At the Archives

BY WAYNE DOUBLEDAY

DOCTOR of high note

DOCTOR Egbert Florence, a well-known and highly esteemed member of the Cooramundra community spent 25 years looking after the health concerns of the residents of his adopted district. He arrived in Cooramundra about 1885 and practised there until his death in 1930 at the age of 64 years.

The Early Years

DR EGBERT Florence was the son of Dr William Florence, who was medical officer for the Chester and Hollywood Railway Company in England. Dr William Florence, a surgeon, gained his qualifications through the Local Supervisory Authority, London. In 1882, William emigrated from London to Australia and arrived in Melbourne aboard the "California" in October 1883.

Egbert Harrall Florence was born in Chester, England, on March 19, 1885. Egbert and his seven siblings arrived in Geelong with their mother Eliza aboard "Maria Hay" on August 17, 1885, two years after his father arrived in Victoria.

Off to New Zealand

WITH very few possessions, the clothes he was wearing and one shilling in his pocket, Egbert began his life's adventures in 1891, at the age of 16 years, by stowing away on "The Sea Nymph", a small brig moored at the wharf on the Yarra River. The brig was carrying a cargo of sheep and horses and was headed for Dunedin, New Zealand.

In July 1892, Egbert embarked on the sailing ship "Abito Laurencor" and went back to Melbourne where he stayed for about six weeks before boarding the "Achirrington" with about 1000 gold diggers boarding for the goldfields in New Zealand.

Egbert had many and varied experiences in New Zealand including tending sheep, panning for gold and labouring in Dunedin; he even guided a party of four Melbourne men to the goldfields and assisted in teaching them how to exist and survive in the relative isolation, which he had learnt the year before.

It could be said that Egbert began his medical career when he billed with Dr W Jackson, who knew his parents in Melbourne. Prior to a 50-bed wooden hospital being built in 1883, Dr Jackson started a tent hospital, the first in Dunstan in the Otago Region of New Zealand. Egbert looked after patients and assisted in all sorts of operations.

In 1892, Egbert and two of his friends, Mark Mansfield and Bob Hatton, volunteered to join up during the Maori War and were appointed to the 1st Regiment, Waikato Militia, Company No. 8. In 1861, Cambridge on the Waikato River was founded and Egbert remained seventeen months before he resigned from the regiment having taken part in a number of confrontations with the Maori people.

Back to Australia

IT IS unknown exactly when Egbert returned to Australia; however, he married Eliza Gertrude Paton in 1874 at Geelong, Victoria and went to Armidale, the first of many places where he practised professionally. The Victorian Gazette Pharmaceutical List revealed that Dr Egbert Florence was listed as being registered on May 13, 1877 (Certificate No.150) and was in business in Victoria before October 1, 1876. From 1876 to 1879, Egbert was a dentist and chemist, as well as a doctor, when he first located at the Mooroopna Hospital, Victoria, where his nephew became the medical superintendent.

The Shepparton News, December 9, 1918, stated that "Dr Egbert Florence in these far back days, must be a man of more than ordinary versatility, initiative and resolution by the use he has made of his life".

In 1918, Egbert left Mooroopna and selected land at Kalamalga, but that venture did not work out so he decided to move once again.

United States of America

IN ABOUT 1919, Egbert and his family went to the United States where he enrolled in the School of Medicine at Pennsylvania University. He graduated as a doctor of medicine on May 1, 1884, with an honourable mention, having written a thesis on snake bite.

After graduation, Egbert with his wife and four small children were travelling by train across America, looking for a place and when they got to San Francisco was a stopover at Reno, he went for a walk into the town.

He inquired at the real estate agency if there was an opening for a doctor and was told that their doctor had died the day before. He said he would go back to the train to tell his wife but that caused great concern as they could not have a lady in town, the late doctor having been shot and the one before dying in a similar way only a short time beforehand. Egbert rejoined the train and they went on to San Francisco.

Australia Once Again

ON RETURNING to Australia, Egbert practised in south-eastern NSW in Bungendore (1934), Cooma (1935 to 1937), Bungendore again (May 1886 to 1890), and Brackwood (1890 to 1893). He went to practise in Cooramundra in 1906 until 1928.

Dr Egbert Florence was a community man and believed in everything that made a better life. He loved art, literature and music; he was a sporting enthusiast, rifle shooting being one of his many interests.

Dr Florence led an interesting life and the stories he had to tell of his exploits and of the people he met during the course of his career are detailed in his memoirs, which are held at the CSU Regional Archives in the Florence Family Collection.

Compiled by June Dietrich
References: The Florence Family Collection (CSURA, WR12321); the Australian Medical Pioneers Index; Ancestry.com; the Victorian Gazette Pharmaceutical List; The Shepparton News, December 9, 1918; University of Pennsylvania, Catalogue and Announcements, 1884 to 1885; NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages; Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria; The Sydney Morning Herald, October 15, 1928.

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