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Oom the Omnipotent Was Here

By **KATHRYN SHATTUCK**

Yoga enthusiasts in Nyack can shop for classes in styles like anusara, vinyasa, iyengar and bikram. But the scene seems almost quaint compared with 90 years ago, when [Dr. Pierre Bernard](#) (right) introduced the rich and eccentric to the joys of the tantric tradition. The media called him Oom the Omnipotent; his devotees said he was a pioneer. To others, he was trouble.

On April 21 and 22, Grace Gordon, the curator of Bernard's papers, will tell of the brouhaha surrounding this flamboyant impresario, who arrived in Nyack in 1918 with his wife, [Blanche DeVries](#), and a shady past involving a sex-based yoga practice frequently referred to as a "love cult."

"As any cult leader, he was extremely good at milking the rich, at flattering and fawning," Ms. Gordon said. "The man never finished high school, but he had a magnificent brain."

In her presentation — "Dr. Pierre Bernard (Oom the Omnipotent) and the Clarkstown Country Club" — Ms. Gordon will follow the self-invented doctor as he tones down his act, luring Vanderbilts and Goodriches to Nyack to foot much of the bill for the country club, and eventually becoming a well-regarded bank president and philanthropist. (Robert Love's recently released book, "[The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America](#)," is not related to Ms. Gordon's presentation.)

Ms. Gordon's program, sponsored by the [Historical Society of the Nyacks](#), will set the stage for the society's Great Nyack House Tour, on May 15, which will offer a reprinting of the 1935 publication "Life at the Clarkstown Country Club" and include visits to five of the club's buildings.

The properties — among a dozen or so laid out across an estimated 260 acres — include the Tudor-style south and north cottages of the Moorings estate in Upper Nyack, once owned by Joseph Hilton and used as guest houses for club members, and the 33-room stone mansion built in 1930 by the widow of Jacob Wertheim, whose two daughters were followers of Dr. Bernard. The dwelling, renamed Shuman Hall, now serves as the administration building for Nyack College in South Nyack. Five other historic homes, not associated with Bernard, round out the tour.

By the time Bernard died in 1955, his shenanigans were by and large distant memories. “He was a good promoter, he kept a straight face and people respected him,” said Winston C. Perry Jr., the president of the historical society.

He even brought [minor league baseball to Nyack](#).

“Dr. Pierre Bernard (Oom the Omnipotent) and the Clarkstown Country Club” will be presented at the Nyack Center, 58 Depew Avenue, on April 21 at 7:30 p.m., and at the Valley Cottage Library, 100 Route 303, on April 22 at 3:30. Information on the talks and the May 15 house tour are available at nyackhistory.org and by phone at (845) 418-4430.