



# Illuminating “Moonlight”

*Mayo film tells the real story of a baseball player-turned-physician.*

BY JEANNE METTNER

When Archibald Graham, M.D., was immortalized in the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, most viewers were unaware that Dr. Archie “Moonlight” Graham actually existed. In the movie, Burt Lancaster plays an aging physician who briefly played major league baseball. The idea that a baseball player would enter the major leagues only to leave almost immediately to become a small-town physician might seem beyond reality. But Graham did exist—and there is far more to his story than was portrayed in the fictionalized, feature-length drama.

This summer, as part of its Heritage Film Series, Mayo Clinic will tell the real story of the Minnesota athlete-physician when it releases the documentary *The Real Moonlight Graham: A Life Well-Lived*. Mark Flaherty, who produced and directed the 35-minute film, says its release coincides with several baseball-related milestones: the 25th anniversary of *Field of Dreams*, the 175th anniversary of baseball in the United States and Minnesota’s host-

ing of the All Star Game this summer at Target Field.

Each year since 2003, as part of its Heritage Film Series, Mayo has made films that help people connect with Mayo history. Last year, it did a documentary about Dave Madden, who had an iron lung. While they were discussing that film, Paul S. Mueller, M.D., chair of Mayo’s General Internal Medicine Division, brought up the fact that Dr. Graham was Madden’s uncle and that he had visited Mayo frequently for training. Mueller said it might be nice to do a film on Graham, who practiced in Chisholm, Minnesota. The documentary, which was made at Mayo, was funded with a \$75,000 grant from the Tull Family Foundation.

## From ball field to medical field

The early part of Graham’s life has become the stuff of folklore—thanks in part to *Field of Dreams* and W. P. Kinsella’s book *Shoeless Joe*, on which the movie is based. Graham grew up in North Carolina, grad-

uated from the University of North Carolina, then enrolled in medical school at the University of Maryland. During college and medical school, he played baseball, spending several seasons on minor league teams in addition to his college teams. Shortly after graduating from medical school in May of 1905, he signed on with the New York Giants.

As *Field of Dreams* depicts, he played in just one major league game, and he never got to bat. “The movie is inaccurate in some respects because it downplays Graham’s athleticism; in reality, he was a gifted ball player who basically had to choose between playing baseball and practicing medicine,” says Mueller, who has been researching Graham’s life for several years. “The Giants were World Series Champions at the time, so his being on the bench was not so much because he lacked talent; it was because he was young and somewhat inexperienced.”

The following year, Graham received his medical license and began his practice. In 1909, he took a job with Rood Hospital in

Chisholm. “When he arrived, Chisholm was in the process of recovering from a huge forest fire that had practically wiped out the city in 1908, so there was much work to be done to get the community back on its feet,” Mueller says.

**Committed to community**

Graham never left Chisholm. In 1915, he married Rochester native and Chisholm teacher Alecia Madden. The two became pillars of the community. The City of Chisholm hired Graham to be its school physician, and he was instrumental in bringing the immunization rate to 100 percent, educating residents about good handwashing and other hygiene measures, and advocating for public health and city improvements such as a proper sewage system and garbage and manure disposal. He also helped many individually. “There are scads of stories about how he helped get people eyeglasses, get transportation to their medical appointments and even get to the Twin Cities for surgery or therapy,” Mueller says.

Graham also was a lifelong learner. He often went to Rochester for continuing education courses and to observe surgical procedures. “To me, that’s one of the most telling examples of his commitment to medicine because in those days, these educational expenses came out of your own pocket; no one gave you a stipend for CME,” Mueller says.

**Building a legacy**

Graham’s dedication to his community made a lasting impression on his fellow Chisholm residents, who referred to him simply as “Doc” until his death in 1965. The documentary includes their recollections as well as those of Graham’s younger patients, some of whom became physicians themselves. Among those following in Graham’s footsteps are William Rupp, M.D., the current CEO of Mayo Clinic in Florida, and Charles Gornick, M.D., director of electrophysiology at the Minneapolis Heart Institute at Abbott Northwestern Hospital.



Graham examining children at Washington School in Chisholm circa 1937.

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In *Field of Dreams*, the obituary of Dr. Graham read to Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) and Terrance Mann (played by James Earl Jones) was the actual one written by Chisholm *Tribune-Press* publisher Veda Ponikvar, which appeared in the August 31, 1965, edition. A portion of it reads:

*The greatness of any community can be measured by the contributions of its citizenry along the journey of life. For Chisholm, an era of rich and purposeful living slipped into another shadow of twilight with the passing of the beloved and deeply respected Dr. Archibald Graham ...*

*He was the champion of the oppressed, the grand marshal of every football, basketball and baseball game. ... He believed in the community, and the parents and children believed in him. ... He remembered everyone by name and in his travels took signal pride in telling about a town called Chisholm and its cradle of people of many tongues and creeds.*

*For the old and young of this little mining town who knew Doctor Graham..., his era was a historic, unique sort of legend. There will never be another quite like his. MM*

Jeanne Mettner is a frequent contributor to *Minnesota Medicine*.

**See the movie** The documentary *The Real Moonlight Graham: A Life Well-Lived* will premiere at Mayo Clinic’s Geffen Auditorium on July 8 and run for one week. It will also be shown October 6 through 10 as part of the clinic’s Heritage Days and will be screened at various venues in Rochester and in Chisholm, Minnesota, where Archibald Graham, M.D., spent his medical career. The film will be released on DVD in mid-July and be available for purchase at Mayo Clinic stores: <http://store.mayoclinic.com/productList.cfm?mpc=6>.