

Guardian at the Gate



Photograph Courtesy of the Jack Oakie and Victoria Horne Oakie Charitable Foundation

Those of you who have taken a tour of the Oakridge Estate are familiar with Victoria Horne Oakie's dedication to keeping her beloved Jack's legacy alive through her books and the establishment of the Jack Oakie and Victoria Horne Oakie Charitable Foundation. Not many of you, however, know the self-effacing woman whose marker at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale simply reads: Victoria Cecil Offield – Wife.

Victoria Hornstein was born in New York City on November 1, 1911, a date that gave her great delight because it was five 1's together: 11-1-11. She grew up in the New Jersey countryside where she became a good swimmer and learned to ride horseback. When she later moved to Manhattan, a favorite pastime was riding in Central Park.

Vickie was a graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York and spent a season at Stratford-On-Avon in England. Upon her return to New York City, she appeared in a number of stage productions. Not long after her arrival in Los Angeles in 1943, 'Life With Father' stars Louis Calhern and Dorothy Gish introduced her to Jack Oakie at The Players Restaurant in Hollywood. In an interview that appeared in Western Clippings Mrs. Oakie remarked, "I stopped breathing when I met him, and I haven't started breathing since! He was a wonderful man to live with, and a wonderful husband!"

Victoria's early career began at Universal on a location shoot not too far from Oakridge. Because she could sit a horse, she was cast in "The Scarlet Horseman"

(1946), a thirteen-part serial in which she co-starred as Virginia Christine's faithful Indian companion, Loma.



Virginia Christine, Janet Shaw and Victoria Horne (as Loma) in "Scarlet Horseman" serial ('46).

At that time, most of the Universal westerns were shot on location at Iverson's Ranch near the Santa Susana Pass. Every day during filming, Victoria and Jack would meet for lunch at the Crisler Building, a two-story brick complex at the corner of Devonshire Street and Topanga Canyon Boulevard.

A History of the Crisler Building

In 1927, at the age of 65, James C. Crisler built the "Crisler Building" on the southeast corner of Devonshire and Topanga Canyon.

In its heyday in the 30's and 40's, it sported the corner drug store and malt shop, doctor's and barber's office, post office and hardware store.



1939, the earliest known photograph of the 1927 "Crisler Building" (looking south, the southeast corner of Topanga and Devonshire). Notice there are no curbs north of Devonshire.

Victoria went on to enjoy a feature film career as a versatile character actress. Shortly after marrying Jack in 1950, she opted to retire to the domesticities of Oakridge where running the household and helping to hand-water nearly ten

acres of lawn and a fruit orchard occupied much of her day. Sundays were party time for the Hollywood crowd with tennis, swimming and screenings of Oakie films.

After Jack's death in 1978, Victoria drew all the blinds and tenaciously guarded the gates of Oakridge to keep real estate agents and the curious at bay. She turned down lucrative offers to purchase the property from the neighboring automotive dealership and The Home Depot, preferring to donate Oakridge to the USC School of Cinematic Arts in 2000 to endow the first Chair in Comedy in her late husband's name.

In addition to writing several books in tribute to her beloved Jack, Victoria established the annual "Jack Oakie Lecture on Comedy in Film" at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1981. In 1989, the Charitable Foundation bearing both their names was formed to partner with colleges and universities around the country to provide scholarships, lectures and screenings for comedy students in theater, film and television.

Mrs. Oakie, impeccably coiffed and dressed, gloved hands carrying her signature train case purse, is still fondly remembered patronizing the local businesses around town. She was a frequent customer at Northridge Pharmacy, Brent's Deli and True Value Hardware. Employees at Northridge Lumber recall helping her navigate her large Cadillac sedan around their tight parking lot.

When asked what he would like people to know about Victoria, David Sonne, Trustee of the Jack Oakie and Victoria Horne Oakie Charitable Foundation and a dear family friend for over two decades, commented, "She just wanted to keep Jack's legacy alive. They were madly in love." He recalled an incident in later years when his wife found a large plastic bag half the size of a pillow case filled with dried chicken wishbones in the Butler's Pantry at Oakridge. When questioned, Mrs. Oakie responded, "Jack and I were so much in love. We had everything we wanted and we didn't have to wish for a thing."

The residents of Los Angeles owe a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Victoria Horne Oakie for her efforts to have Oakridge declared City Historic-Cultural Monument #484 in 1990. Her foresight ensured that the Paul Williams designed residence and grounds would survive in tribute to not only a legendary architect and a great comedian but also to a San Fernando Valley ranch culture that has long since disappeared.

Victoria Horne Oakie joined her beloved Jack on October 10, 2003 at the age of 91.



For a glimpse of what Jack's ride down Devonshire Street was like when he drove to meet Victoria for lunch, please click here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ib_mWJFcflk

To watch Victoria Horne in an excerpt from “The Scarlet Horseman” (now a campy classic), please click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsdzZIekV4Q>

Visit Valley Relics Museum in Chatsworth to view a display of the Oakies' personal memorabilia, including Jack's “Oscar” cuff links and a replica of Victoria's 8 carat diamond ring: <https://valleyrelicsmuseum.org>