton who brought hundreds of jobs to Schuylkill County by arranging for Alcoa to secure the former federally owned ordnance tract at Cressona. He likewise brought many jobs to the Sunbury area by securing land for the Merck & Company plant.

Flood control was another of his major accomplishments. The many millions in federal funding he secured for flood protection along the Susquehanna River at Sunbury and Milton spared many a property owner the heartbreak and expense of seeing their life's dream ruined by floodwaters. The people of Sunbury credited the "Fenton Flood Wall" with saving their city from disaster during Hurricane Agnes in June 1972. The Susquehanna rose to within two inches of the wall's top, but the barrier held. An example of what would have happened without the wall was seen upriver at Wilkes-Barre which was devastated.

A distinct honor for Dr. Fenton and for his congressional district was his appointment in 1948 to serve as the county's first delegate to the World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland.

Dr. Fenton's military service made him a staunch friend of the nation's servicemen. As a member of the House of Military Affairs Committee during World War II he visited battlefields and hospitals in Europe and met with Generals Dwight Eisenhower and Mark Clark, both of whom lauded the recommendations he made for improving the lot of the wounded and sick servicemen.

The congressman learned that you don't have to be in a war zone to risk being shot by an enemy. On the morning of March 1, 1954, while he and fellow solons were engaged in House session, a group of Puerto Rican terrorists began firing shots from the visitors' gallery.

Five congressmen were wounded and Dr. Fenton was first on the scene to render aid. He later described his experience:

"Congressman Walter had finished speaking. The debate was concerning rules and it was decided a rising vote should be taken. Then the shooting began. Most of the fellows ducked. I don't know why I remained standing. I should have known better, being a veteran of World War I.

"I was in the fourth row from the back, facing the speaker on the Republican side, and I looked up into the visitors' gallery. Somebody grabbed me by the shoulder and said, 'Doc, someone is hit.' I ran and saw Mr. (Alvin) Bently lying in a pool of blood on the floor. In my opinion he had a 50-50 chance of surviving. After giving aid to Congressman Bently I stayed with him until the House physician took him away. Then I gave my attention to Congressman Clifford Davis (D. Tenn) who had received a leg wound. It was miraculous that more were not hit."

Dr. Fenton's first committee assignment in Congress was on the Enrolled Bills, Claims Committee, and the Mines and Mining Committee. During World War II he served on the Military Affairs Committee. After the war he was elected to the powerful and prestigious House Appropriations Committee.

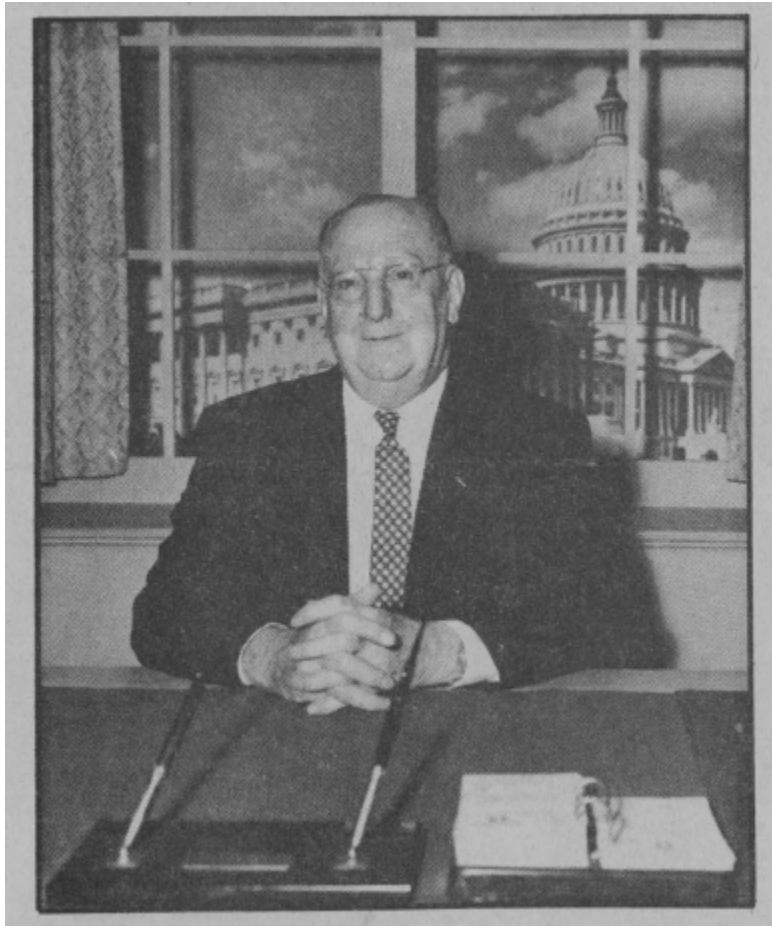
Dr. Fenton died on Oct. 23, 1986 at the age of 97. He was preceded in death by his wife in 1969; his brother, John T. Fenton, a Mahanoy City pharmacist, in 1962; and two sisters, Mrs. Charles G. (Mae) Richards in 1968, and Mrs Richard (Edith) Purnell in 1988.

One sister, Mrs. William A.B. (Caroline) Reed resides in Mahanoy City.

Dr. and Mrs. Fenton had three daughters: Mrs. James J. (Mary) Kernan and Mrs. Daniel G. (Betty) Lewis, Mahanoy City, and Mrs. Robert G. (Peggy) Brewer, Miami Fla.

He is further survived by seven grandchildren: Marbeth (Kernan) Petrucka and Kathy (Kernan) Pedriani; Dr. Ivor F. Lewis and Betsy Lewis; Robert G. Brewer, Dr. Russell Brewer and Lewis Fenton Brewer.

Greatgrandchildren include Jimmy, Page, Mark, David and Seth Petrucka, Danny and Tessa Pedriani; Bethany Lewis; Christen, Jennifer, Katie and Rusty Brewer.



MR. CONGRESSMAN - With the Capitol in the background, Dr. Ivor D. Fenton is pictured in the office he occupied for 24 years as a member of the United States Congress.